Performing the sacred: Varanasi, the city of living heritage

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Abstract: This paper is about tourism and heritage performance in sacred sites. The pilgrimage city of Varanasi, in Northern India, forms the basis for analysing the multifarious spatial practices, social interactions and cultural performances which often constitute the heritage of religious sites. The central claim of this paper is that heritage is performative; drawing on ethnographic examples, I argue that Varanasi’s heritage should be thought of as a ‘living heritage’ continually restored by the rituals of pilgrims, locals and devotees as much as by the activities of those who come to visit the city. This productive ‘messiness’ of performative and spatialised encounters activates processes of cultural negotiation and identity formation which underpin the symbolic relevance of this city.

Keywords: India-Varanasi; living heritage; multicultural encounters; tourist performance; tourist spaces; sacred sites; tourism anthropology.

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1 Introduction

When walking in the narrow lanes of the old city and along the riverbank in Varanasi during my first fieldtrip in 2004, I remember being often taken by a sense of confusion and frustration. There was certainly the feeling of being in a powerful spiritual place, with crowds of pilgrims lining up outside temples and bathing devoutly in the Ganges, and emaciated sadhus1 wandering around with their spirit stick and their forehead painted with sacred signs. There were Brahmins reciting mantras2 under the straw parasols dotting the ghats3, and mourners attending the pyres in the open-air cremation grounds along the holy river. That feeling was overwhelmingly sensual: the persistent smell of ashes from the cremation grounds, the sound of prayers spreading in the air at all times, the touch of my bare feet on the temples' stony ground: it was like being constantly immersed in a poignant place whose spirituality was conveyed by its atmosphere as much as by its materiality.

But then there were also those that flocked from all over the world to visit and ‘experience’ this extraordinary place: the tourists.4 There were young backpackers and nostalgic hippies, up-market package tourists and niche travellers, volunteer tourists and returning visitors committed to learning yoga, Ayurveda, Indian traditional music, or who had simply fallen in love with the ‘never-forsaken’ city.5 I could see them – I was in fact part of them – mingling with locals and pilgrims in everyday spaces and activities, negotiating their presence in the city. And yet, there were different degrees of mingling and diverse ways of negotiating, so that it proved difficult, as a tourism researcher, to make sense of the tourist encounter in single terms, as there were in fact multiple encounters, different and sometimes conflicting practices and narratives through which this encounter was mediated.

Among those travelling subjects there were also the researchers. Because of the multifaceted cultural significance of Varanasi, many scholars, students, journalists and intellectuals come to study this city. Again, I was one of them, and often found it challenging to position myself – as a researcher and a tourist – within such a multi-layered field site (Crang, 2011; Galani-Moutafi, 2000; Graburn, 2002).

Spirituality, religion and ancient ritualism were clearly the pull factor for many visitors coming to Varanasi. I myself was intrigued by such a lively and pervasive daily exhibition of faith and devotion, which brings to life compelling intellectual questions about the blurring boundaries between sacred and secular, authentic and staged, pilgrims and tourists (Coleman and Eade, 2004; Della Dora, 2012; Graburn, 1977; Turner, 1973, 1974).

It was not just about Hindu rituals, though. While Hinduism is the predominant narrative – and it should be pointed out that Hinduism itself includes a remarkable diversity of paths, practices and beliefs (Flood, 1996) – the city caters for other religious traditions as well. The sacred geography of Varanasi is in fact an intricate mandala6 of intersecting routes, practices and architectures stretching from Buddhism to Jainism, from Islam to Christianity (Singh Rana, 2009). Concepts of karma7 and moksha8, practices of meditation and devotion, the metaphysics of reincarnation and the ethics of ahimsa (popularly known as non-violence) often combine with Christian missionary principles and forms of New Age spirituality to create a sort of fusion religiosity which confers an extra layer of meaning to the cultural texture of the city. It often felt like a daunting task to try to get to grips with the complexity of Varanasi’s spiritual heritage.
Such a sense of intricacy and frustration is perhaps best captured by a remark that a fellow researcher made in a conversation during my very first fieldtrip: “Varanasi? It’s a mess!” I suppose that is not very far from what Bruner ([2005], p.20), with more intellectual sophistication, meant when he referred to this site as being ‘interpretatively intimidating’. I have been trying to untangle that ‘mess’ since my undergraduate studies. While a bit of that intricate *mandala* has become clearer to me, other layers of depth overlapped as my research progressed. In fact, I realised that it is precisely that ‘messiness’ that makes Varanasi a particularly meaningful site through which to explore intersections between religion, heritage and tourism.

The messiness of Varanasi is at the centre of this paper. The productive con-fusion of diverse cultural practices shaping this pilgrimage site will be framed by two concepts widely adopted in tourism studies. The first one is that of performance. Drawing on non-representational theory and performance studies, I argue that the cultural heritage of Varanasi is primarily constituted through the contextual practices and performances of both locals and visitors – whether tourists, travellers or pilgrims – and that heritage may (and perhaps should) be rethought as something alive, continually re-enacted in the everyday. I shall discuss this in the next two sections.

Adopting a cultural geography perspective, I will pay particular attention to the spatial dimension of the heritage and tourism performance, deploying the epistemological potential of different geographical concepts, from the experiential qualities of place, through to the aesthetics of landscape and the relational possibilities of space. While I am aware that each of these terms draws on distinctive, often contested, theoretical traditions, for the purpose of this paper I shall employ them to denote the particular geographical qualities that each term has come to be predominantly associated with within the discipline.

