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Ritual Identity

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Rituals are often used as opportunities for self-reflection and identity construction. The Camino to Santiago de Compostela, which has become a singularly popular pilgrimage since the late 1980s, is an example of a ritual that is explicitly used to gain a deeper understanding of one's identity through distancing oneself from daily life and creating a space of contemplation. Implicit in this function of rituals in general, and the pilgrimage to Santiago in particular, is the assumption that one is more authentic and closer to one's true identity during the pilgrimage than one is in daily life. The ritual self, as an idealised identity, functions thus, as a critique of one's regular cultural identity. This chapter proposes to investigate both the ideal, ritual identity and the implicit critique towards the cultural dynamics that force the pilgrim to 'not be her/himself' in daily life.^[1]

Key Words: Ritual, identity, pilgrimage, Camino, Santiago de Compostela, authenticity.

Ritual Identity

Authenticity has become an important concept in discussing our contemporary condition. In discussions on religious identity, or other spiritual activities (such as pilgrimage) the concept invariably shows up - to the annoyance of an increasing amount of people. The notion of authenticity often meets with sighs of exasperation and even contempt. It is in danger of becoming a hollow concept due to over-usage. However, the popularity of the notion points towards a very deeply rooted and widespread understanding of who we are, how our spiritual identities are shaped, and how we relate to each other and the world we inhabit. Therefore, it is important to seriously look at this concept and unpack the idea of authenticity. The present chapter attempts to do so in the context of the contemporary pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela.^[2]

The contemporary Camino provides a suitable context for unpacking the notion of authenticity for a number of reasons. This is shown by the great interest that pilgrims themselves take in the concept. The Camino is an example of a ritual that is explicitly promoted as an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of one's obstacles in life, one's desires, one's youth, family, and background - in short: one's identity. This opportunity

is to a large extent the result of some practical conditions guaranteed by the journey: by distancing oneself from daily life the pilgrim creates a space of contemplation.^[3] Therefore, the discourse that surrounds notions of authenticity on the Camino often revolves around notions of separation, introspection and reflection. To illustrate how this concept is discussed, I offer the following examples:

Example 1. In the popular Dutch television show *Kruispunt*, presenter Wilfred Kemp interviews pilgrims on the Camino. When he asks a 78-year-old Australian man for his 'life philosophy', the man answers:

Well, I can only answer that by telling you what Herman Hesse [said]. He said: "There is no

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- 1) A more developed version of this chapter will be published in *The Study of Culture through the Lens of Ritual*, Paul Post and Robert Logan Sparks eds. (Amsterdam; Groningen: Instituut voor Christelijk Erfgoed; Instituut voor Liturgische en Rituele Studies, 2015), 273-285.
- 2) To gain a good insight in the dynamics of the contemporary Camino, see Nancy Louise Frey's *Pilgrim Stories. On and Off the Road to Santiago* (Berkely, Los Angeles, London: California UP, 1998); Lesley D. Harman's *A Sociology of Pilgrimage. Embodiment, Identity, Transformation* (London: Ursus Press, 2014).
- 3) In this aspect of the pilgrimage, one might easily recognize Turner's famous phase of liminality. See 'Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage' in *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1967), 93-111; 'Liminality and Communitas' in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977), 94-131; 'Passages, Margins, and Poverty: Religious Symbols of Communitas,' *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1974), 231-71.

reality except the one contained within you". That is why so many people lead such an unreal life. They see the images outside themselves as reality, and never allow the world within to assert itself.^[4]

When Kemp then asks him what the Camino has brought him so far, he answers that he's been brought back to his childhood. 'That's one thing I'm finding, I sing as I walk'.^[5]

Example 2. One of the most popular series of guidebooks to the Camino is written by John Brierly. He offers texts to guide the pilgrim along the 'Mystical path' as well as on the 'Practical Path'. I used his book this spring when I walked from Porto to Fisterra, and on the stage from Vilarinho to Barcelos, Brierly provided the following spiritual guidance:

We have mastered how to travel to the moon but we don't know how to find inner peace. Charity begins at home is an old saying containing much wisdom. The breakdown of relationships is endemic in our affluent western world – we don't need to switch on the television to witness war. We are at war with ourselves, with our families, with and between our local communities and within our own country. If we want to create peace in our world we don't need to step outside our neighbourhood – we just need to develop an open door and an open-heart right here right now (Brierly, 2014:126).

