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Customizing Places: Pilgrimage Sites, Holy Statues, and the Moment of ‘Connectedness’ in Contemporary Malta

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1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the act of pilgrimage in contemporary Malta¹⁾ and examines the suitability of adopting the dichotomy between the sacred and the profane. This is an issue in the present day when the moment of connectedness²⁾ that is relevant to a variety of places, objects and people is experienced temporarily both in reality and in cyberspace.

Previous studies have discussed pilgrimage with the assumption that it entails acts of physical movement from one place to another (Eade and Sallow 1991; Coleman 2000; Colman and Eade 2004; Dubisch 1995; Morinis 1984, 1992; Naquin and Yu 1992). The difficulties experienced on the travelled path are regarded as evidence of a pilgrim’s love for God, a way to dedicate their suffering. The fact that there are pilgrimages by proxy for the sake of those who cannot go on their own due to diseases or injuries has also encouraged scholars to understand pilgrimage as quintessentially a physical movement between the sacred and the profane, between daily life and non-daily life.

However, this established framework has not yet reflected the conditions of pilgrimage in today’s world. The popularization of the Internet has produced many online ‘pilgrimage sites’, which have enabled ‘pilgrimages’ to take place while the pilgrims remain in at home their chairs. Charms and holy water, used to be obtainable only by pilgrims healthy enough to visit certain sites, are also available over the Internet by just clicking and typing in the credit-card numbers while remaining inside, even when it is cold outside. The term ‘cyberspace’ was coined by a scientific novelist (Gibson 1986), however, it also seems that through electronic technology, cyber-religion (Brasher 2004; Lyon 2000) or cybergrace (Cobb 1998), a new and easy route to sacredness, is now available to every believer.

In this paper, I will discuss the meaning of pilgrimages that still involve physical movement in contemporary settings as mentioned above, focusing on people’s perceptions of what and where holy places are for them and on how these places are chosen, experienced and connected to daily life. Then this paper will discuss what has changed or rather remained the same in the pilgrimage experience.

2. Catholic pilgrimages in the cybergrace era

The Vatican, unlike the Shrine Authority in Japan which made critical remarks regarding virtual worship and mail-order businesses selling, for example, good-luck charms,³⁾ has encouraged Catholics to make use of modern technology as a manifestation of their beliefs (New Code of Canon Law 1983). Visiting net-stores in order to buy books, music, rosary beads, and scapulars or clicking the 'request' button to ask for a prayer are not forbidden by church authorities.

First, before the advent of the Internet, the Vatican started giving its blessing to believers who watched the Pope on television or listened to him on the radio. This is considered as accruing the same benefit as that given to the pilgrims who make the special journey to the Piazza San Pietro, and it is equal to an indulgence toward what the believer has to do for the atonement of sins. Therefore, Catholic believers have been able to enjoy acquittal which is regarded as being 'beautiful and graceful consideration by Catholic Church' (Carmelites 1980: 577) without travelling out of their daily space for a certain period of time. In that sense, cybergrace is, first and foremost, not a new phenomenon to Catholicism.

However, the advent of the Internet has definitely diversified the ways for Catholics to approach sacredness. There are many net-shops dealing with religious goods that relate to pilgrimage sites all over the world. Some websites provide virtual pilgrimages to Jerusalem or Marian apparition sites. These sites contain links that not only pertain to religion, but sometimes to ethnic food shops or even pornographic websites (Vásquez and Marquardt 2003: 48). This means that one can enjoy a sacred and sexual journey at the same time on those sites.

We can also observe the phenomenon of what can be called 'real virtuality' (Castells 1996; Dodge and Kitchin 2004) in Catholicism. For instance, the Confraternity of Loreto⁴⁾ in Italy offers special favours to those registered. They can receive indulgences on the day of registration and the tenth of December, the feast day of Loreto, as well as receive Mass at eight o'clock every day. This Mass is dubbed 'perpetual Mass', meaning those registered can receive Mass before and after their death.

