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IRANIAN HOSPITALITY: FROM CARAVANSERAI TO BAZAAR TO REPORTING SYMBOLIC EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports case studies seeking to address one of the great problems of social science: namely, the extent to which is it possible or desirable accurately to report conscious experience (Hulburt & Scwitzgebel 2007). An **interpretive ethnographic** approach is used to address this problem. *Caravanserais* and bazaars in Iran have always offered multi-sensual experiences and represented aspects of symbolic interaction, as well as facilitating physical exchange, between travellers and locals. This is true in their origins, in their nineteenth and twentieth century usage, and in their contemporary roles which increasingly include heritage tourism accommodation or heritage retailing. Using two case studies the paper explores the role that hospitality has played and shows that it has been fundamental to their evolution and remains so, particularly for the commercial *caravanserais* and tea houses which now exist as refurbished heritage accommodation and restaurants.

KEY WORDS

Interpretive ethnography; Laddering; Iran; Bazaars; Caravanserais

INTRODUCTION

There has always been a strong tradition of hospitality in the Islamic world, as with the mediaeval western monastic tradition. This Islamic practice emulates Ibrahim in the Koran. *Caravanserais* were hostels for travellers, where accommodation was often given for free for an overnight. Establishing *caravanserais* to provide hospitality for travellers is reflected in the traditions and writings of Iranians. A comprehensive system of caravanserais existed across Iran, and throughout the whole Islamic world, providing hospitality and care for travellers, both pilgrims and strangers. In Iran today 120 of these caravanserais still exist in various states of repair. In contrast to the mediaeval western monasteries (O'Gorman 2006), *caravanserais* could also be used as commercial centres for merchants. As well as being located on trade and pilgrimage routes, *caravanserais* were also commonly found associated with the grand bazaars of Iranian cities.

Central to the paper are the authors' own expressions. Firstly, as CASE STUDY 1 observation and interaction in caravanserais refurbished as lodgings is used is to interpret physical structures, and in particular to show how the physical form of caravanserais traditionally embodied dimensions of expectation and behaviour. Secondly, as CASE STUDY 2 personal sensing and reflection is used to articulate personal experience as expression. It is also used to question the failure of others who have used like method to come to a shared expression, but instead to imply the privileging of their own expression. Bazaars and their associated caravanserais are the focus of this second study. The authors analysed their own photographic archives which they had previously taken independently as cultural tourists fascinated by bazaars and other traditional Iranian buildings. As all interpretive qualitative research needs to recognise the standpoints of its authors, both fit into the *educational* quadrant of Pine and Gilmore's (1999) quadrants of experiential consumption [Figure 1]. However, each has a different background: one was trained philosopher, the other as a historical geographer. When the photographs were taken, neither author had any intention of analysing them to analyse their expression. Case study 2 is offered as a demonstration of the potential of the analytical method which can be used on other data sets, principally those of tourists.
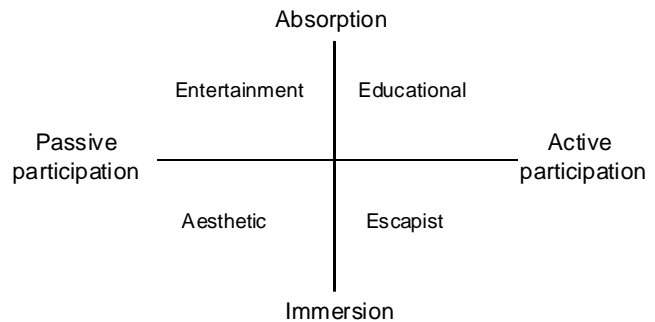
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                           Absorption
                               |
           Entertainment       |    Educational
                               |
Passive  ——————————————————————|——————————————————————  Active
participation                  |                    participation
                               |
             Aesthetic         |    Escapist
                               |
                           Immersion
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Figure 1: Pine and Gilmore's Quadrants of Experiential Consumption

CASE STUDY 1

Some of the *caravanserais* have been redeveloped and are used a city centre hotels, others still operate like the *caravanserais* of old, whilst the remainder are left to decay under the care of the Cultural Heritage Agency. At Zein-i-edin in the desert, about 100km outside Yazd in the direction of the Afghan border, there is a restored *caravanserai*, located on one of the silk routes. It is owned by the Iran Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organisation, and, until recently, neglected and derelict. Four years ago it was secured on a 12 year lease by three brothers with an agreement to renovate the site as a hotel designed in a style sympathetic to its original origins. They employ a professional Iranian hotelier to manage and operated the project. It attracts international visitors, mainly from Spain but also elsewhere in Europe, domestic tourists and also provides meals for passing tour groups.

