Divine Materiality of the Vanished *Ṣaḥāba*:
Religious Commodification of Ḥujr b. ʿAdī al-Kindī in Syria

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1. Introduction

In every religion, holy relics have played a significant role as religious symbols that deepen piety and faith through the religious meanings and contexts evoked by their strong materiality. They, therefore, encourage attention toward the emerging relationship with 'powerful religious messages and a sense of membership and identity' [Kitiarsa 2010: 571]. Further, the materiality of holy relics cultivates individual piety and faith through the contiguity and intimacy with them. Indeed, various religions have developed their religious authority through the formation of systems of management of the materiality of holy relics by constructing authorised narratives, rituals, and institutions to enhance religious authenticity.

In the case of Islam, holy relics consist of items described as *āthār* or *āthār sharīf*,[1] or the remains of Islamic notables [Meri 2002, 2010: 109; Komaki 2013: 24]. *Āthār sharīf* originate from the *āthār nabawī*, the remains of Prophet Muḥammad such as his hair, clothes, footprints, and other objects that have strongly attracted Muslims as a medium for obtaining *baraka* (God's blessings) [Meri 2002, 2010; Komaki 2004, 2013].[2] Moreover, it is also believed that *karāma* (miracle) can occur through the usage of these holy relics in social life [Meri 2002, 2010; Komaki 2004, 2013]. In this context, the mortal bodies of Islamic notables are recognised as some of the most divine holy relics for obtaining *baraka* and *karāma* among Muslims. Thus, Muslims believe that the tombs of these notables, such as the Green Dome (*al-Qubba al-Khaḍrāʾ*) in the Prophet Mosque (*al-Masjid al-Nabawī*) in Madīna, Saudi Arabia and other mausoleums in the Islamic world, are blessed by Allāh, and provide effectual methods for expressing their religious piety and faith [Meri 2002]. Moreover, the strong context of holy relics encourages certain forms of religious commodification through the authorisation of narratives, rituals, and institutions to manage their materiality embedded with religious meaning and authenticity [Wheeler 2006]. Some religious institutions in Islamic history have exercised strict control over the religious consumption of holy relics and authorised its management to enhance their religious power [Meri 2002; Komaki 2004,

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　1　They are also named *āthār nabawī* (the remains of the Prophet Muḥammad), or *tabarrukāt* (blessed objects) in Islamic context [Komaki 2013:24].

　2　In this environment, Muslims collect holy relics of Muḥammad and other Islamic notables, such as other prophets, Shiʾite Imams, saints, and other historical figures, to demonstrate their religious authenticity to the society. Nowadays, famous Islamic relics are accumulated in the Jāmiʿ al-Ḥusayn in Cairo, Topkapı place in Istanbul, and Niẓāmuddīn Auliyā shrine in New Delhi.

2013].[3] Therefore, systems for the management of the materiality of holy relics have influenced religious commitments and mobilities undertaken by Muslims such religious visits and other related religious practices to enhance their own piety and faith.

Although the construction of the religious context of holy relics and institutionalisation of their management in Islam have contributed to the development of religious sensibility and identity, recent developments in religious commodification have transformed the management of holy relics and the essence of their embedded religious context. Mass production and consumption of commoditised holy relics have emerged in every place, and such consumption is seen in every aspect of our social life [Starrett 1995; D'Alisera 2001; Komaki 2004, 2013; Pinto 2007]. The rapid increase in the availability of religious goods and objects as daily use and souvenirs in religious places has changed the landscape of religious places, with the commoditisation of holy relics as well as their consumption in private and public life. As the overflow of religious commodities in private and public religious lives has evoked the transformation of their management, some figures have strongly criticised the situation in which the veneration of holy relics violates Islamic teachings against *bid'a* (innovation) or *shirk* (polytheism) [Karamustafa 2018: 172], or religious commodification undermines the religious context of holy relics and their authenticity in society. In this situation, the transformation and continuity of the materiality of holy relics have become a significant topic for discussion.

Despite the criticism of religious commodification by some figures, researchers consider the development of religious commodification a part of our contemporary religious life. As Graham Ward argues, 'what we believe and the practices that produce, reinforce, and modify that believing are historically and culturally embedded' [Ward 2006: 184]. Further, 'the presence of religious goods and some enormous efforts to 'sell' religious faiths via market and media channels have demonstrated the growing mundaneness of religious teaching and beliefs at the outset' [Kitiarsa 2010: 569]. In this sense, religious commodification has been seen widely across history in every religion, as Joseph Meri clarifies regarding the commodification of holy relics among Abrahamic religions in medieval Damascus [Meri 2002, 2010]. However, the social impact of religious commodification becomes a crucial point in light of the development of technologies such as mass production systems and the emergence of digital media such as the Internet and social networking services (SNS). Thus, Moore [1994] documents the ways in which religious agents 'have grown by participation in the market, or more specifically how religious influences established themselves in the form of commercial culture' [Kitiarsa 2010: 565].