In summary, thanks to modern technology, Catholic believers can go on a 'pilgrimage' without physically moving (a virtual pilgrimage) and they can enjoy the same blessings as traditional pilgrimages (indulgences through television and radio); they can even receive special blessings which those traditional pilgrims cannot (indulgences on feast days and perpetual Mass). Easy access to sacred places via the Internet has also enabled pilgrims to decorate their daily spaces with religious goods. Instead of having to go out in order to pray and buy religious goods at pilgrimage sites in commemoration of their holy experiences, those goods can be ordered and be shipped to their homes by using the Internet. Pilgrims see these goods for the first time in their own home, and these new objects add colours to bedrooms, kitchens, and even bathrooms. Some people have reported experiencing 'miraculous healing' through the religious goods inside their daily places, including the toilet (MacDannell 1995; Morgan 1998).

This implies that any place can be turned into a sacred place, and the goods and

healing that are only obtainable once at pilgrimage sites are now available elsewhere. This brings to mind the concept of 'Jesus in Disneyland' (Lyon 2000).

In this paper, I will examine how conventional pilgrimages involving physical travel are being experienced in today's setting. Through an analysis of data collected in Malta intermittently between 1994 and 2008 I will also explore the kinds of places seen as worthy of an actual visit and discuss the issue of continuity or discontinuity between conventional pilgrimages and new forms of pilgrimages, often referred to as secularized pilgrimages. I will also discuss the moments at which the feeling of connectedness emerges and then disappears.

3. Pilgrims' explanations: why we go on sacred journeys

When we ask people at pilgrimage sites about their reasons for going on a sacred journey, they by and large either give answers relating to the place, saying 'because there is something mystic here' or 'I feel God close to me here,' or they give answers relating to the holy objects they can encounter at certain sites. In Malta, 'holy objects' do not usually refer to sacred relics, but to the statues of the Saints; thus the 'magnetism of pilgrimage' (Preston 1992) tends to be comprised of the mystical image of the places and their holy statues.

There is an institutional procedure used by the Vatican to authorize places considered worthy of visitation based on the holy objects that are measured by their historical, artistic and cultic superiority (New Code of Canon Law 1983, Article 1189); and Malta has 23 such authorized pilgrimage sites. The Ta' Pinu church is the national shrine (New Code of Canon Law 1983, Article 1230; 1232) and it constitutes the most popular pilgrimage site, attracting even pilgrims from abroad.

Nonetheless, the authorized pilgrimage sites do not have a monopoly on the places visited by the faithful. People make pilgrimages to both remote and authorized pilgrimage sites as well as to the nearest churches and chapels. Moreover, authorized objects do not represent the total number of objects used for devotion. For example, those who say 'I come here because there is the statue of St. Mary of Assumption' might be visiting an authorized pilgrimage site but one which was authorized because of a statue of St. Joseph.

Previous studies on pilgrimage tended to deal with authorized pilgrimage sites such as Lourdes and Jerusalem where many local and foreign pilgrims visit. However, people go on pilgrimages inside and outside of their country, and repeatedly visit the same places whenever occasions arise. Scholars do not pay quite as much attention to these pilgrimages despite the fact that they are essentially the same as other conventional pilgrimages to international pilgrimage sites in terms of physical movement. As a consequence, the concept of pilgrimage sites as a remote place, somewhere out of our daily space was created, and it contributed to reinforcing the theory of the pilgrimage as an activity that involves back and forth movement between the sacred, non-daily places and the profane, daily places.

In this paper I focus on pilgrimages that are repeatedly practiced in localities near



Figure 1 Ta' Pinu Church in Malta. K. Fujiwara, 2004.

where the pilgrims live and that are made on a 'daily basis' in line with individual belief, to fill the gap in the existing research. After all, pilgrimages are undertaken as a result of a belief in God and the saints, which is kept for a lifetime, and people undertake pilgrimages wherever they are.