Example 3. One Dutch pilgrim wrote the following passage on her blog:

Many things are happening to me today. I can see and feel myself change. I keep coming back to thoughts that I had earlier. And every time they become more nuanced. It is true that you start to think differently on and because of the Camino. What seems to be a judgment one day, turns out to be an insight. Everything happens for a reason. I thought that the Camino was a flight. A flight from everything and everyone, but especially from myself. But no matter where you flee to, no matter how far you go, alone or with someone else, you always bring yourself with you. So you can't flee from yourself. The beautiful thing about the Camino is that the opposite happens. You only become closer to yourself. I notice a process of change within me. And the Camino helps me with that (van der Kraan, 2015).

In these examples, we find the idea of a return: a search for something inside ourselves that makes us human,

something pure and whole. We find a discourse that tells us to 'find who we truly are' and to 'take the time to really get to know ourselves'. The notion of words like 'truly' and 'really' implies a core that is ever-present and never-changing. Similarly, the notion of return implies that this authenticity is something we possessed before, the idea of innocence lost. This begs the question: how and why have we lost this? The answer to this question is as wide spread as the problem: our true selves have been pushed away and replaced by short-lived and artificial substitutes generated by a late modern and super diverse society that offers easy but superficial satisfaction to our every whim. This speed, which is dictated by societal organisations, does not befit our human pace and alienates us from our true rhythm and leaves us incapable of finding such much sought after ideals like truth, love, and peace - in short: our lost innocence. This is the discourse that is constructed around the notion of authenticity on the Camino to Santiago.

This discourse reminds one inevitably of the philosophies of some of the New Age movements in Western society. Dutch religious scholars Dick Houtman and Stef Aupers have pointed out that the common ground in the many manifestations of the New Age movement is based on the assumption that our spiritual discontent and our consequent inadequacy are the result of the culture that we live in (Houtman and Aupers, 2007). The British anthropologist Paul Heelas described this idea as follows:

Perfection can only be found in moving beyond the socialized self - widely known as the 'ego' but also as the 'lower self', 'intellect' or the 'mind' - thereby encountering a new realm of being. It is what we are by nature. Indeed, the most pervasive and significant aspect of the lingua franca of the New Age is that the person is, in essence, spiritual. To experience the 'Self' itself is to experience . . . 'inner spirituality'. . . . The inner realm, and the inner realm alone, is held to serve as the source of authentic vitality, creativity, love, tranquillity, wisdom, power, authority and all those other qualities that are held to comprise the perfect life. (Heelas, 1996: 18).

This 'inner realm' can be reached through the performance of rituals. Through rituals, we escape the alienating demands imposed upon us to survive in

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- 4) 'Verhalen van de Camino', *Kruispunt*, Saskia Hesseling, RKK, aired 24 May 2015 (Hilversum: NPO2, 2015).
 - 5) 'Verhalen van de Camino', *Kruispunt*, Saskia Hesseling, RKK, aired 24 May 2015 (Hilversum: NPO2, 2015).

daily life and reach out to something 'true', a 'divine spark deep inside us'. Rituals, then, function as remedies for the influences of a corrupting society: when work rushes us forward, we find quiet in meditation; when online media bombard us with superficial information, we can focus on the intimate relation between ourselves and God through prayer; when tax authorities are solely interested in our financial situation, we find time to explore more profound layers in our life during a pilgrimage. By means of rituals we attempt to reach a meaningful core within ourselves that is usually overshadowed by the more practical side of living in a superdiverse society.