Drawing on humanistic and phenomenological perspectives, the concept of place encapsulates human experiences of attachment, dwelling and belonging, which merge into the notion of ‘sense of place’ (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 2003). It will thus be used to signify the combination of perceptions, meanings and identities that shapes the religious tourist place analysed here.

The idea of landscape, on the other hand, nicely captures the interplay between aesthetics, practice and material place, which lies at the core of the spiritual and tourist experience in Varanasi. The tangible and intangible cultural value of Varanasi’s ‘heritage landscape’ (Singh Rana, 2009) is the subject of the longstanding claims – as yet unsuccessful – to class the city as a UNESCO World Heritage site. In heritage discourses, landscape is often considered as an aesthetic ‘object’ to be preserved, thereby pointing to the inherent ‘duplicity’ (Daniels, 1989) of this concept weaving together “visual image and the material world” [Cosgrove, (2003), p.254]. While I draw on the iconographic approach (Cosgrove, 1984; Cosgrove and Daniels, 1988) to emphasise the representational power of Varanasi’s spiritual landscape, my argument is mainly structured around the notion of ‘practised’ and ‘lived’ landscapes inspired by the ‘performance turn’, which has been increasingly informing landscape studies (Cresswell, 2003; Ingold, 2011; Wylie, 2005).

Furthermore, as I argue that cultural meaning in Varanasi is constructed and negotiated through spatial encounters, and that the spatial dimension is intrinsically constitutive of heritage and tourism practices, space seems to be the appropriate term to express the relational nature of tourist encounters. Whether theorised as the product of social and economic power relations (Harvey, 1996; Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 2005),
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framed by notions of hybridity and otherness (Bhabha, 1994; Foucault, 1984; Soja, 1996), or better understood through rhizomatic theories as a configuration of networks (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988; Latour, 1987), space is a concept apt to convey ideas of connection and interaction.

The focus on the spatialities of tourism and heritage leads to the second key notion adopted in this paper, that of ‘contact zone’ (Clifford, 1997; Pratt, 1991, 1992). Tourism scholars have employed several metaphors to analyse the spaces of social interactions constituting the tourist encounter; in this paper I build upon some of those metaphors and concepts to examine the (multi)cultural relevance of Varanasi and its ghats as a site of multiple encounters.

I shall discuss these issues using ethnographic material collected during my fieldworks in India in 2009 and 2010.

2 Varanasi, the city of ‘living heritage’

Varanasi, also known as Banaras and Kashi, is located on the banks of the Ganges in the Northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. It is one of the sapta puri, the seven Hindu pilgrimage cities across India believed to grant moksha. These special holy sites are called tirthas, spiritual fords where one can easily transit from earth to heaven. It is upon its special status as a gateway to spiritual journey that much of Varanasi’s symbolic meaning is constructed [see Eck, (1982), for an in-depth study of the ritual-spatial context of Varanasi]. Indeed, the two recurring themes describing Varanasi in popular tourist literature – which I am going to illustrate – are remarkably relevant to the discussion on the pilgrimage/heritage interface that this paper aims to contribute to.

The first one designates Varanasi as ‘the’ sacred city of India, the grand pilgrimage site of Hinduism. Religion and spirituality are invoked here as the defining elements of the city. Varanasi is often promoted as a cradle of religions, which coexist in everyday spaces and rituals – although not always peacefully, as for the longstanding Hindu-Muslim communal tensions. Varanasi also attracts numerous Buddhist pilgrims visiting the nearby Sarnath, where the Buddha is said to have delivered his first sermon. It is likewise a devotional place to Jains, who believe the city to be the birthplace of some of their saints. Communities of Catholics and Jewish expatriates are also present here.

However, in line with national master narratives depicting India’s heritage as predominantly Hindu (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2008), dominant representations of Varanasi revolve around the city being the centre of Hindu culture. It is primarily its proximity with the ‘holy’ Ganga, the Ganges, which makes Varanasi a particularly powerful – it is believed – spiritual place. Hindu tradition posits in the city the power to set all living beings free from the chain of reincarnations. That is why Varanasi is considered the most auspicious place to die. It is known as the city of the ultimate pilgrimage (Justice, 1997; Parry, 1994), where many Hindus come to spend the last days of their life in the hope of a blessed death, or to cremate their loved ones who passed away elsewhere, or simply to disperse their ashes in the Ganga. Cremation rites and ritual ablutions publicly performed on the ghats bestow a sacred meaning on the whole city’s riverfront. People from all over India come to visit this place. Such a ‘sacredscape’ (Singh Rana, 2009) is also a great attraction to Western travellers, who come by the thousands every year. Drawing on Orientalist representations of India as the epitome of spirituality and ancient wisdom (King, 1999), Varanasi is depicted and promoted as
‘mystical’, ‘timeless’, ‘exotic’, ‘magic’. It is portrayed as reflecting the quintessential holiness of India, and the landscape representing that is the ghats. These, however, are not only the place where sacred rituals are performed. They are also the place where everyday activities are carried out, where people do the laundry, brush their teeth, shave, play cricket, where they work, or just hang out and drink tea. It is likewise the hub of tourists’ activities like walk tours, boat sightseeing, folkloric events; but also mundane doings like eating, chatting, shopping and hanging around. Varanasi is at once a pilgrimage city, a tourist site and an ordinary place, with all the implications that this involves in terms of cultural negotiations, which will be discussed later.