4. Pilgrimages in Malta

In Malta, pilgrimages are often performed in relation to acts of *nagħmel wegħda*. *Nagħmel* means 'to do' and *wegħda* means 'promise'. *Nagħmel wegħda* as a whole means 'to make a vow' or *promessa*, to promise to do specific acts on the condition that God, through the intercession of the Saints, grants them a special favour such as healing. The making of vows is very common among Catholics, and promises are usually made between people and the Saints through their specific statues, meaning the statue of a certain saint at a certain location. A site may contain an exclusive statue such as Our Lady of the Rosary or Our Lady of the Assumption, and believers visit the statue of the saint to which they had made a vow. St. Mary is an individual and yet there are many statues of Her under various titles all over the world, however not every statue under the same title serves as a subject for *promessa* because of the fact that every statue is linked with the place they are located. Those who say 'I came here because there was a statue of Our Lady of Sorrows,' for example, actually come there to accomplish their vow because they made a promise through the 'one specific statue' located in that place, not through the other statues of Our Lady of Sorrows in different places.

Furthermore, these 'specific statues' are not always famous ones, as shown below.

Case 1: Mario (a pilgrimage to an authorized site)

'I like going fishing, and once when I and some of my friends went offshore, to our

horror, the ship was in momentary danger of shipwreck. Eventually a wave of about four meters high washed over the ship. The moment that the great wave came over us, I made a vow that I would walk to Our Lady of Żabbar in my wet clothes if Our Lady saved us (by asking God to do so). Then we were saved, and I went to Żabbar on foot.'

According to Mario, he went to the church of Our Lady of Grace. This church became an authorized pilgrimage site in 1951 because of the drawing of Our Lady of Grace. However, he made a promise through the statue of Our Lady of Grace in Żabbar and not through the drawing that had received authorization by the Vatican. This begs the question: what were Mario's criteria for choosing Żabbar for his pilgrimage?

Mario's family members are all devotees of Our Lady of Grace, and they say whenever they make *nagħmulu wegħdi* (pl.) to Her, they do it through the statue in Żabbar. Mario says, 'That statue is totally different from the other statues representing Her; its brilliant eyes are especially distinguished.' There are many devotees who mention that the eyes of that particular statue are special, making it seem as if the statue were living and smiling at them. For devotees, this is not just a statue, but an irreplaceable object that mediates their prayers to Our Lady. This implies that people are not necessarily going to a recognized pilgrimage site because of its authorized objects, but sometimes because of objects that are seen as sacred by their own standards.

The Catholic Church allows the cult of all statues and drawings on condition that they help strengthen the faith of believers. Therefore, worshipping God and asking St. Mary and other saints to pray for them through statues which are not authorized does not deviate from Catholic teachings; below is another example.

Case 2: Caterina (pilgrimage to an authorized site)

'Look at Him! How beautiful! It's beyond the work of a human, isn't it? When you need a favour, ask Redentur and He will grant it to you.'

Caterina told this story when we visited the parish church in Senglea. This church became an authorized pilgrimage site in 1921 because of its statue of Our Lady of Victory. However, most of the pilgrims go there because of the statue called Redentur (the Savior).

The story of Redentur is not clear. There is no information on who made it or when it was made but it is estimated to be approximately 300 years old. The fact that the statue's creator is unknown has given rise to many mysteries and stories. People gossip about why no record exists of who made this statue and whether it was made by a famous sculptor. They wonder who could make such a perfectly 'beautiful' statue unless it were through an act of God. Therefore it is believed that the face was completed by the hand of God.

Those who make vows through Redentur use the word 'beautiful' to describe His dripping blood and facial expression which is full of pain. They say, 'it has no parallel', 'it is the statue chosen by God' and they call it 'Ix-Xbieha mirakuluża (the miraculous statue)'.

