

Viewpoint/ Critical Review

A Critical Reading of Sirjan's Ritual Landscape and Its Potential for Place-Based Tourism Development

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Abstract | Ritual tourism lies at the intersection of tourism and ritual landscape studies. Some places possess distinctive rituals that are closely linked to the identity of the city and its local community. This article introduces the ritual landscape of Sirjan and evaluates its potential for ritual tourism in relation to the local community and place-based tourism. Based on field observations of the historic core of Sirjan and an examination of its ritual centers, the main areas of ritual significance and the routes with the potential to become ritual pathways were identified. A ritual landscape tourism potential map was then prepared, illustrating the ritual zone, ritual structure, and ritual centers, and highlighting the areas with the greatest potential for ritual tourism. These areas can strengthen the local community's sense of belonging while enhancing the city's tourism attractiveness. The findings indicate that the concentration of tourism on a limited number of modern attractions, together with contemporary urban expansion, has led to the neglect of the tourism potential embedded in Sirjan's ritual landscape. The spatial dispersion of ritual centers, the disruption of perceptual continuity between historical and ritual sites, and the reduced legibility of ritual routes are identified as the main barriers to ritual tourism development. Conversely, the presence of a network of Hosseiniyehs and Tekyehs, the continuity of religious and traditional rituals, and their integration with the city's historic fabric represent Sirjan's most important spatial assets for the development of ritual landscape tourism.

Keywords: *Tourism Landscape; Ritual Landscape; Place-Based Tourism; Ritual Tourism Potential Assessment.*

Introduction | With a population exceeding 300,000, Sirjan is the second most populous city in Kerman Province (S Data Knowledge-Based Company, 2023). Until the relatively recent past, the city possessed a distinctive ritual landscape¹ that constituted an integral component of its local identity; however, its significance has gradually diminished over time. In recent years, tourism development in Sirjan has primarily focused on recreational and natural attractions, as well as newly developed modern tourism destinations. The expansion of projects such as Gohar Park, together with destination-oriented attention toward attractions including the Stone Garden, the Chopoghi Windcatcher, and selected historical and natural sites, has redirected the city's tourism flows toward isolated destinations

centered mainly on leisure activities. Although many of these attractions-particularly those of historical significance-play an important role in attracting visitors, other valuable capacities of the city, especially those associated with ritual tourism and the ritual landscape, have received comparatively little attention. This is despite the fact that Sirjan's ritual landscape, consisting of a network of Hosseiniyehs, Tekyehs, and ritual routes, embodies an essential dimension of the city's historical, religious, and social identity and could complement existing tourism patterns by strengthening place-based tourism. Walking through Sirjan's streets, particularly within the older sections of the city's historic core, reveals a remarkable concentration of Hosseiniyehs, mourning associations, and Tekyehs. Ritual ceremonies continue to be actively held in these religious spaces, attracting substantial participation

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from local residents. Nevertheless, the city's streets and public open spaces no longer maintain meaningful spatial and experiential connections with these ritual centers. The gradual loss of connectivity among ritual nodes and the declining significance of ritual routes have weakened local community participation in preserving these traditions. This discontinuity between ritual and, in many cases, historical landmarks and the surrounding urban fabric has also diminished the relationships among ritual centers themselves, resulting in a fragmented ritual landscape expressed as isolated events at scattered locations. Consequently, the ritual landscape has become increasingly detached from the broader urban experience, reducing its tourism potential and functioning primarily as a local cultural phenomenon with progressively diminishing appeal for visitors.

Critical Question

To what extent is the current tourism development approach in Sirjan compatible with the city's ritual tourism capacities and the principles of place-based tourism?

Critical Perspective

This study critically examines the contemporary tourism development of Sirjan through the relationship between ritual tourism and place-based tourism. The critique is founded on the premise that tourism planning in Sirjan has largely prioritized isolated attractions and dispersed destination-oriented developments while overlooking the potential of the city's ritual landscape as a framework for creating place-based tourism experiences. Within this perspective, the study introduces and analyzes the relationships among ritual nodes, historical identity, and the spatial structure of the city, critically evaluating the consequences of this

disconnection for spatial legibility, tourism experience, and perceptual continuity (Fig. 1).