However, while often praised as spiritually outstanding, Varanasi stands in fact in a broader network of pilgrimage paths, a complex sacred geography mapped out over the centuries by the routes of countless pilgrims (Eck, 2012); a geography inscribing myths, hagiographies, epics and theophanies onto the vast territory of Bharata. In this sense, the city has to be understood as “part of a living, storied, and intricately connected landscape”, where “significance is marked not by uniqueness, but by multiplicity” [Eck, (2012), p.2]. Such an imagined and lived landscape, Eck argues, has contributed to construct a shared sense of national belonging and constitutes an important segment of Indian cultural heritage.

Indeed, the second recurring theme in popular narratives labels Varanasi as the heritage city of India, pointing to the significance that this city holds in defining local and national cultural identity. Besides being the holiest city of India, Varanasi plays a significant cultural and political role in the national scenario. It is considered a centre of knowledge and education, probably the most prestigious with regard to traditional learning. Since ancient times, Varanasi has been home to gurus, saints, ascetics and poets. Babas and sadhus are a common sight in the landscape of Varanasi; they are welcomed and worshipped and contribute to enhance the religious aura of the city. As spirituality, knowledge and tradition are intrinsically connected in Hinduism, any kind of traditional knowledge is considered sacred, so that it is fair to say that an individual studying Sanskrit, performing yoga, learning classical music or practising traditional dance is actually undertaking a spiritual activity. What links spirituality and knowledge is their connection with the past. Mainstream narratives lay particular emphasis on the supposed antiquity of Varanasi. Whether depicted by Hindu authoritative sources (Kashi Khanda) as the eternal city existing beyond time and space, or unfailingly associated by modern tourist literature with Twain’s (1898, p.480) famous description of Benares as “older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend”, the past is crucially summoned to construct Varanasi as India’s cultural capital [on heritage, tourism and history in India, see Henderson and Weisgrau (2007)].

Academic debate about heritage emphasises that antiquity and the past are often mobilised to convey a sense of continuity with the present and to foster place belonging, showing how heritage functions as a social and political means to construct local and national identity (Ashworth et al., 2007; Crang and Tolia-Kelly, 2010; Graham et al., 2000; Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996; Waterton, 2010). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998a, p.7) refers to heritage as “a mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past”. In Varanasi such a continuity, cultural identity and sense of belonging are granted not so much by its material environment, or by a single specific monument, as by the living tradition that every day livens up the city’s landscape and causes Varanasi to be dubbed as “one of the world’s oldest living cities”. The peculiarity of Varanasi’s heritage, indeed, is that it is constituted by a set of practices and rituals inscribed in a specific
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landscape, that of the ghats. Singh Rana (2009, p.148) confirms: “the ghats of Varanasi represent one of the finest ensembles of monumental architecture linked with the everyday activities of the pilgrims and the local people, and they are the symbol of the heritage tradition of India”. I argue that while such a living tradition is primarily sustained by the practices of pilgrims and local social actors, tourists and travellers, too, contribute to the enactment of the heritage and the development of the city’s cultural identity.

It should be noted, however, that such a vibrant cultural identity is also one very much struggled upon. Despite apparently meeting many of the criteria for inclusion in the UNESCO World Heritage List, Varanasi’s cultural value has not yet gained institutional recognition. The longstanding battle for enlisting the city as a world heritage site has been extensively documented by Singh Rana (2010), who identifies the causes of this failure in a mix of factors. Firstly, the lack of transparency and commitment on the part of stakeholders; secondly, the conflicting agendas and power imbalances between the different groups involved – public and private, local, national and international; finally, the lack of participatory methods and the consequent disengagement of local communities with the heritage issue.

3 Performing tradition and spirituality

The shift to performative (Butler, 1990; Goffman, 1959; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998a; Schechner, 1985; Turner, 1982) and non-representational paradigms (Lorimer, 2005; Thrift, 2007; Thrift and Dewsbury, 2000) within the humanities and social sciences has produced an extensive body of work rethinking tourism and heritage through the lens of performance. A forerunner in this respect is MacCannell’s (1976) use of the theatre metaphor to explain the tourist experience. MacCannell draws on Goffman’s (1959) argument that everyday life is not simply lived but ‘acted out’, and as such our social actions can be likened to theatrical performances. Goffman defined the spaces of our social interactions as divided into front and back stage, with the front stage being the place where we perform our public identities and social roles, and the backstage being a more private region where we can dismiss our public persona and be ourselves. Pushing this idea forward in tourism, MacCannell (1976) argued that tourists seek the more authentic and intimate reality to be found in back regions. However, what is actually shown to them by the tourism industry is not the ‘real’ back stage as meant by Goffman but a ‘staged authenticity’, a false ‘real culture’ performed specifically for tourists. MacCannell’s theories prompted the emergence of a strand of studies centred on performance and the theatrical enactment of tourism (Adler, 1989; Baerenholdt et al., 2004; Desmond, 1999a; Edensor, 1998, 2000; Minca and Borghi, 2009; Sheller and Urry, 2004) and heritage (Crouch, 2010; Hoelscher, 1998; Katriel, 1997; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998a; Silverman, 2013). MacCannell’s concern with authentic/staged and true/false fronts, however, has been challenged by recent research which has advanced notions of performance in tourism moving beyond binary approaches (Bruner, 2005; Edensor, 2000, 2001). Calling into question academic representations of tourists as passive consumers of the mise-en-scène of cultures, new research has recognised the agency of tourists in the production of the tourist performance which is, as several scholars argue, a cultural production in its own right, deserving serious academic enquiry (Bruner, 2005; Edensor, 2000, 2001; MacCannell,
Moreover, drawing particularly on the non-representation al approach, an increasing body of work has been exploring more mundane aspects of performance, bringing into focus everyday doings, embodied experiences and the ‘banal’ practices of tourism (Crouch, 2005; Haldrup and Larsen, 2010; Obrador-Pons et al., 2009).