These two cases show that people go to authorized pilgrimage sites not because of they have been authorized by the Vatican, but because of objects that they subjectively

feel to be sacred. Both Our Lady of Grace in Żabbar and the Redentur in Senglea are a greater source of faith for the people than the authorized objects there, and they have become the main focus of pilgrimages to these places. Even though they are ‘ordinary’ statues inside the churches, believers consider them to be treasures that they visit to pray to and to show gratitude to for interceding on their behalf.

I would like to add that it is not my intent to discuss ‘popular Catholicism’ by presenting these cases. As mentioned above, the Catholic Church allows people to pray to all the statues as long as it helps their religious life. What is important here is the fact that people can find sacredness in virtually any object according to their own standards, as well as the connotations in terms of the sacralisation of place. The next case shows that a church without any objects recognized by the Vatican can be a pilgrimage site, and even without any subjective feelings on the part of a pilgrim. In other words, the case is made that sacralisation of place can occur apart from any subjective or objective perspective.

Case 3: Fiona (pilgrimage to a church in Valletta, the capital)

‘I came here because my breast cancer surgery was a success, thanks to Our Lady of Sorrows. That’s why I am following the statue barefoot.’ (This interview was held on Friday one week before Good Friday when procession with statue took place.) ‘Today, I will also ask Her to keep the breast cancer from returning.’

Fiona went to a church that has no particular authorized object. Our Lady of Sorrows to whom she showed her gratitude is only one of many statues kept in churches. Interestingly, she is not even someone who normally visits the statue of Our Lady of Sorrow in Valletta. She and her family are devout worshippers of San Pietro in Birżebbuġia next to her village, Ghaxaq, and every corner of her home is ornamented with likenesses of Him. Nevertheless, she chose to make a vow through Our Lady of Sorrows through the statue in Valletta. This example seems to indicate that something other than belief plays a role.

There are no trains in Malta, so people usually go to other villages by bus or by car. Fiona does not have a driver’s license and she uses the bus for transportation. Her problem in getting to the statue of San Pietro is that since there is no direct bus from Ghaxaq to Birżebbuġia, she has to either walk to Bir id-Deheb for catching a bus to Birżebbuġia or ask somebody to pick her up at her house and drive her to Birżebbuġia by car. To get there by way of Bir-id-Deheb in a bus takes under one hour, which would not be seen as a real difficulty ordinarily, but in Malta, it is. A full-time housewife without a driver’s license such as Fiona would not normally choose a ‘difficult’ place to go to make a *nagħmel wegħda* pilgrimage. What is cherished most is the achievability of the vow that is made, not the idea of traveling to a ‘distant’ place, thus running the risk of breaking the promise due to that difficulty. With that in mind, Valletta, the capital, is more accessible to bus users because there is always direct and frequent bus travel to Valletta from every corner of the village in Malta. For Fiona, even though Birżebbuġia is geographically closer than Valletta, it takes more time to go there by bus so the church in Birżebbuġia can be seen as a ‘remote place’. In other words, the destinations for

nagħmel wegħda are chosen on the basis of being easy to access so that those within their 'familiar places' can traverse frequently. This indicates that the practical situation is quite contrary to the theories put forward in previous studies on pilgrimages.

The question still remains of why Fiona especially chose the statue of Our Lady of Sorrows among other statues in Valletta. I believe there are two reasons: first, her problem was breast cancer and she felt an affinity with the image of Our Lady of Sorrows whose pain is expressed through the image of a knife in her chest. Second is that making vows through the statue of Our Lady of Sorrows, especially barefoot, is a well-known method in Malta, so in a way, it seems that she completed her vow that related to her private problem by using a standardized arrangement.

What is important here is that the statue itself is not seen as a 'special figure' by those who make vows to it. Its sacredness is guaranteed by the fact that is administered by the church and as this is the case, such statues can be found in churches all over Malta. This example thus shows that any place with a statue has the potential to be chosen for a pilgrimage.

As the next case shows, 'any place' is not limited to a church.