Whereas an example of a *caravanserai* has suffered from inappropriate restoration and is now in an advanced state of decay and disrepair is at Dayr-i Gachin about two hours south of Tehran. Shokoohy (1983), after a detailed archaeological and historical survey, argues that this *caravanserai* dates back to the 3rd Century A.D. It was originally established by the Sasanian Emperor Ardashir I (A.D. 224-41), throughout the last millennium and a half it has many uses including a Zoroastrian sanctuary, however, it always provided accommodation for travellers. It was abandoned in the late 19th Century when the alignment of the road was significantly altered.

From the plan [Figure 2] the full extent of the *caravanserai* can be seen including stratified accommodation, bathhouse and a mosque. Today ownership of the caravanserai is a dispute and it has suffered from poor and unsympathetic restoration.
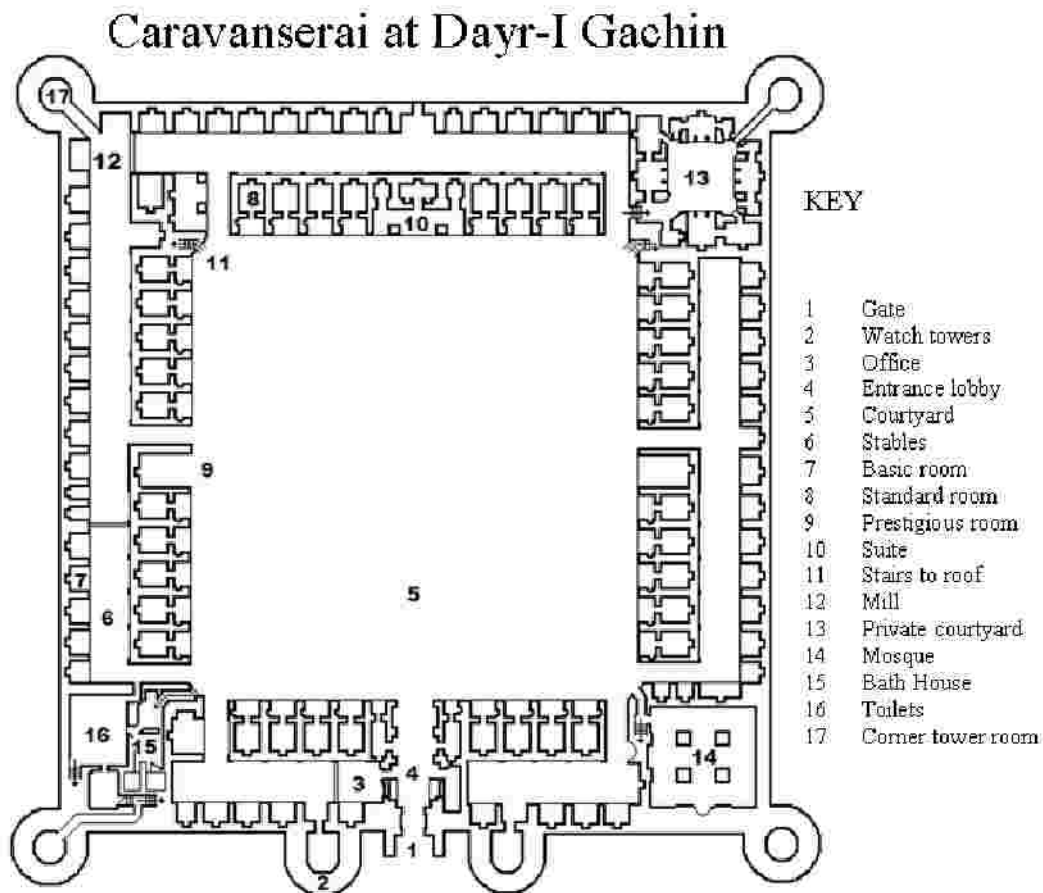
Caravanserai at Dayr-I Gachin