In this section, I discuss some examples of those ‘messy’ encounters that I mentioned in the introduction, which stand in the threshold between performance and everyday practice, between the eventful and the ordinary. Authenticity is not my concern here. Rather, I look at authenticity as the cue for the performance to happen, as a script for the play of reciprocal gazes: experiencing authenticity is often what drives tourists to partaking in rituals, while from a postcolonial perspective, reinterpreting authenticity for tourists, as I will show, is one of the ways in which local actors play back. Varanasi’s sacred heritage takes the stage in multifarious ways. Elsewhere (Zara, 2015), I have analysed the performing of the sacred as a spectacle by looking at the Ganga Aarti, a popular Hindu religious ceremony celebrated daily on the ghats, which has become a major tourist attraction. There, I examined the ways in which the host and the tourist gaze merge in the construction of the religious tourist event. In this section, I focus especially on the everyday practices and rituals, which constitute and keep the ‘living heritage’ of Varanasi alive.

3.1 Merging practices and rituals

In an interview with a government tourism officer, the interviewee stressed that “in the Hindu culture”, knowledge and spirituality are actually the same thing. He gave me some examples; dance – he said – which is an important part of Hindu traditional knowledge, is associated with the god Shiva. It is Shiva Nataraja, Lord of Dance, who creates, preserves and dissolves the universe by his cosmic dance. Music too is considered a divine art: Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge, is prayed to at the beginning and at the end of any performance. He elaborates:

“We pray god at the beginning of every action we take, any everyday practice. We Hindu believe god to be everywhere, we worship everything, trees, nature… We don’t really separate the sacred from the rest, because everything is spiritual. Spirituality is an attitude that we have.”

Figure 1 provides an example of how traditional knowledge, everyday practice and spirituality, presented as fundamental components of Hindu cultural identity, merge with travellers’ activities and routines. The photo portrays young students from a renowned religious school practising their daily yoga exercises on the ghats, to the delight of tourists who cannot help capturing the scene with their cameras. Because – it emerged from my interviews – that is actually what tourists come for: “to see the culture”, “to experience life in the city”, “to witness” ancient rituals and ceremonies. Tourists, however, do not simply ‘see’ the culture, they photograph it; they see it through their ‘photographic eye’ (Crawshaw and Urry, 1997), thereby adding one further significant practice to the interactions occurring on this site, that is picturing (Cragg, 1997). This is a typically touristic practice, which engages both tourists and hosts in a multi-layered performative ‘transaction’ [Staiff et al., (2013), p.1]. The practice of visually framing cultures, nature and peoples is indeed in many ways central to tourism (Desmond, 1999b; Robinson and Picard, 2009; Urry, 1990), which is increasingly being studied as an arena where productive tensions between representation and practice unfold (Cragg, 1999;
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Lubbren and Crouch, 2003; Minca, 2007; Scarles, 2009; Staiff et al., 2013). The performance of the gaze in Varanasi (Gaenszle and Gengnagel, 2008) is mainly played out around both the exposure and the exhibition of the sacred and the tradition (Oakes and Sutton, 2010). Figure 2 shows a typical iconographic view of Varanasi, with pilgrims and locals bathing in the Ganga, an image that makes Varanasi immediately recognisable worldwide. At the same time, it also shows a couple of tourists watching that very iconographic landscape from the boat. The figure captures both religious and tourist rituals: tourists boating along the riverbank gazing upon, re-crafting and circulating through pictures Hindu ancient practices revived daily on ghats.

Figure 1  Hindu students practising yoga on the ghats (see online version for colours)

Source:  Author’s photo

Figure 2  Tourists boating the ghats (see online version for colours)

Source:  Author’s photo
In turn, local social actors gaze back and reinterpret their culture and traditions for the tourist gaze. Figure 3 shows a baba posing for pictures in exchange of a ‘donation’. This type of interaction is very common on the ghats, unfailingly leading travellers to ask the fateful question: are these real babas or fakes? A question that often betrays disappointment as to what is perceived by many as the selling of spirituality:

“I feel, like with most of India, there is no spirituality here at all. The pursuit of money is at the heart of everyone: Brahmins, babas...” (Irish tourist, 31, male)

Yet it seems to me that what these interactions suggest in terms of cultural productions is far more interesting than dwelling upon the simple counter position between ‘real’ and ‘fake’, ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’ that is involved. Indeed, this is not all about the mere staging of authenticity, it is also about an intriguing threshold where imagined geographies of Otherness, expectations, and cultural practices are negotiated (Picard and Di Giovine, 2014). With his folkloric attire and gestures, the baba embodies the Orientalist aesthetics (Said, 2003 [1978]) of a traditional, exotic and spiritual India frozen
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in time; an image that tourists are taught to look for as much as locals have learned to exhibit. Both the baba and the tourist put in practice reciprocal imaginations and expectations about what the Other is supposed to search for, look like and act. In so doing, they produce unique, situated and relational cultural performances, which enrich Varanasi with yet another meaning. Moreover, as I have learned from my ethnographic conversations with various Hindu interlocutors, the ‘donation’ is commonly understood and reframed as nothing more than the expected offering that accompanies any sacred transaction in many Hindu rituals. Not a clash between sacred and profane, then, but an extension of the sacred into everyday material life; a ‘lively exuberance’ [Carrithers (2000), p.852] of religious practice that reveals the natural ‘polytropic’ fluidity and inclusive attitude of Indian religious culture, permeating spiritual as well as social and material relations (Carrithers, 2000).