Case 4: Grace (a pilgrimage to Girgenti Valley)

'I made a vow and the problem was solved; I am not going to tell you what kind of problem I had. Anyway, I had a really hard time... and I went to Girgenti to see, what's her name? (I answered, Sylvana?) Oh, yes, Sylvana, and bought one hundred rosaries of Our Lady of Consecration and now I am distributing them to people. Here is one for you.'

Grace distributed the rosaries in fulfilment of her promise. She asked something of St. Mary through the statue of Our Lady of Consecration at Girgenti. When the issue was resolved, she went on a pilgrimage there to pray and buy rosaries. As shown in this case, pilgrimages of gratitude may be accompanied by taking goods from a place, rosaries in this case, to be distributed to friends and acquaintances and they eventually function in promoting Girgenti as a pilgrimage destination for making vows.⁵⁾

Girgenti is famous as a place where a Marian apparition occurred. Even though it has not yet been recognized by the Vatican or the Curia of Malta, many people go there to pray to God through St. Mary. There is no church so far, but the land is arranged and open to the pilgrims for prayer, and there are several statues, including Our Lady of Consecration, also known as Our Lady of Girgenti. Some pilgrims claim to have been smiled upon by this statue.

The statue is not administered by any church; therefore, the objective benchmark of sacredness does not indicate that this is an especially sacred statue. To those who do not believe in the Marian apparition at Girgenti, it is just a faded statue that has been exposed to the sun. What caused Grace to decide to make a vow through this statue then?

Grace and other pilgrims to Girgenti often insist on its sacredness because of Her 'miracles' for two reasons. The first has already been mentioned above: the rumour that the statue's looks change from time to time. For non-believers, this can be explained by



Figure 2 A pilgrimage site based on a Marian apparition in Girgenti. K. Fujiwara, 2002.

the sunshine from different directions at different times. For those who choose to go to Girgenti, that phenomenon is taken seriously. The second reason is that there is a large number of ‘miraculous stories’ about by this statue. These stories mostly relate to healing diseases and wounds, however they also include tales of surviving a hijacked airplane by holding the picture of this statue, or winning the first prize in a lottery. For believers, the statue of Girgenti blesses them with many kinds of ‘miracles’ and the statue itself is perceived as embodiment of those ‘miracles’.

Early on, Girgenti became famous for a tree that St. Mary is supposed to have appeared over. However, the tree was brought down by a strong wind and became blighted. Even though some people still remember the place where the tree was located, the tree itself has disappeared from the landscape without a trace.

In summary, these cases indicate that whether a site is an authorized pilgrimage site, a church in general or an open space without any church, whether there is an authentic object through which the faithful can make a vow or not, any place has the potential to be chosen as a pilgrimage site; that is to say, a place becomes a sacred place when an object has been chosen for a pilgrimage destination. The sacredness of a place is not a fixed fact for anyone, and in that sense, pilgrimage sites are ubiquitous in our daily spheres.

Historically speaking, pilgrimages involving vows and gratitude are not new phenomena at all; nevertheless, they have not yet been paid much attention to by studies on pilgrimages. Recent studies have covered topics such as visiting the cemetery of Elvis Presley, buying holy goods through the Internet and filling one’s home with them and allowing a building in a city where St. Mary reportedly appeared to become a pilgrimage site. These new form of pilgrimages are treated as secular pilgrimages or religious tourism in comparison with conventional pilgrimages involving physical movement to

places outside of the pilgrim's daily place (Swatos and Tomasi 2002). However, if pilgrimages involving vows and gratitude are taken into consideration, the aforementioned cases can be regarded as nothing new because pilgrimage sites manifest themselves in the past and present for certain groups of people in the sphere of their daily lives. As long as there are believers who choose to go to a site or live and use an object in a series of day-to-day religious exercise, there temporarily appears a place for that purpose. We can say that the moment and platform of connectedness which includes both religious and profane aspects, is created for those who customize that place based on each one's reasons in order to suit their daily exercises, and who share the same belief and practices in hope of a better future, and who considerate of each other.