Critical Review

The ritual landscape constitutes a fundamental component of a city's tourism landscape, and its role cannot be overlooked when seeking to enhance tourism in places where ritual traditions form an essential part of local identity. Strengthening ritual tourism can enrich the tourism landscape by fostering dynamic interactions between local communities and visitors through ritual practices. However, the gradual decline of ritual landscapes in cities whose historical and social identities have been shaped by ritual traditions may generate consequences extending far beyond the reduction of ritual activities themselves. As the connections between urban spaces, ritual nodes, and the local community weaken, rituals increasingly become isolated events occurring at dispersed locations, gradually losing their role in shaping the collective life of the city. This process may diminish residents' sense of place attachment and weaken collective memory. Accordingly, examining Sirjan's ritual landscape under present conditions is of particular importance, as the continuation of current development trends may not only contribute to the gradual erosion of local rituals but also deepen the disconnection between society, history, and the city's spatial context.

Theoretical Critique

• Ritual tourism

From the moment a space becomes capable of being interpreted and understood, it is transformed into a place, because beyond its physical characteristics it acquires meanings and interpretations that constitute the subjective dimension of landscape (Sadafi Kohneshahri, 2024). Place emerges

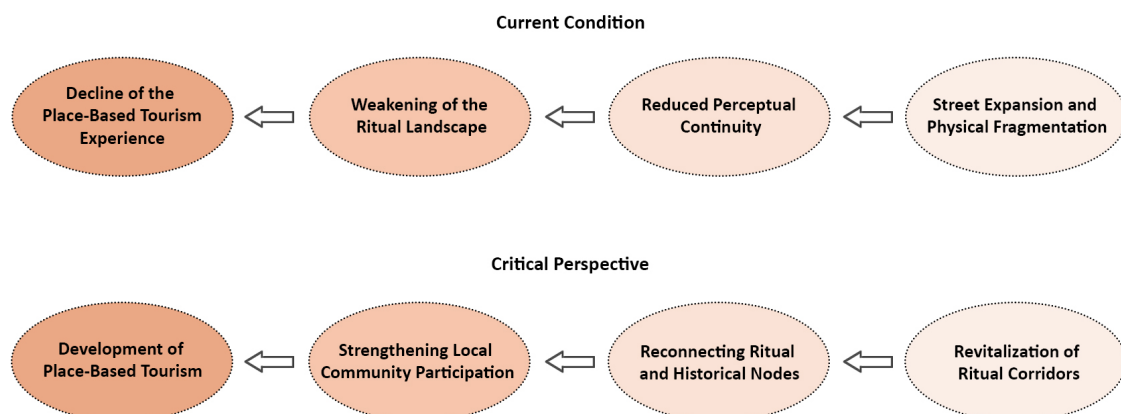


Fig. 1. A comparative diagram illustrating the critical framework adopted in this study. Source: Author.

through meanings accumulated over time and through people's experiences of their environment. Consequently, place represents a deeply rooted experience encompassing multiple socio-cultural layers (Hoseynzadeh et al., 2024). Landscape extends far beyond the notion of a "scenic view" or visual panorama. Rather than being merely a visual experience, it comprises a synthesis of diverse human experiences (Parchekani, 2016). Landscape provides a framework for understanding the world and examining the interactions between humans and their environment. Through cultural components such as rituals, it reveals new dimensions of human-environment relationships by integrating the objective and subjective aspects of phenomena (Abarghouei Fard, 2021). As an advanced system of meaning and knowledge, the ultimate objective of tourism landscape is to promote human development and movement toward higher levels of cultural and experiential fulfillment (ibid., 2021). Rituals have long been regarded as a significant component of tourism studies. From the incorporation of ritual elements into tourism experiences to the conceptualization of tourism itself as a form of ritual, the role of ritual within tourism has progressively expanded (Chen et al., 2024). The interdependent relationships among the geography of place, local ritual practices, and the communities that sustain them have increasingly become an important field of scholarly inquiry in diverse geographical contexts (Shinde, 2021). Owing to its diversity and multifunctional character, ritual tourism has emerged as one of the major pillars of contemporary global tourism (Khorramrouei & Mahan, 2021).