However, this discourse is not merely a contemporary quirk in the interpretation of the Camino as some sort of hippie holiday. Pilgrimages have always been understood as metaphors for the spiritual journey our souls undertake in search for enlightenment, inner peace, or ultimate salvation. In his introduction to the seminal volume *Sacred Journeys* (1992), Alan Morinis defined 'sacred' as

the valued ideals that are the image of perfection that a human being sets out to encounter or become on a pilgrimage (Morinis, 1992:2),

and pilgrimage as

a journey undertaken by a person in quest of a place or a state that he or she believes to embody a valued ideal (Morinis, 1992: 4).

The pilgrim finds here 'an intensified version of some ideal that the pilgrim values but cannot achieve at home' (Morinis, 1992: 4). In Morinis' understanding of pilgrimage, then, we find the same notion of authenticity that we found in the quotations we discussed: the pilgrim undertakes a quest in search for perfection, which are inaccessible in their daily surroundings. It is necessary to leave home to achieve these valued ideals. Our daily lives deny us access to these ideals to such a degree, that we need to leave home to find our true selves.

Similarly, the Franco-Yugoslavian sociologist Erik Cohen argued that the main difference between pilgrims and tourists lies in the fact that tourists leave home to seek the exotic and unknown, while pilgrims leave home to seek that which is most familiar to them, their so-called centre. This centre is not necessarily religious, but does symbolise 'ultimate meaning' (Cohen, 1979:181) for the pilgrim. In other words: the Camino is a more natural home for pilgrims

than their daily surroundings. The Camino, in that sense, is almost constructed as a neutral space, which does not steer pilgrims but leaves them free to develop their own space. As if this environment is the necessary consequence of the absence of a perverse society. By not posing any constraints, the Camino allows pilgrims to come closer to their true selves.

However, here we begin to find reason to become suspicious of this true identity. This identity that we construct during rituals, is judged not only more befitting to ourselves, but also as decidedly superior to our daily identities. Therefore, we might ask ourselves whether it is not more accurate to say that instead of bringing us closer to *who we truly are*, the Camino brings us closer to *who we truly want to be*. Perhaps we should think of pilgrimage as an opportunity for externalising those aspects of our identity that we judge inferior; as an opportunity for us to state that the problems we find in ourselves are not our own, but rather imposed upon us by a corrupting world. It allows us to believe that if we were to inhabit a more suitable world, we would also be better people - the good people that we actually are.

If we accept that analysis, then this personal core, which we carry within ourselves, takes the shape of a series of negations of those aspects of ourselves and our society that we do not value. Our ritual identity, then, is in many ways in direct opposition with these undesirable character traits: when we see our society as intolerant, we construct our ritual identity as open and inviting; when we look upon our neighbours as slaves of deadlines, we conduct our ritual identity towards a process of slowing down; when we see our children cannot look behind the material value of their possessions, our ritual identity turns to a re-appreciation of our means.

To take it one step further still, we might attempt to reverse these steps in order to get an insight into the world in which we do and, even more so, in which we do not want to live. The pilgrim identity, understood as a sacred and authentic identity, can then be understood as a form of social criticism. It combines a sacred quest with a critique on contemporary society and can point toward pressing tendencies in societal discomforts. To understand the social criticism expressed through pilgrim authenticity, we should understand the world that is found on the Camino and how it relates to the world that we actually live in. The characteristics of this ideal world are manifold and operate on many different levels and spheres. We will only discuss some of the most apparent in the following sections.

1. *Returning to Simpler Times*

As the Camino is a centuries old route, a journey that has been undertaken by many, many pilgrims before, the pilgrimage responds to the contemporary nostalgic desire to 'return to simpler times'. In this instance, we find a clear critique on the contemporary obsession of the young with the new, and the ever-changing. People who feel ungrounded in daily life, find roots and a historical frame on the Camino. This temporal dimension of the Camino was beautifully explored by the Australian cultural analyst Paul Genoni. He argues that pilgrims

have an intense encounter with a displaced or disrupted sense of time . . . [which induces in them] . . . the sense that time has been transcended or 'crossed', and that the traveller has undergone an experience that is seemingly of another, earlier epoch (Genoni, 2011:157).