	KEY
1	Gate
2	Watch towers
3	Office
4	Entrance lobby
5	Courtyard
6	Stables
7	Basic room
8	Standard room
9	Prestigious room
10	Suite
11	Stairs to roof
12	Mill
13	Private courtyard
14	Mosque
15	Bath House
16	Toilets
17	Corner tower room

Figure 2: Caravanserai at Dayr-I Gachin

One of the main issues that impedes any study of the evolution of these facilities is the lack of historical archives, most early 18th Century invaders destroyed city and state archives. In Isfahan, for example, Asaf (1348/1929) notes, after the invasion of 1135/1722 the Afghan governor ordered the burning of contents the imperial record office. Limited textual sources remain, McChesney (1988) presents limited sources on Shah Abbas's building of Isfahan and Bacque-Grammont (1993) lists the documents available in various archives. However, the lack of documentary evidence requires a more imaginative methodology; exploring what remains of

these buildings. For this the built environment is used as a text by reflecting and analysing the cityscape; Geertz (1977: 448) describes the cityscape is "a story people tell themselves about themselves." Two different architectural approaches exist for this: Historical Architecture and Social Architecture. Hillenbrand (1994), as an architectural historian, tries to identify the architect, analyze the work, and put the architect's work into the larger context of his time and region. Whereas Blake (1999), as a social architect, argues the built environment reflects the social system of the time and the ways in which that system is expressed, reproduced, and experienced and therefore reflects the structure of urban life. The problems of how to collect, analyse and present this type of data are addressed in case study 2.

CASE STUDY 2

This case study flows from important changes in ethnographic and like methods, principally the bridging of the duality of the observed and the observer (Coffey 1999) and the re-alignment of ethnography, as *interpretive ethnography*, with hermeneutic phenomenology. It recognises the potential contributions interpretive ethnography and hermeneutic phenomenology can make to hospitality and tourism analysis. Briefly defined, phenomenology is the description of lived experience, and hermeneutics is the interpretation of experience. Developments in hermeneutic phenomenology are paralleled in ethnography with changes from classical to interpretative and critical ethnography. Where as interpretive ethnography is interested in interpreting lived experiences, critical ethnography commonly takes engagement a stage further and challenges power structures (Foley & Valenzuela 2005).

CASE STUDY 2: PART 1 - LIVED EXPERIENCE AND METHOD

Lived experience is a comparatively neglected area of consumer experience in hospitality and tourism. Likewise, personal sensing is a comparatively neglected method in hospitality and tourism, presumably because it makes no pretence to objectivity. It recognises instead the centrality of subjective reaction and reflexivity, and is a form of exploration and meaning-making. It is quite literally about relating lived experience. Its *input* is impression; its *process* is engagement with subject matter; and its *output* is expression. The validity of the method is in the

creative process and in the insights produced, with reliability important in identifying the contrasting expressions produced and their linkage to relived experience, rather than in their replication. Just as the validity of bespoke design is found simultaneously in the imaginative use of form and the realisation of appropriate function which prompts a 'wow' factor, so the validity of personal sensing is found in the 'wow' of distinctive but appropriate expression. It is the plausibility and relevance to the reader of the expression which makes personal sensing as a hermeneutic phenomenological method of value (van Manen 1990). Equally, as with design, general principles may be abstracted from expressions made by similar individuals, and these principles, however implicit, underpin shared expression. These are the experiential structures, or themes, which give shape to the shapeless from everyday lived experiences (van Manen 2002).

Personal sensing is nothing new, either as method or lived experience. It is how we function as human beings, and how we amass cultural capital appropriate to our lives. A commonly used method of personal sensing is ethnography. As commonly used by anthropologists, it is an empiricist method seeking to describe a group or culture through sensing and reflection while submersed in a local community. This is essentially a long term form of immersion, which not only affects the research outcomes but also the researcher (Coffey 1999). Its intention is to show how social action in one world can be understood from the perspective of *another* culture. This is what cultural tourists also commonly do. The parallel may be taken further. Ethnographers seek 'natural' as opposed to contrived or experimental contexts, although these now include mediated or cinematized environments as the 'real' world is no longer the only referent for analysis, if it ever was so (Denzin 1997). 'Serious' cultural tourists likewise commonly seek 'natural' contexts.