• Place-based tourism

In explaining the concept of place-based development, Khorramrouei and Mahan (2026) describe it as an approach that should not be understood merely as a collection of isolated social or economic indicators, but rather as a multidimensional, systemic, and context-dependent process. Place-based development is founded upon the assumption that sustainable and effective development can only be achieved when development processes maintain an organic relationship with the spatial characteristics, social identity, historical experiences, and indigenous capacities of a particular place.

The concept of the tourism landscape refers to the processes through which landscapes, activities, development projects, and similar initiatives are shaped in accordance with tourism objectives (Terkenli, 2021). A tourism landscape represents the intersection of the historical, geographical, and cultural

resources of a place, distinguishing it from purpose-built and enclosed tourist spaces that often conceal the less attractive and more ordinary dimensions of everyday urban life (Parchekani, 2016). Rituals function as mechanisms through which human beliefs are transmitted across generations, while the physical manifestations created to preserve and sustain these rituals give rise to ritual landscapes. The significance of such landscapes lies in their enduring connection to the religious and cultural past, enabling them to preserve and perpetuate the identity of communities across time (Abarghouei Fard et al., 2018). A ritual landscape is an objective-subjective phenomenon emerging from nature and embodying beliefs, traditions, customs, and ritual practices that manifest themselves in accordance with their specific spatial context (Khorramrouei et al., 2019). From this perspective, ritual tourism and place-based tourism should not be regarded as independent concepts but rather as complementary and mutually reinforcing approaches. Rituals become meaningful, enduring, and experientially accessible to visitors only when they are encountered within their original place-based context and in close association with their historical, social, and physical settings. Place therefore functions not merely as a venue for ritual performance but as an integral component of the ritual's identity and meaning. Conversely, when rituals are detached from their specific spatial context and reduced to staged performances or standardized tourism programs that can be reproduced irrespective of location, they inevitably lose part of their capacity to convey meaning and to endure within collective memory. Consequently, place-based tourism provides an appropriate framework for the realization of ritual tourism, as it enables visitors to experience the historical, cultural, and physical dimensions of ritual practices in an integrated and authentic manner.

• Ritual landscape of sirjan

Ritual ceremonies are not merely temporary or episodic events. When they are continuously practiced over time and repeatedly performed within a stable spatial setting, they gradually evolve into a ritual landscape. As rituals are enacted through collective activities within a physical environment, an interaction emerges among three fundamental components: the physical setting, history, and society. Through the repeated performance of rituals within a particular place, collective memory is formed, and meaning is attributed to space (i.e., place-making). Consequently, space ceases to function solely as a physical container and is transformed into a place endowed with ritual identity and landscape significance.

The mourning ceremonies of Muharram and Safar constitute the principal ritual traditions associated with the Tekyehs and Hosseiniyehs of Sirjan. The most prominent manifestations of Sirjan's ritual landscape during these months include the erection of Hosseini tents and ceremonial camps, the installation of ritual standards (Alam), the draping of public spaces in black, collective religious chanting (Zekr), mourning processions, Ta'zieh performances, and chest-beating ceremonies (Sineh-zani). Among the city's mourning associations, the "Mohammadi Caravan", commonly known as the Butchers' Procession, is regarded as the oldest, while the "Hosseini Caravan" is another of Sirjan's historic mourning groups (Golabzadeh, 2006).