In this, Genoni recognizes a

negotiation between the relationship between past and present . . . [whereby] . . . travel is narrated as a nostalgic encounter with a past made desirable by the crippling effects of modernity (Cohen, 1979: 157).

This preoccupation with the historical tradition of the pilgrimage, and more personally with the idea of the medieval pilgrim as a direct predecessor of the contemporary pilgrim, is perhaps the clearest manifestation of social critique in the temporal experience of the pilgrim identity.

2. *A Sense of Pan-determinism*

Another characteristic of the ideal world of the pilgrim is a sense of pan-determinism^[6]: everything the pilgrim encounters or observes on the Camino has meaning. The Camino is famous among its pilgrims for being a place where the extraordinary can happen. For, at the Camino, all pretence falls away, and the notion of 'coincidence' is unmasked as the inability of the ordinary person to oversee his or her life as guided by a greater force. These Camino miracles often revolve around chance encounters, help offered in a seemingly hopeless situation, or other instances of unlikely good fortune. It is not hard to see how this characteristic of the ideal pilgrim world is constructed on one of the most persistent critiques on modern life - a life in

which God is dead, everyone is made to survive on their own, and even family and neighbours cannot be relied upon for help or support. The Camino offers a counterpoint to this harsh, lonely world by promising that everything the pilgrim does and sees is important and s/he will never be alone.

3. *Social Interaction*

Another important characteristic of the ideal pilgrim world plays out on a social level. Pilgrims often remark that the interaction between pilgrims on the Camino is much more open and free than in daily life. Pilgrims open up to each other with an ease and level of comfort that they do not know at home. (In this, it is not hard to recognise a reflection of Turners famous notion of *communitas* - See Footnote 3) What is more, the Camino offers pilgrims the chance to free themselves from repetitive, restricting social circles: the daily demands from colleagues and family, the keeping up of appearances, the same conversations over and over again with the same people, is countered by the pilgrim's sense of freedom, of taking care of no one but yourself, of speaking to people without pretences or judgment, and gaining new perspectives from other people.

4. *Turning Towards the Natural*

Lastly, I would like to point to the Camino as a place where pilgrims turn towards the natural. This is part due to the ritual's call upon the pilgrim's physical efforts, which seems to be a rather direct response to the contemporary complaint about the non-physical world we live in, disconnected from our body and dependent upon virtual worlds. What is more, the ordinary life spent in urban surroundings filled with days spent in a dark office behind a desk, are countered on the Camino by a pilgrim's life in natural surroundings, depending on the individual's bodily strength and endurance. Pilgrims often note that it is the first time in a long time that they are fully aware of the body they inhabit. It is in many senses our most direct and therefore natural instrument and yet it is put to very limited use in our daily lives.

Closely connected to this sentiment lies the often heard remark that after a certain amount of time on the Camino, the pilgrim adopts the rhythm of the body; a rhythm directed by the steps of the feet and the efforts that can be sustained by the pilgrim's back carrying the pilgrim's belongings: eat when you are hungry, visit a church when you pass it, find a place to rest when you are tired, lay down your backpack when your back

6) For a discussion on 'pan-determinism', see Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1975), 110-3.

starts to hurt. Note: because of these bodily demands it is necessary for the pilgrim to carry as little possessions as possible. This, again, is often understood as a critique on the unnecessarily large amount of value we usually add to material belongings in our consumer society.

Conclusion

This, then, is my suggestion for unpacking the notion of authenticity within the context of the pilgrimage to Santiago. That pilgrims use the concept of authenticity to enable themselves to externalise those aspects of their identity that they find undesirable, by branding them as part of a corrupting society and therefore as un-authentic. In this process of externalisation they adopt a different external context, that of the Camino, and in constructing this context as fundamentally pure and open, they are able to find within this authentic world a more suitable, a more desirable identity as pilgrim. This is the final paradox on which the pilgrim's authenticity is based: that they are fundamentally dependent upon exterior circumstances to become aligned with what they often understand as their personal, interior reality.

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