What is interesting about the idea of the living heritage is that it produces particular dialectics of heritage performance both on the part of tourists who come to Varanasi to get a sense of the ‘real’ Indian way of life, and by local people who embody and enact such a cultural heritage. This idea resonates with innovative readings of heritage as a process of negotiation and production of meanings (Di Giovine, 2009). Tourists, however, do not just want to ‘see’ the culture, they want to actually experience it. The tourism officer quoted earlier confirms:

“Tourists come to Varanasi to learn something: there is medical tourism – people come to learn Ayurveda – music tourism, yoga tourism… this is a peculiarity of Banaras, because Banaras has its own style, like the Banaras style of kathak dance for example…”

The opportunities for tourists to get involved in the lively cultural life of the city are indeed numerous. In a somewhat ironic cultural role-play, sometimes non-Hindu visitors are even viewed as upholding the tradition even more than Hindus themselves. The widely read Hindi newspaper Dainik Jagran reported the story of a tourist couple from Holland re-celebrating their wedding in Varanasi in the Hindu ritual11. In the opening, the article stresses that, increasingly, people in India are neglecting their traditions whereas foreigners are becoming more interested in adopting them. The couple was on a tour in Varanasi and reportedly met an old man on the ghats; he revealed that according to the Indian tradition, if a couple gets married in Banaras, their relationship will last forever. Already passionate about Hindu cultures, the couple decided to embark on a Hindu re-wedding. Interestingly, the ceremony was managed by a tour operator; the marriage party set off from the hotel, where they returned to enjoy the treats that the tour operator had arranged for them after the ceremony in a nearby temple. I interviewed the travel agent (TA) and the tour coordinator (TC) involved in the organisation of the marriage. What follows is an edited excerpt of the interview:

“TA: We organised everything for them. They contacted our company saying they wanted to marry in the Hindu ritual system, so we did all the rituals which happen in the marriage.”

“Interviewer: You mean in a very Hindu traditional…”

“TA, TC: …Yes! All the rituals, all the things that happen in the marriage!”

“TC: So that’s not a thing which happens every now and then, you don’t hear about that, you know… That was a real marriage!”

“I: How did the whole thing happen?”
“TA: I organised the priest for them and the right place, because the temple is
the right place, in front of god… I cannot make them do marriage in the hotel.
It was the Lord Hanuman temple, the monkey god temple. So they came here
and we had organised the things for them; they wore Indian traditional dresses:
the woman wears sari, she takes henna on the hands, and some make up also,
everything. And the groom also takes the Indian dress and turban... Everything
was there, everything was matched to the Indian tradition. And then the priest
started the marriage... and they exchanged the rings also, because they said “we
want to exchange our rings”, so we said ok, you can do this thing also.”

“I: Was it a kind of cultural mix?”

“TA: Yes, because in India we have the exchange of rings before the marriage,
but they said “we want to do in our culture also, we want to exchange our
rings”, so we helped organise that thing. And then they went back to the hotel
and… I had organised a surprise for them, in the room! I had given them the
suite room, and we decorated it with flowers, because this is also in our culture,
and um... put a cake in the room also, for the happy marriage life! [Chuckles]”

“I: Were they happy?”

“TA: Yeah, very much happy!!”

“I: Did they go back home afterwards?”

“TA: Yes, they went back home after one day. They stayed in Banaras two
nights.”

“I: Did you talk with them and understand why they wanted to do this?”

“TA: Yes, actually they had learned about the Indian culture, they were very
much impressed about the Indian marriage, the things we do… They had
learned about Indian tradition from the Internet, books and the people who
visited India already.”

One may see a blatant folkloric aspect in this revival of tradition, along with juicy profit
opportunities for the tourism business. Yet, most tourists appear to show a genuine
mindset when it comes to engaging with the spiritual legacy of Hinduism.

An example comes from yoga. Indian spirituality and yoga are a dyad well rooted in
tourist imagery. This discipline, together physical, mental and spiritual, intercepts tourist
practices in various ways. Some come to Varanasi having been practising yoga regularly
at home; others take advantage of the trip to India to get a taste of the most typical and
global of India’s spiritual practices. To do yoga in India may be likened to taking tango
classes in Argentina or studying Renaissance art in Florence, as this tourist’s remark
shows:

“I’m also a yoga student so for me studying yoga in India is, of course... the
place! Here I’m gonna get the authentic teachings and the depth and the
cultural context, all the things you just can’t get anywhere else.” (Canadian
traveller, 49, female)

Tour operators capitalise on cultural heritage and collective imagery by often including
yoga classes in package deals as a way of enhancing the ‘India experience’ offered to
their customers. To all, however, the particular landscape of Varanasi provides the
perfect ambience for the fulfilment of this activity. Tourism agents, tourists and local
gurus all emphasise the fact that to do yoga in the city of Shiva15, in front of the holy
Ganga, is the quintessential experience of Indian spirituality, the realisation of what yoga
is all about: calmness, harmony, energy, connection with the transcendental. Landscape
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aesthetics, traditional heritage and cultural practices merge here to create a ‘new’ landscape re-signified by tourists’ practices [see Miles-Watson (2013), on living landscapes of worship].