• **The relationship between place-based tourism and the local community of sirjan**

Place-based tourism can flourish only when the local community itself values and maintains a strong attachment to its place. In other words, tourism that genuinely emerges from place cannot develop without the active support of local residents. This principle applies equally to ritual tourism. If local communities fail to preserve their distinctive rituals and gradually lose interest in performing them, ritual tourism—as is currently the case in Sirjan—cannot effectively attract visitors. This principle even applies to replicated or imitative rituals. A place lacking its own distinctive ritual traditions and exhibiting no meaningful differentiation from other places is unlikely to be attractive to tourists because its rituals are not intrinsically connected to the identity of the

place itself. Conversely, when the local community continues to preserve and practice its own traditions without imitation, rituals naturally acquire their unique character and become genuinely place-based.

• **Assessing the potential of sirjan's ritual tourism landscape**

As previously discussed, Sirjan's ritual landscape is primarily expressed through mourning ceremonies. Field surveys of the city's streets, alleys, and central districts, together with aerial imagery analysis, first identified three principal historical landmarks within the historic core: Sirjan Bazaar, the Historic House of Haj Rashid, and the Historic House of Dr. Sadeghi. Subsequently, the city's two principal mosques—the Jame Mosque of Sirjan and the Central Mosque of Sirjan—were identified, located respectively to the west and east of the historic bazaar. Other significant ritual sites include Imam Hassan Mojtaba Mosque, Qotbi Mosque, Muslim ibn Aqil Mosque, Khatam al-Anbiya Mosque, Qanbari Hosseiniyeh, Seyyed al-Shohada Hosseiniyeh, the Oshaq al-Abbas Mourning Association, the Mohammadi Mourning Association, and Zeinabiyeh. The remarkable concentration of these ritual sites within the 56-hectare historic core illustrated in Figs. 2 to 3 demonstrates the continuing importance of Sirjan's ritual landscape for its local community.

Several noteworthy observations emerge from Fig. 3. The city's principal ritual sites are located in close proximity to its most significant historical landmarks. Adjacent to the major ritual centers—including the Jame Mosque of Sirjan, the Central Mosque, and



Fig. 2. Historical core of Sirjan. The highlighted area indicates the historic core of the contemporary city, covering approximately 56 hectares. Source: Author based on Google earth.