Contemporary ethnography is as much about interpretation as it is about description (Denzin 1997). Like hermeneutical phenomenology, ethnographers increasingly now explicitly reflect on lived experience, rather than simply describe it. It has also a discourse of emotions, with ethnographers having contested how far it is possible to keep personal emotions out of analysis and representation (Coffey 1999). As such, it is a method about representing multi-

vocal and parallax discourses in which stability and firm representation is challenged. Multi-perspectival epistemology and multiple standpoints contest the privileging of any single ethnographer's representation. Ethnography is thus an impressionistic but also reflexive a method, flexible in techniques, and is an approach rather than a set of specific procedures. 'Serious' cultural tourists are similarly flexible, being practiced at what they are doing (Stebbins 2006). Other than in the comparative transience of their stay at a place, 'serious' cultural tourists may in effect be thought of as ethnographers. Much depends on the reflexivity ascribed to cultural tourists and the impact of their shortness of stays on how far this ethnographic metaphor is appropriate. If it is, cultural tourists may be used as such to form a basis of shared expression for academic analysis. For cultural tourists located in Pine and Gilmore's educational quadrant, absorption and engagement are foremost, and these are the true ethnographers among tourists.

CASE STUDY 2: PART 2 - APPLICATIONS IN HOSPITALITY AND TOURISM

Personal sensing has not been totally ignored in hospitality and tourism. For example, Lynch (2005) used what he termed *sociological impressionism* as a method in hospitality. This is a method preoccupied with subjective experience, the spiritual and the emotional self. It focuses on the intangibles that arise from experience, and attempts to capture a stream-of-consciousness, and therefore to represent the uniqueness of subjective experience. Lynch claimed to focus on immediate perceptions that acquire permanency and to focus on impressions which were as near spontaneous as circumstances permitted. The method seems to be equivalent to a less formal application of *Descriptive Experience Sampling* (DES) which has been used in psychology for twenty years (Hulburt & Scwitzgebel 2007). In the latter method, experiences are recorded by subjects at set times. Like DES, sociological impressionism requires researchers to focus on analyzing their *own* experiences. As such, this is a method of personal sensing, but not one undertaken at fixed intervals, rather recorded on an opportunist and situational basis. The difficulty with sociological impressionism in hospitality is not only that it has so far focused only on the expressions of a single individual, rather than seeking shared expressions, it is unclear how impressions can be any more than a diary or set of notes produced at the moment of impression, and whether these notes are an accurate representation of introspection. DES has attracted like concerns. Further, once written up as an academic paper, the author in effect

converts impressions into expressions, but without a formal method to record the processing of the information. Discourse in hermeneutic phenomenology and interpretive ethnography would further contest the ability of a researcher to report impressions rather than expressions. This is because the transcription of feelings and emotions itself simplifies and interprets these into words.

> 'All recollections of experiences, reflections on experiences, descriptions of experiences, or transcribed conversations about experiences are already *transformations* of those experiences' (van Manen 1999:54).
> 'Our data are constructed through our memories of happenings *and* memories of our informants' (Coffey 1999: 110).

Statements such as these reflect the engagement qualitative methods foster in their users, and that memory can be reformed as it is simultaneously situational but also temporal.

Like sociological impressionism, *expressive phenomenology* has also been recently introduced into hospitality (Wijesinghe, 2008). This would appear to be a form of hermeneutic phenomenology. But in contrast to sociological impressionism, expressive phenomenology has sought to recognise the inevitability of converting impressions into expressions. Unlike sociological impressionism, it seeks to connect beyond the level of feelings, and seeks to get beyond emotions to what is felt (*presences)* in the context of these emotions. It seeks to grasp and portray presences as a pre-analytical primordial form of knowing. It has used narrative as a medium, recognising narrative to be an active reconstruction of events and significances, tied together through time by the narrator as a plot. Expressive phenomenology also focuses on explicitly *past* experiences rather than current experiences, as illustrated in the latest use of expressive phenomenology in '*Netnography*' (after 'Ethnography'), interpreting blogs as narratives, thus post hoc and written to a reflective plot. In expressive phenomenology the creative process of creating expressions is seen as desirable in this method. In expressive phenomenology the use of narrative is thus not an attempt to recapture the former meaning of an experience as it was first experienced, but is a rearranging of experience in a way that creates possibilities for new meaning to emerge or for the authentication of the original meaning.