This perspective could promote casting off the old view of pilgrimages as a rite of passage going back and forth between the sacred and the profane. Pilgrimage sites exist not only in some marginal place (Turner 1974) but potentially everywhere in our familiar places at some level. Religious pilgrimages do not necessarily refer to the great pilgrimages to Jerusalem or Lourdes that are done by leaving one's sphere of life, but include pilgrimages inside familiar, daily places performed periodically as exercises of belief in the saints. Pilgrimage studies should keep those 'everyday use' pilgrimages in mind and consider the Internet as a means of broadening our options. They should not be characterized as something promoted for the secularization or desanctification of a site. In this regard, we might need to create a new framework to understand pilgrimages without the dichotomy between authentic and secular on the basis that any place can be a pilgrimage site as long as there are believers who think that a place is holy and worth visiting. We should also remember that even before the advent of the Internet, there were sacred places that appeared and disappeared occasionally inside daily spaces. That being the case, there is no such thing as a sacred place for everyone when it comes to the actual relationship between place, objects and people.

5. Customizing places: making our own story/history

I have stated that it is not until someone regards an object in a place as sacred and chooses it for the purpose of making a vow that a site emerges as a sacred place experienced by believers. I have maintained that the Internet has not drastically changed the form of religious practice, but rather that it has only enlarged the sphere of religious activities to cyberspace. There is no such place as a fixed 'sacred place' that can be divided from our daily places, and I believe that sacred places appear and disappear according to people's perceptions at certain times and in certain circumstances.

What does it mean that sacredness is ubiquitous and that it can also disappear even after it has been recognized as such? This can be an important and intriguing question when considering pilgrimage.

People regard certain objects at certain places as sacred, and they go on pilgrimages to visit them. However, it is also true that these objects are not always regarded as sacred by the pilgrims themselves. First, they are fully aware of the simple fact that these objects are manmade, and if asked, pilgrims answer that they venerate saints, not statues.

They emphasize that their practices have nothing to do with idolatry. They go to specific places in order to visit sacred objects for them to give thanks to the blessings that have been bestowed on them, but at the same time they deny those very grounds for going there. This also applies to those who say ‘I came here because there was something mystical.’ When questioned further, they say, ‘anywhere will do for me’ and they deny the uniqueness of the place where they are praying. There are even some people that cite the doctrine of the substantiation of God. They explain that God presents Himself everywhere in the form of the Holy Spirit; therefore, there is no special place for praying, because He is always with them everywhere. In this way, pilgrimage sites are described as sacred places worthy of visiting, at the same time, they are explained as merely places like any other place.

If God is everywhere and a statue is not the target for gratitude, there is no need to visit those places. Then, the question of the reason why pilgrims repeatedly visit certain places remains.

Previous studies have tackled the question of why people go on pilgrimages, and in this paper we have also started our discussion by raising the same kind of question of what it means for pilgrims to go somewhere physically in the current cybergrace environment. However, this question might not reflect the ideas of pilgrims themselves, the practitioners, because their main concern is not with philosophical questions such as ‘Why do I go on pilgrimages?’ Instead, it is with specific questions such as ‘Where, when and how long I can go?’ Pilgrims do not seek the basic reasons for making a pilgrimage. They just do it because they believe in the saints and want to make a vow through specific statues in certain places. Therefore, if this is the case, what should be investigated in pilgrimage studies is not the reasons but rather each pilgrim’s story, the personal and social relationships among the pilgrims and their destination and the objects.

Pilgrims create their own pilgrimage stories with themselves as the main characters by repeatedly undertaking pilgrimages. This repetition strengthens their ties with the objects of their destinations. These objects appear in their private pilgrimage stories not because they are objectively ‘sacred’, but because the pilgrims describe them as ‘special’ in the context of their stories. The more times a pilgrim goes on a pilgrimage, the more the stories he or she has and the closer his or her attachment to the place and the object grows. And, through these ‘practices’, the places and the objects will come to fit their stories; in that way, the connectedness is experienced in the relational context of place, objects and people.