Previous studies on commodification of religion, therefore, seek to conceptualise

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3 For instance, Jāmiʿ al-Ḥusayn in Cairo and Niẓāmuddīn Auliyā shrine in New Delhi incorporate a specific institution for the management of holy relics [Komaki 2013].

contemporary forms of religious commitment to holy relics, and how commodification has 'emerged as one of prominent aspects of private and public religious life' in contemporary society [Kitiarsa 2010: 563]. Defining religious commodification, he states, 'the term itself implies sets of purposeful acts to convert religious symbols and institutions into marketable and consumable commodities'[4] in order to enhance religious activities in the market sense [Kitiarsa 2010: 565], and indicates that religious commodification encourages 'individuals to personalize their piety and religious sensibility' [Kitiarsa 2010: 570].

Although the study of religious commodification emphasizes the significance of personalisation and privatisation of piety and faith through the development of a market economy in the field of religion [Ward 2006; Kitiarsa 2010; Sinha 2011; Reader 2013], other studies show that the materiality of holy relics is comprehended by embedding the material into networks of religious symbols and meanings through the process of mass production and consumption of religious commodities [Iannaccone 1990, 1992; Wharton 2006; Kitiarsa 2010]. The materiality of religious commodities has, therefore, promoted the construction of a certain religious context embedded in the holy relics through communication about and negotiation over religious commodities among stakeholders. In this sense, the process of religious commodification has not only promoted marketisation of religious traditions and cultures based on individual piety and faith, but also enhanced interactions and communications among producers and consumers in the process of commodification, to create a certain religious context for their consensus and embed it in the material as well.

This paper, therefore, examines the materiality of holy relics in Islamic commodification through the case study of the Ḥujr b. ‘Adī al-Kindī at ‘Adrā in the context of the Syrian political crisis. This paper will focus on the development of the religious commodification of Ḥujr b. ‘Adī al-Kindī, and the management environment for religious commodities in the field.

The study takes the form of an empirical case study using a qualitative content analysis approach. Data for the paper was gathered from related articles in newspapers and magazines, as well as posts on SNS.

2. Ḥujr b. ‘Adī al-Kindī and His tomb in ‘Adrā, Syria

Ḥujr b. ‘Adī al-Kindī was one of the famous ṣaḥāba (companions of the Prophet Muḥammad), who unwaveringly supported Imām ‘Alī, and was opposed ‘Uthmān and his supporters

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4 Pattana Kitiarsa also details the following features of contemporary forms of religious commodification: (1) manufacturing and marketing religious goods with particular emphasis on charisma and extraordinary leadership; (2) publishing business for religious publications; (3) broadcasting religious messages and programming via mass media, including television, radio, newspapers, internet, and other online media; (4) commercial films, sports, and other forms of popular culture; (5) pilgrimage and religious tourism; (6) adopting business/market strategies of modern corporate firms, such as with megachurches and other prosperity theologies and cults [Kitiarsa 2010: 571–572].

[al-Amīn 1986: 569–586; Muḥammad n.d.: 71–72]. He was killed sometime between 670 A.D. and 674 A.D. at Marj ‘Adhrā’ in Syria on the orders of the Umayyed Caliph Muʿāwiya [al-Amīn 1968: 569] along with his companions, and buried there with them [al-Amīn 1986: 571; Muḥammad n.d.: 71–72].[5] His biography was recorded in the historical documents of Sunni historians as well as of Shi’ite writers.[6] He was the commander of the conquest of al-Qādishīya in Iraq and Marj ‘Adhrā’ in al-Shām, and one of the figures who strongly opposed Caliph Muʿāwiya for the public desecration of Imām ‘Alī [al-Amīn 1986: 571]. After he was arrested with his companions because of his opposition to the Caliph, he was sent to Damascus and killed at Marj ‘Adhrā’ in al-Ghūṭa Dimashq (a rural portion of Damascus) [al-Amīn 1986: 574–582].
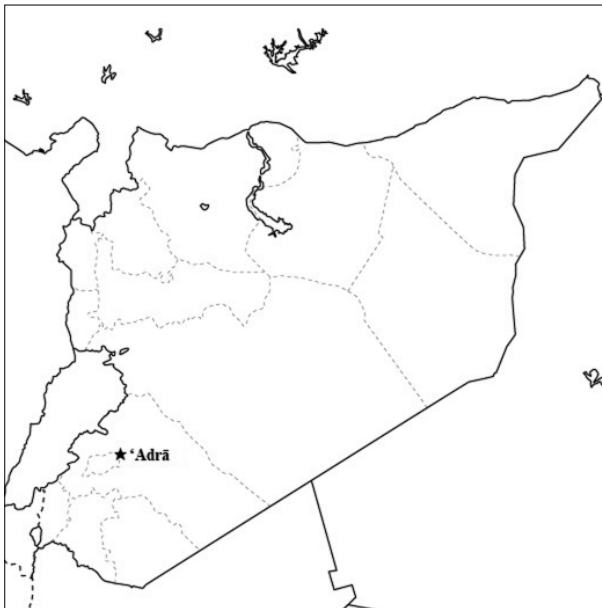

Figure 1: Map of Syria and the location of ‘Adrā
Source: Created by Author

His tomb was managed by the local community in ‘Adrā, and received visits from a few historians and travellers, who recorded the details in their travelogues [Sirriya 1979; al-Amīn 1986].[7] However, the place was not very famous as a destination for religious visits, and it

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5 The other narratives show different stories about his biography [al-Amīn 1986].

