Pilgrimage: Some Lecture Notes

Whether it be an individual or group pilgrimage, the fundamental structure that orients a pilgrimage is that of a rite of passage, albeit, framed within a journey over a landscape to some sacred place.

1. Orphaned Status: the Goals

- the primary purpose of a pilgrimage involves the general obligations and needs relating to filling a void:
  - responding to god s commands, as when Muslims carry out a hajj (to surrender ) to Mecca to renew one s spiritual commitment
  - when a specific individual is fulfilling a vow or seeking a cure, as when pilgrims travel to Marian (Virgin Mary) apparitions to seek a cure or to refresh their spiritual lives or to fulfill a vow made when ill or for someone else s illness

- but the primary purpose may not be necessarily linked to reaching a specific place per se, though often is, but of the journey itself and what is encountered and experienced along the way
  - in the Western Literary tradition of Bunyan and Dante, the pilgrims wanderings, albeit toward a particular destination, served as an allegory for personal growth and the passage through life
    - The Canterbury Tales concern pilgrims to Canterbury Cathedral in Kent, southeastern England, but are really about the journey itself.

- there maybe a series of mini-pilgrimages embedded within the pilgrimage.
  - the Islamic hajj involves traveling to the Ka ba (most holy structure in Islam situated in Mecca, the relative approximation of which orients the direction to which you pray 5 times a day, and is according to Islam the center of the world), but to complete the journey, having circled the Ka ba at Mecca (7 left-handed circles), go down road to the Mount of Mercy on the Plain of Arafat, back to the city of Muzdalifa and to the Three Pillars near Mina, and then back to Mecca, and around the Ka ba again - its all about retracing the path taken by Muhammad, not visiting the holy places per se.

2. Separation, Journey and Sacrifice

- the destination (be it the goal itself of the pilgrimage or the justification for doing a journey ) is defined as a sacred place,
  - which is revered as spiritually endowed, a place where Mircea Eliade calls an heirophany - a shining through of the sacred, a place where God speaks and is heard, and an axis mundi - a spiritual center of the cosmos
  - it can range from a formidable natural feature in the landscape, a mountain top, a great river, etc., not so easily accessible - with difficult and challenging quest to reach
    - Mount Kailash high in the Tibetan Himalayas
- to a very accessible, human-made environment, oriented and linked along major commercial travel routes, such as a building, temple, mosque, shrine, a monastery, or even city itself.
  - Mecca, Jerusalem, Benares on the Ganges

- but in a pilgrimage, it is in the **act of traveling** to this place that distinguishes a pilgrimage from other forms of rites of passage.

- which necessarily entails a symbolic and physical **separation** for the ordinary, the mundane, from your current social and spiritual status and identity
  - you got to leave home and do some serious traveling
  - often discard your everyday cloths to wear distinguishing religious-oriented clothing, marking out to you and to others your special mission

- and typically some sort of **hardship** and self and collective **sacrifice** - pilgrimages are not suppose to be luxury vacations, with all the conveniences and comforts
  - providing **alms** to the needing along the way
  - often **food** restrictions, what can no longer be eaten while on the pilgrimage, as well as restrictions on **sexual** intercourse
  - simply the **cost itself to travel** the great distances require huge personal sacrifices, months and years of saving up for the journey
  - as an extension of your own sacrifice, **animal sacrifices** might be offered, such as while on a Islamic **hajj** a goat sacrifice in memory of Abraham’s submission to God

3. Acquisition of Power and Knowledge

- the direct encounter with the **heirophany**, be it retracing the steps of Buddha, Christ or Muhammad, kneeling before and touching the sacred relics, consumption of the sacred waters or plants, can bring spiritual transformation, gnostic and esoteric knowledge, enlightenment, revelation and visionary experiences
  - you may **become**, for an eternal instance, the object of the quest - the sacrament, the deity, the divine personage
  - touching the Black Stone at the Ka be in Mecca will confer a **baraka** - **divine blessing** upon the pilgrim -

4. Affirmation and Rebirth

- **religious status** changed, as your experiences and possible visionary insights increase your understanding and awareness of your changed place in the spiritual world - a void is filled as you enter a new spiritual status
- **social status** changed, as looked upon with heighten favor by others in the community - elected to public office, obtaining a bank loan