Private pilgrimage stories are always developing, and the process of pilgrimage should be apprehended as updating these stories and their platforms of connectedness little by little; they will always remain temporal in that sense. If we change our perspective from a general proposition which questions the reasons for going on a pilgrimage to one that focuses on specific stories that discuss where and how long pilgrims travel, and if we bring pilgrimage into line with the daily practices involved in the cult of the saints, then I believe we will be able to fully understand pilgrimage as continuity from the past and the present.

6. Conclusion

If Catholic pilgrimage sites were limited to those authorized by the Vatican, and people chose those which were far from their spheres of life when going on pilgrimages, there would be no problem with defining pilgrimage as a movement back and forth between the sacred and the profane, non-daily and daily sphere. However, anywhere one chooses to go on a pilgrimage can be regarded as a typical way of practicing authentic pilgrimages for a long time; any place can be either sacred or profane in perfect line with Catholic practices. People in the past and present have chosen all kinds of places as pilgrimage destinations, and even if the places are officially authorized for pilgrimage, the reasons for going there are based on the pilgrims' subjective preferences. This kind of freedom of choice enables any place to be a sacred place for someone, even though others may view it as a normal everyday place at the same time. It should also be noted that the sacredness of the place emerges every time someone narrates his or her story. These groups of people, those who customize places based on their preference and convenience in practicing their beliefs in the saints, contribute to create a platform of connectedness that temporarily emerges in a relational context of place, objects and these people. We can say that in our contemporary environment, such locus also manifests itself in cyberspace as long as there are people connected to and emotionally bound to certain sites, through the sites, through exchanging and negotiating each other.

Pilgrimage sites in reality and in cyberspace are places which are composed of the life stories of individuals. Each individual can self-identify living as a Catholic. By going on a pilgrimage and repeatedly doing so, pilgrimage sites become intertwined with the pilgrims' lives. I believe the cybergrace era today has only increased the reflections in the 'kaleidoscope' that portrays the pictures of such 'places'. In that sense, going on a pilgrimage either in reality or online can be regarded as an act of enlarging one's locality (Auge 1995) in a relational context. It is, therefore, the act of acquiring and increasing detached territories or enclaves where pilgrims can better ascertain their own identities as well as the act of making a temporal form of connectedness for them with actual/imaginary social ties with people known/ unknown to them in reality/online.

Notes

- 1) Malta (the Republic of Malta) constitutes six islands in the middle of the Mediterranean. Its population is about 400,000 and 98 % define themselves as Catholic. The national languages are English and Maltese (an Arabic dialect). It became independent in 1964 and joined the EU in 1994.
- 2) Connectedness as a general term means what historians like Agulhon would refer as 'La Sociabilité', sociologists 'networks', anthropologists 'social ties' or 'transnational ties', religious scholars 'loose connections' or 'emotional and social connections'. Here in this article, it refers to various forms of ties, bonds, and relationships between people living either closely or remotely, between people and associations, between people and objects or places they feel particularly attached to. The Japanese terms *tsunagari* and *kizuna* that went global

after the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake on 11 March 2011 also mean quite the similar kind of bonds. These ties are ‘mobile, flexible, and vary in form’ as Mori writes in the Introduction. In this paper, I would like to shed light on their temporal aspect depending on the time, circumstances and individuals, and also on actual or imaginary ties both in reality and online by using the term connectedness.

- 3) In July 2006, the Shrine Authority issued a statement, saying that online pilgrimage (virtual worship) should be refrained from because it would hurt the fundamental dignity of Shintoism (Yomiuri Newspaper, 16 December 2006).
- 4) Loreto is famous for ‘Santa Casa’ which was reportedly carried from Nazareth by angels.
- 5) Additionally, there are cases where goods such as plaster casts, a pair of crutches, golden medals, or paintings of Jesus and St. Mary are brought to a place, and are known as *ex-voto*.

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