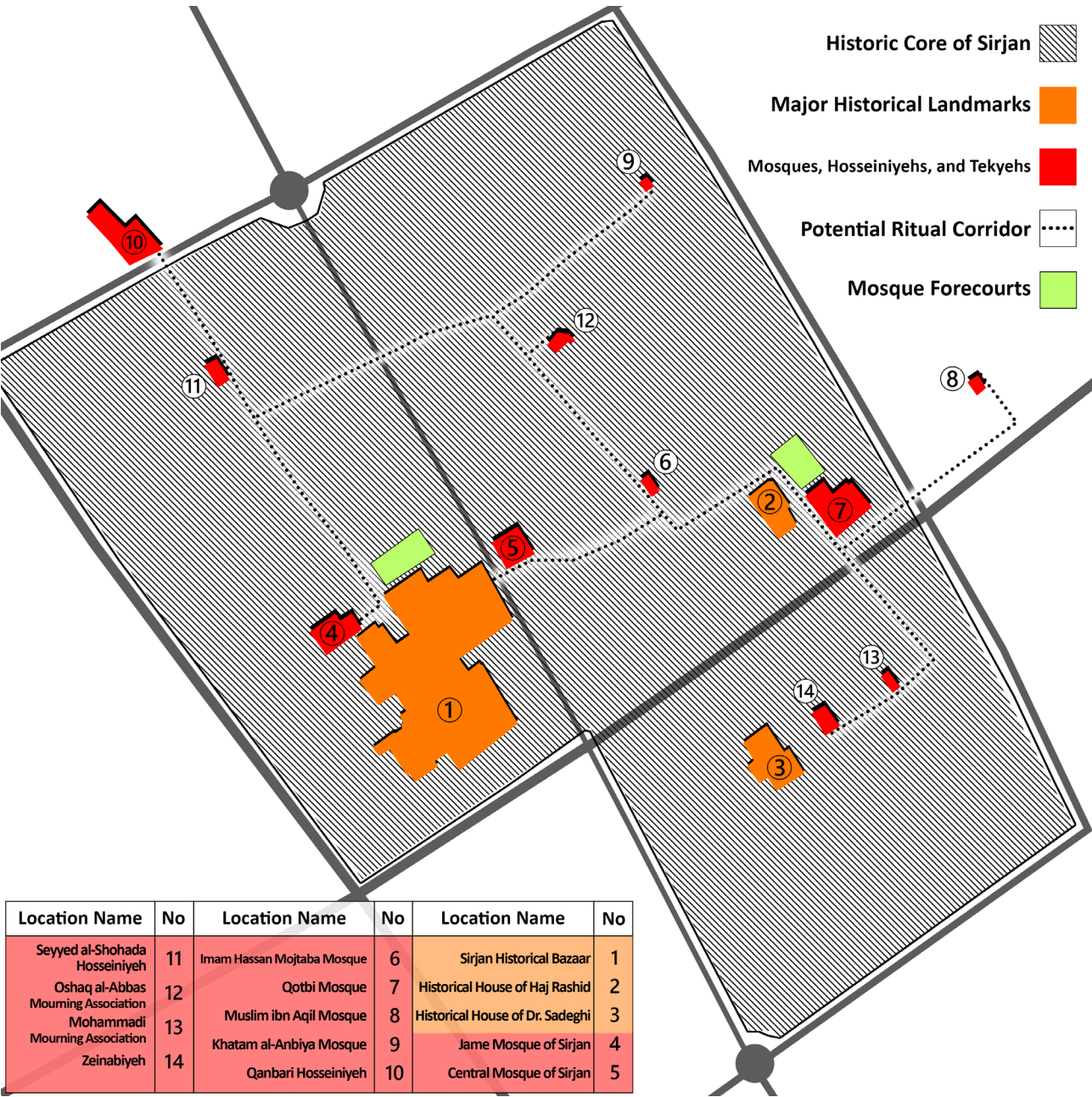


Fig. 3. Historic core of contemporary Sirjan (56 ha), including three major historical landmarks and eleven ritual sites. Source: Author.

Qotbi Mosque—are urban open spaces functioning as forecourts (Jelokhan), which accommodate large gatherings during ritual ceremonies. By connecting the dispersed ritual nodes shown on the map, a series of proposed ritual routes was delineated along existing urban corridors. The ritual potential of these routes was evaluated according to the sequence and concentration of ritual sites along each axis. As illustrated in Fig. 3, two ritual sites lie beyond the proposed ritual landscape boundary: Muslim ibn Aqil Mosque, located immediately east of the study area, and Qanbari Hosseiniyeh, situated to its north. Their locations suggest that the city’s historical and ritual core extends into the surrounding urban fabric, gradually diminishing

rather than ending abruptly. One of the most significant challenges facing Sirjan’s contemporary ritual landscape is the disruption of perceptual continuity between the city’s historical landmarks and its ritual nodes. Perceptual continuity refers to the existence of legible and cognitively coherent relationships among urban spaces and elements, enabling users to experience a place as an integrated whole. Contemporary urban expansion—including the construction of new streets, modernist physical interventions, and changes in urban development patterns—has, in many instances, disrupted these relationships. Consequently, ritual centers that once functioned as parts of an interconnected network of streets, public spaces, and

historical elements have become isolated nodes within the urban structure. This fragmentation has reduced the legibility of ritual routes, weakened the relationship between ritual practices, history, and place, and transformed the ritual landscape from a coherent spatial system into a collection of disconnected elements.

• Barriers to the realization of ritual tourism in sirjan

Several structural obstacles continue to hinder the realization of an effective ritual tourism strategy in Sirjan. Foremost among these is the necessity for local residents to maintain a strong sense of attachment to their rituals and cultural values while actively participating in their preservation. However, in today's digital era, increasing exposure to external cultures and the gradual distancing of residents from their own local traditions have weakened community participation in ritual practices and contributed to growing indifference toward their preservation.