Another important difference between expressive phenomenology and sociological impressionism as used so far is that the former has used narratives produced by someone other than the researcher, rather than by the researcher, her or himself. However, if interpreted as a form of hermeneutic phenomenology, expressive phenomenology offers a working method for researchers also to convert their *own* experiences into expressions. As in all hermeneutical analysis, the task becomes that of interpreting pattern to make details meaningful.

CASE STUDY 2: PART 3 - INTERPRETIVE ETHNOGRAPHY APPLIED

If we consider hermeneutical method this alternative application is unsurprising. Central to hermeneutics is its circular or spiralling method: that is, that the meaning of the part can only be understood if it is related to the whole; and the meaning of the whole only through its parts, and the repeated progression through this. What is interpreted is *not* fact or data, but *text* made up of meaningful signs, requiring identification and contextualisation. Contextualisation includes new contexts from other fields of knowledge and re-contextualisation through a *dialogue* with a text. This dialogue requires entering the text, with a dialectic between familiarity and distance, and a dialogue with the imagined reader of the interpretation. Hermeneutics commonly recognises the importance of insight and intuition. That is, that knowledge is not acquired through reasoning but instead is gained in an instant flash. It is the authors' belief that hermeneutical spiralling can be used to operationalise expressive phenomenology as a method for articulating self expression as well as understanding the expressions of others. All of these processes can apply to so-called 'my-stories' and 'self-narratives' as they can to the texts of others. Indeed, hermeneutical practice includes starting with personal experiences as both accessible and orientating:

> 'It is the extent to which *my* experiences could be *our* experiences that the phenomenologist wants to be reflectively aware of certain experiential meanings. To be aware of the structure of one's own experience of a phenomenon may provide the researcher with clues for orientating oneself to the phenomenon and thus to all other stages of phenomenological research' (van Manen 1990: 57).

Self-narrative analysis thus provides one means of starting engagement with seeking meanings in experiences.

Hermeneutics has traditionally considered written texts, and as said above, those of others. More recently, blogs have been analysed in a similar manner. But far more tourists record their impressions in ways other than written texts, and indeed, the texts usually analysed by hermeneutics are expressions rather than impressions. Far more tourists record impressions using cameras, or now video cameras, than make written notes. And far more tourists edit their photographs either into physical albums or electronically, than compose diaries. As such, the manipulation of photographs provides a contemporary form of expressive text for analysis, either as the texts of others, or the texts of the researchers. The processing of photographs by the tourists who take them also allows the instant flash of insight to be incorporated into the analysis, as electronic editing allows tourists to manipulate their records to represent their 'remembered' feelings and their significance. In other words, it recognises that memories are potentially reconstructed into an ideal.

Recognising these important developments in qualitative methods, Case Study 2 is presented as a means into understanding cultural tourists reactions to the experiences of Iranian bazaars. Case Study 2 focused on the grand bazaar in Esfahan. Rather than a critical ethnographic approach, the authors use an alignment of interpretive ethnography and hermeneutic phenomenology applied using a variant of Gutman-type laddering (Gutman 1982) similar to that recommended by Prentice (2001). They are particularly interested in how far their different backgrounds differentiate their expressions as indicated by their photographic archives.

PRESENTATION

The authors will report their initial findings of the two case studies to demonstrate the potential of interpretive ethnography as a method. Not only will the effects of their different backgrounds be shown in the analysis, this will be shown across different aspects of laddering found in the methods. Laddering will range from visual content, through meaningfulness to memories prompted. The presentation will call into question the reliance in hospitality and

tourism of single-ethnographer interpretations. A multi-ethnographer approach will be called for instead.

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