4 The ghats as a contact zone

The theme of the encounter, which has been running throughout my discussion, is one widely engaged with in tourism research. It is also an inherently geographical one. Encounters occur in and with places, places that are imagined, lived, performed, criss-crossed with diverse routines and choreographies; places that are contended, shared and negotiated in multiple ways (Coleman and Crang, 2002; Crouch, 2005; Staiff et al., 2013). As it will appear from my discussion so far, in Varanasi “the performative encounter between tourists and place” [Staiff et al., (2013), p.9] occurs predominantly in the ghats area. It is therefore worth asking what kind of space the ghats are, and what conceptual frameworks may be employed to interpret this site. Different metaphors may be used to make sense of the diverse cultural practices and representations shaping this crucial part of Varanasi.

Two useful and somewhat similar concepts are MacCannell’s (1992) ‘empty meeting grounds’ and Bruner’s (2005) touristic ‘borderzone’. Bruner (2005, p.17) defines the borderzone as ‘a point of conjuncture’ between foreign visitors coming forth from their ‘bubble’ hotels (Boorstin, 1961; Cohen, 1988), and locals performing ‘the natives’. It is the zone where the tourists encounter the exotic Other promised by the tour, in a ‘touristic drama’ [Bruner, (2005), p.18] where all actors – tourists, locals-performers, producers, administrators – know their part. This is the case for traditional Maasai, Balinese or Indian Kathak dance shows organised specifically for tourists. To some extent, the Hindu marriage described earlier should be understood as a borderzone experience. However, as Bruner (2005, p.17) himself stresses, the borderzone has a contingent, event-centred nature, focussing as it does “on a localised event, limited in space and time”. It does not account for more ordinary, improvised encounters happening on the ghats alongside theatrical performances in strict sense. In this respect, it would perhaps be more helpful to resort to another use of the theatre metaphor, recalled by cultural geographers in recent theories about ‘practised landscapes’ (Cresswell, 2003). That is Jackson’s (1979) idea of landscape as a theatre of ordinary practices, an idea which he employed to describe US vernacular landscapes, arguing that it is everyday routines that produce and reproduce actual living landscapes (see also Ingold, 2011). The ghats could indeed be thought of as a landscape scripted with the daily doings and interactions of travellers, inhabitants, pilgrims.

However, the ghats are, above all, a space of encounters, where different actors, imageries, routines and objects interact in various ways activating processes of identity, which challenge stable definitions of self and other, place, and belonging. In this sense, the concept that most captures the cultural complexity of Varanasi’s ghats is that of ‘contact zone’ (Clifford, 1997; Pratt, 1991, 1992). This is a threshold where subjects from very different historical, geographical, social and cultural backgrounds intermingle and make connections. These interactions, Pratt (1991, 1992) maintains, are often revealing as to the underlying tensions between dominant and subordinate cultures that come into play in these encounters. What Pratt’s concept adds to other metaphors mentioned earlier is the idea of the power relations inherent in the tourist encounter. Pratt’s contact zones
are ‘spaces of colonial encounters’ [Pratt, (1992), p.6], which reproduce asymmetrical relations between colonisers and colonised. This is particularly the case for tourist encounters in developing countries. On the ghats, tourists bring with them expectations and imaginaries fuelled with colonial tropes, which shape what they do and how they interact with local people. Lured by essentialist depictions of India as a land of spirituality and wisdom, tourists come to Varanasi to do yoga, to witness ancient ceremonies and rites; they photograph babas and devotees on the ghats because they represent that cultural strangeness and difference that attract many Westerners:

“If we come here we want to see something different; Hindu religion is very different from our country, from Christianity, Islam…” (French traveller, 22, male)

Varanasi is perceived as the epitome of Otherness; it strikes and attracts because it is ‘different’, and through its difference it embodies and typifies the ‘strange’ and ‘mysterious’ Orient. One need not look far to find the Orientalist echoes at work in this representation: oddness, peculiarity, difference stand in a binary relationship with what is deemed logical, intelligible, normal, the latter set of values being associated with the ‘rational’ West, as opposed to the ‘irrational’ East/Orient (King, 1999; Said, 2003 [1978]).

However, precisely because of the non-regulated nature of the ghat space – its messiness – interactions between hosts and guests (Smith, 1977) are often open-ended and creative.

An example comes from music, a fertile terrain for negotiations of heritage and tradition in the tourist encounter. Again, evidence is found in the local press; next to the Western spouses committing to each other in the Hindu marriage discussed earlier, the newspaper shows an Italian young man on the ghats playing an original instrument crafted by himself. The music produced, says the article, is believed to be healing and the peculiar instrument attracted local attention. It is noteworthy that in a city which stands out for its musical heritage, a city that produced world-class musicians like the sitarist Ravi Shankar, and that is considered the stronghold of Indian classical music, innovation may come from the fusion of sounds, expertise, interests and music sensibilities imported by the travelling subjects. Not accidentally, the scene takes place on the ghats; that is not to say that the fluid mobilities of travellers and locals are confined solely to that area – in fact, they do traverse other city spaces, too – but it is primarily upon the ghats that they come together and become apparent. The ghat zone is a space “vibrant with people and potential” [MacCannell, (1992), p. 18] where package tourists and backpackers, pilgrims and inhabitants, babas and priests, wealthy brahmans and drug dealers, vendors and snake charmers, beggars and cripples, human beings and animals, living bodies and dead bodies come together, make contact or just pass by. Their patterns, performances and body movements traverse and constitute the space of the ghats. These are spaces “pregnant with the possibility” [Chakrabarty, (1991), p.26], open to chance encounters and sensually overwhelming, drenched as they are with smells, colours and sounds. Edensor (1998, 2000) defines this kind of spaces as ‘heterogeneous’. Such a sense of all-togetherness is what strikes tourists as well:

“All life is down there, isn’t it, people washing in the river and the buffalos roaming there, in the Ganga, and everything is... it’s all happening there. It was nice, my first view of the ghats was breathtaking.” (British traveller, 56, female)
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Frequently, however, this spatial promiscuity appears disorienting, demanding, upsetting or even threatening:

“...half of the group got annoyed and scared for being ‘assaulted’ by so many vendors, beggars, people... and left, they went back to the hotel.” (From a conversation with a tour guide on the ghats)

“I feel quite emotional here... people drinking Pepsi, next someone is burning, someone swimming in the middle, cows a bit further... “ (Polish traveller, 22, male)

“...everything is together in one place, it’s quite overwhelming...” (German traveller, 32, female)

The ghats embody the space of chaos and disorder that Orientalist discourses associate with the Orient. At the same time, confusion and irrationality are reframed as ‘exotic’ and consumed as ‘picturesque’, and the intensely sensual experience of the ghats, perceived as attractive by many travellers, fuels the trope of the Dionysian Orient (King, 1999). As the Orient itself, the ghats are an ambiguous space: frightening and yet enticing, repulsive and sensual, irrational and yet spiritually enlightening. Together with its ritual relevance in religious terms, this particular cultural and spatial liminality of the city’s riverfront is what contributes to the making and remaking of its living heritage.

5 Making sense of the messiness

The case of Varanasi contributes to recent theoretical developments in tourism studies and to the specific theme of the heritage/religion interface in some important ways.

First, it advances theories of performance in tourism and heritage by providing empirical evidence of how symbolic tourist sites are better understood as crossroads of social and cultural practices, which put into play and creatively rework dominant discourses of heritage and tradition. The Varanasi example allows for the underlying claim of a growing body of literature to be persuasively made yet again: heritage is performative. Whether evoked through the verbal performances of museum guides (Katriel, 1997), staged in living history events (Crang, 1996), vivified through sensual engagements (Crouch, 2010), or reinterpreted in the tourist encounter as shown in this paper, traditions and the pasts are kept alive and constantly transformed through human interactions and performances. Thus, heritage as a fixed and singular normative concept – defining what memories, landscapes, objects and traditions are to be valued and preserved, and how – needs to be problematised and the active role of its consumers reinstated. The empirical material presented here goes in the direction of ‘pluralising pasts’ (Ashworth et al., 2007), looking at tourism not so much as the lucrative market for the commodification of the past, as a dynamic process able to creatively re-invent tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983) and resignify the past in multiple and sometimes contested ways. As observed in Varanasi, tourists do engage with local traditions and spirituality, they do not simply ‘consume’ them; they do so through typically modern (MacCannell, 1976) practices, devices and mindsets, which speak of the tensions of modernity unfolding in the interplay of identities, expectations and power relations happening in the tourist encounter (Oakes, 2005). In a sense, then, tourist practices link antiquity to modernity, and assure that continuity of the past(s) in the present(s) – a core function of heritage – is constantly renewed. While this idea resonates with extensive
literature on tourism performance as previously referenced, in looking at the ordinary, entangled performances of tourists and hosts, this paper contributes particularly to the growing body of research bringing into focus the everyday practices of tourism.

Second, building mainly on tourism research in cultural geography, the paper makes a case for the need to investigate the spatial dimension of the heritage and tourist performance. To theorise the ghats as a contact zone means drawing attention to the inherent tensions and negotiations that constitute symbolic tourist spaces, where colonial imaginations are played out along with the reverse gaze (Gillespie, 2006; Hottola, 2002) of local actors – as in the baba vignette – and new ‘hybrid’ cultures (Bhabha, 1994) develop from these encounters, as shown in the music example. The ghats are not simply the backdrop for these intercultural performances to happen; instead, they are a social space continually produced and reproduced through social practice (Lefebvre, 1991). The contact zone metaphor allows to understand the tourist space both in its ‘representational’ aspects (Cosgrove, 1984; Lefebvre, 1991; Urry, 1990) fostering geographical imaginations which affect the ways tourists and hosts (inter)act, and in its ‘lived’ and sensual texture, where ‘contact’ between different cultures is quite literally made through haptic, and sensory more generally, exchanges between people and place. What is more, it lends itself to understanding the tourist site as a space of contestation and power relations. This is seen in the politics of Varanasi’s heritage, which reveal underlying struggles between actors in the private and public spheres on different scales (Singh Rana, 2010). Culture and power in Varanasi have also been explored in Freitag (1989), while Parry (1994) shows how ritual and economic control over the ghats is exercised by various groups and influential Brahmin Pandits (Parry, 1994). Issues of power, I argued, are especially evident in the colonial legacy embedded in Western tourism in India, still significantly laden with Orientalist tropes and representations. However, while academic research has extensively investigated the ways in which ‘the Orient’ is represented (on India see Arnold, 2005; Hutnyk, 1996; King, 1999), how it is practised, particularly by contemporary tourism, have only been recently attracting scholarly attention (Edensor, 1998; Haldrup and Larsen, 2010; Henderson and Weisgrau, 2007; Hottola, 2002). By exploring the complex spatial practices which constitute one of India’s most prominent religious tourist sites, this paper contributes to filling the gap in research on tourist practices in ‘Oriental’ spaces, with particular regard to India.