• An illustrative example

A representative example in Sirjan can be observed in the relationship between the historic bazaar and nearby historical landmarks, including the Chopogh Windcatcher and adjacent heritage buildings. Historically, Sirjan Bazaar functioned as a central component of the city's integrated urban structure. Before the city's extensive expansion, public spaces, streets, social activities, and ritual practices formed a continuous and interconnected spatial system. However, contemporary urban development, the construction of new modernist urban corridors, and non-place-based physical interventions surrounding the historic fabric have substantially weakened both the spatial and perceptual relationships among these elements. Although these landmarks remain physically close to one another, they are no longer readily perceived by users as components of a unified historical and ritual landscape. Another major obstacle concerns the ritual corridors themselves. A fundamental prerequisite for the emergence of meaningful ritual routes is the existence of pedestrian-oriented streets possessing ritual significance. In Sirjan, however, even within the historic core, urban streets continue to prioritize vehicular movement over pedestrian activity. As a result, automobiles frequently dominate even the narrowest streets, where the presence of vehicles often exceeds that of pedestrians (Fig. 4).

Another major obstacle contributing to the decline of ritual tourism is the insufficient attention given to the city's historical heritage. The principal ritual sites, including the Jame Mosque of Sirjan, are situated within the oldest parts of the city. Neglecting the significance of these historical buildings and



Fig. 4. The dominance of vehicular traffic over pedestrian movement along Sirjan's urban routes. Source: Author.

landmarks, together with the limited development of historical urban tourism, inevitably undermines the potential of ritual tourism. This is because ritual and history are inseparable, and both should be recognized and promoted simultaneously.

• Critique of ritual tourism in sirjan

The present critique is founded on the premise that the principal challenge facing ritual tourism in Sirjan is not the lack of ritual or spatial capacities, but rather the inadequate utilization of these existing potentials within a place-based tourism framework. Field observations, analysis of the spatial organization of the city's historic core, and examination of the relationships among ritual nodes indicate that most of the essential conditions required for the effective development of ritual tourism are already present. These include a high concentration of ritual sites, their proximity to historical landmarks, the existence of flexible and open public gathering spaces, and the continuity of several ritual traditions. From an objective perspective, these capacities comprise the density of ritual sites, their spatial integration with historical buildings and urban fabric, the presence of flexible public spaces, and an appropriate spatial structure capable of supporting the formation of ritual corridors. From a subjective perspective, the city's principal assets include collective

memory, local residents’ sense of place attachment, the continued performance of ritual practices, and the cultural meanings embedded within these spaces. Nevertheless, these objective and subjective capacities have failed to develop into a coherent tourism network due to a series of physical and perceptual discontinuities. These include the dominance of vehicular traffic over pedestrian movement, reduced spatial legibility and continuity along ritual routes, declining participation of the local community, and the concentration of tourism around isolated and dispersed attractions. Accordingly, the fundamental challenge is not the absence of capacity, but rather the inability to integrate these existing capacities through a place-based tourism approach. Based on field observations, the graphical mapping presented in Fig. 3, and the analysis of relationships between ritual nodes and the city’s spatial structure, the capacities and constraints of ritual tourism in Sirjan were identified and summarized in Table 1. These findings were subsequently classified into objective and subjective dimensions in Table 2.