Third, as a centre of pilgrimage and spirituality, Varanasi is a breeding ground for pilgrimage studies and religious tourism research; most of the relevant literature is indeed concerned with the ritual, social and spatial construction of Varanasi as a tīrtha, and the related practices of mobility predominantly explored are practices of pilgrimage and religious travel (Eck, 1982; Gutschow, 2006; Parry, 1994; Singh Rana, 1993). Despite more comprehensive studies (Freitag, 1989; Gaenszle and Gengnagel, 2008), little academic attention has been paid to exploring intersections between traditional spiritual practices/spaces, and contemporary tourism in broader terms, although attempts to address this gap have recently been made (Doron, 2005; Huberman, 2005, 2006; Korpela, 2009, 2013; Rana and Singh, 2010). A central claim of the empirical discussion presented in this paper is that sacred sites are not only sites of religious performance, but sites where the religious and the touristic interweave (Della Dora, 2012). The complexities and cultural implications resulting from the blurring of the two traditionally distinct typologies of ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ travellers have been seen here as opening up novel ways of conceptualising cultural heritage. While scholars have stressed that the heritage landscape of Varanasi is made up of ancient practices of pilgrimage, devotion and
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spirituality revived daily, my argument is that the merging of religious and touristic activities, and the interplay between pilgrims, inhabitants and tourists, add to that cultural heritage an extra layer of multicultural meaning. In other words, Varanasi testifies both to an ancient living tradition re-enacted every day on the ghats, and to the modern cultural and identity practices that take place through tourism. Therefore, if on the one hand the paper contributes to broadening academic literature on Varanasi by investigating the multicultural productions prompted by the presence of lay tourism in the sacred city, on the other, by showing the tangled realities of different actors, practices and spaces in this pilgrimage city, and complicating easy assumptions on its symbolic meaning, it also challenges a widespread tendency in tourism and religion research to seeing tourism mainly as disruptive of the sacredness of places and rituals [Timothy and Olsen, (2006), pp.12–13].

Finally, what draws together the three arguments expounded above is the underlying idea of the productive messiness encompassing the intersecting trajectories of tourism, religion and heritage in Varanasi. This messiness speaks of the troubling, and yet fecund experience of the intercultural encounter, and the epistemological attempts to make sense of it. These attempts have been various, some suggesting notions of confusion (Hottola, 2004) and hybridity (Bhabha, 1994), others adopting metaphors of contact and indeed encounter (Pratt, 1991, 1992), others alluding to the allegedly conflicting (Huntington, 1996), distressing (Oberg, 1960) and unsettled (Moufakkir, 2013) nature of these encounters. This paper adds to these debates by framing the discussion on heritage, religion and tourism in Varanasi through the lens of cultural con-fusion as metaphorically expressed by the idea of messiness.

6 Conclusions

In this paper, I analysed the interfaces between pilgrimage, tourism and heritage in Varanasi in the light of performance theories. Drawing on a series of empirical examples, I showed how various social actors participate in the construction of this pilgrimage site as a meaningful place where different cultures meet and interact. These encounters, I argued, are spatial encounters, which engage people with places through a variety of onsite performances. Some of these performances have a routine, ordinary nature, others a dramatic purpose; some are viewed as sacred, others as secular, some as both. The diversity of people and activities in the ghats, the intersecting of ritual, labour and leisure routines, the architectural pastiche of palaces, temples, guesthouses and makeshift huts, the multiple uses of space for private and public, legal and illegal, religious and lay pursues, the overlapping of life and death, (spiritual) wellbeing and illness make the ghats an enormous stage where culture is performed live every day. What we witness in Varanasi is a fascinating role-play where tourists participate as active subjects in the re-enactment of the tradition, and ultimately become part of the heritage landscape of the city. Thus, the religious/tourist site becomes a ‘cultural laboratory’ [Löfgren, (1999), p.7] fostering processes of cultural negotiation and identity formation, which shape individuals as much as places.

The case of Varanasi, with its peculiar merging of architecture, environment and practices, suggests two key ideas. The first one, I proposed, is the notion of ‘living heritage’: heritage can be something alive, and not just the freezing of the past. This leads to the second idea, which calls for more creative ways of conceptualising heritage,
shifting from common understanding of heritage as objectified culture – to be preserved, restored, consumed – to heritage and culture as a dynamic process, “continually emergent in living” [Crouch, (2010), p.57]. As discussed, there exists a substantial body of research working in this direction, which this paper has sought to contribute to.

In conclusion, the task that I set out to pursue is yet to be accomplished: that ‘cauldron’ [Bruner, (2005), p.9] of pilgrims, travellers, tourists, locals and ethnographers mixing up in Varanasi is really still waiting to be unravelled, and that sense of frustration at the messiness of this city, which I described in the opening, have accompanied me through every line of this paper. The uncertain status of Varanasi as a pilgrimage site, a tourist destination, a spiritual city and an ordinary place remains unresolved. Hopefully, though, navigating through this confusion has shed some light upon the enlightening, creative complexities of the cultural productions flourishing around travel, so that, paraphrasing Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998b), Varanasi may prove to be, if not untangled, at least ‘pleasurably confused’.

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References

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Notes
1 Holy persons; popularly also called *babas*.
2 Sacred formulas.
3 Flights of steps leading down to the river.
4 This research has investigated particularly Western tourists.
5 Another name of Varanasi is Avimukta, the ‘Never Forsaken’. According to various myths, the city is never forsaken by god Shiva, who established his eternal abode in Varanasi. Similarly to the myth, some Hindus take the vow never to leave the city (*kshetra samnyasa*), and spend the rest of their life there.
6 Cosmogram.
7 Action; in Hinduism and Buddhism, it refers to the baggage of good and bad deeds accrued from past lives, which influences present and future lives of individuals according to the principle of causality.
8 Liberation from the cycle of rebirths.
9 Sanskrit name for the Indian Subcontinent.
10 Teachers, persons who provide spiritual guidance.
12 The patron god of Varanasi.