Conclusion

From the perspective adopted in this critique, the principal challenge confronting tourism development in Sirjan is neither the absence of local ritual traditions nor the lack of spatial potential. Rather, it lies in the dominance of a modernist, non-place-based approach to tourism development, which overlooks the intrinsic interrelationship among ritual, place, and the local community. Sirjan’s historic core possesses a remarkable concentration of ritual sites closely associated with historical landmarks and deeply rooted religious traditions. However, the physical and perceptual fragmentation among these elements—resulting from the prioritization of vehicular circulation over pedestrian movement within historic streets and the diminishing role of the local community in sustaining and reproducing ritual practices—has significantly reduced the possibility of experiencing ritual tourism as an integrated spatial phenomenon. The continuation of non-place-based development strategies and contemporary modernist interventions in the city’s spatial organization

Table 1. Spatial capacities and barriers to the realization of ritual tourism in Sirjan. Source: Author.

Component	Spatial Capacity	Barrier
Spatial Structure and Route Network	Potential to connect dispersed ritual nodes through the definition and revitalization of ritual corridors	Physical fragmentation disrupting the connections among ritual nodes and key ritual routes.
Movement and Accessibility	Existing routes have the potential to be transformed into pedestrian-oriented ritual corridors.	Vehicular dominance, even within the narrowest and oldest streets (vehicle-oriented circulation)
Historical Context	Ritual nodes are closely associated with major historical landmarks, including the historic bazaar and heritage houses.	Insufficient attention to historical buildings and spaces as effective assets for tourism development
Ritual Nodes	High concentration of mosques, Hosseiniyehs, and Tekyehs within the historic core	Fragmentation of ritual activities into isolated locations and the decline of ritual continuity across the city
Public Spaces	Presence of open spaces surrounding major mosques (e.g., mosque forecourts), providing flexible venues for ritual gatherings and ceremonies	Limited utilization of these urban open spaces as settings for ritual events
Local Community	Continuous annual observance of Muharram and Safar rituals and sustained participation by part of the local community	Declining sense of attachment among a considerable portion of the local community (particularly younger generations) toward rituals, influenced by external cultural patterns
Tourism	Potential for ritual tourism to complement historical and cultural tourism	Current tourism is primarily concentrated on modern recreational attractions, with limited attention to Sirjan’s distinctive ritual tourism potential

Table 2. Classification of the components of ritual tourism in Sirjan according to objective and subjective dimensions. Source: Author.

Landscape Dimension	Components
Objective (Physical–Spatial)	Spatial structure and route network; Movement and accessibility; Historical context; Ritual nodes; Public spaces
Subjective (Perceptual–Social)	Local community; Tourism

has prevented existing ritual assets from evolving into a coherent tourism product. This fragmentation has become one of the principal factors contributing to the marginalization and decline of ritual tourism in Sirjan. Rituals can serve as an effective foundation for tourism development only when they are experienced in close interaction with their specific spatial context and through a legible network of ritual routes, ritual nodes, and public gathering spaces. Accordingly, revitalizing the city's principal ritual corridors, establishing pedestrian-oriented routes, restoring the spatial relationships between historical and ritual elements, and strengthening the active participation of the local community would contribute not only to tourism development but also to the regeneration of Sirjan's ritual landscape. Ultimately, ritual tourism can create meaningful synergies with the city's historical and cultural tourism only when tourism planning is grounded in the principles of place-based development, reinforcing the spatial, cultural, and social connections that constitute the identity of place.

EndNote

1. Owing to the continuity and diversity of its traditional and religious practices, Sirjan possesses a distinctive ritual landscape in which rituals are not confined to isolated ceremonial events but are closely integrated with urban spaces, including streets, Hosseiniyehs, and Tekyehs. Rituals such as the third-, seventh-, and fortieth-day memorial ceremonies following a person's death, Muharram and Safar mourning traditions—including mourning processions, Nakhil-gardani (ceremonial procession of the Nakhil), and Alam-gardani (procession of ritual standards)—as well as the distinctive religious practices of Ramadan, have gradually become embedded within the city's spatial identity and have contributed to the continuity of collective memory within its historical setting (Golabzadeh, 2006). The sustained performance of these rituals and their enduring association with specific places have transformed Sirjan into more than merely a venue for recurring religious ceremonies; together, they constitute a unique system of relationships among ritual, place, and the local community, forming what can be understood as a ritual landscape.

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