6 Muḥsin al-Amīn, the famous Shi’ite scholar who wrote *A ‘yān al-Shī‘a* (The Encyclopaedia of Shi’ite Notables) documented records from both Sunni and Shi’ite writers, such as Ibn ‘Asākir’s *Tārīkh Dimashq* (History of Damascus), Ibn Athīr’s *al-Kāmil fī al-Tārīkh* (The Complete History), al-Ṭabarī’s *Tārīkh al-Rusul wa al-Mulūk* (History of the Prophets and Kings) and other historical documents [al-Amīn 1986: 569–586].

7 For instance, ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī (1641–1731) recorded his visit to the tomb [Sirriya 1979], and Muḥsin al-Amīn himself visited the place in 1933 [al-Amīn 1986: 582]. Muḥsin al-Amīn wrote of the existence of footprints (*āthār al-qadam*) next to the mosque [al-Amīn 1986: 582].

remained a site of veneration only for the local community [al-Amīn 1986: 582].

As mentioned above, Ḥujr b. ʿAdī al-Kindī was one of the strong opponents to Caliph ʿUthmān and Muʿāwiya, and a strong supporter of Imām ʿAlī. Hence, Shiʿite writers preferred to narrate his biography and achievements, depicting him as a hero who maintained his beliefs without fear of the authority. During the Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War, his reputation grew in accordance with public mobilisation for Shiʿite political movements in the 1980s [Cole & Kiddie eds. 1986]. In these circumstance, the Iranian government and Shiʿite figures made massive donations and provided support for the renovation of the shrine of Ḥujr ibn ʿAdī al-Kindī in ʿAdrā town in Sihʿite style, in cooperation with the Syrian government in the 1980s [Calzoni 1993].[8] Moreover, the Iranian government sent masses of religious visitors to the town in order to elevate the morale of the family members of the martyrs of the Iranian Revolution and Iran-Iraq War, thus developing sites of religious tourism industry (ṣināʿa al-siyāḥa al-dīnīya) for Shiʿite Muslim visitors to Syria [Yasuda 2013].

With the proliferation of Islamic tour operators and the development of the religious tourism industry in Syria, the shrine of Ḥujr b. ʿAdī al-Kindī and ʿAdrā town became one of the significant religious destinations in Syria for Shiʿite Muslims, and he and his tomb became commodified for the religious tourism industry.

Figure 2: Photo of Maqām Ḥujr ibn ʿAdī al-Kindī in ʿAdrā before the Demolition
Source: [AIM News 2 May 2013]

As a result, Ḥujr b. ʿAdī al-Kindī was actively commodified among Shiʿite Muslims outside the country for the development of their individual piety and faith through the

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8 Most of the Shiʿite shrines in Syria that Iranian and other Shiʿite groups supported are of historical figures of the battle of Karbalāʾ in 680 A.D. [Calzoni 1993]. As Michael Fischer indicates the strong political discourses of Shiʿite narratives of the battle of Karbalāʾ, named "Karbala paradigm" by the converts in the sense that Imām al-Ḥusayn was a revolutionary who fought against the autocratic rule of the Umayyads [Fischer 1980], the description of Shiʿite historical figures and their reputation were dramatically changed.

formation of a management system for holy relics. The religious context of holy relics of Ḥujr b. ‘Adī al-Kindī became strongly connected with the Shi'ite environment through its management environment that incorporated landscape, narratives, rituals, and institutions for holy relics based on Shi'ite religious context [Mervin 2007; Pinto 2007], which led to difficulties in the era of political crisis in the country.

3. The Political Crisis of Syria and the Disappearance of Ḥujr b. ‘Adī al-Kindī

As Syria is one of the important centers for Abrahamic religions, such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, it features various holy relics and sacred sites that attract people from within and outside the country for pilgrimages or religious visits[9] through the establishment of a firm management system for the religious commodification of holy relics [Burns 2009]. In this situation, contested discourses have created conflict and segmentation among stakeholders. The firm management of religious commodification has evoked sectarian emotion among people due to social disparities resulting from the sectarian commitment of religious commodification. Opposition forces have, therefore, targeted these holy relics and religious heritages in order to destroy the anchorage of religious communities and evoke emotions to fuel sectarian conflicts for spiritual attrition.

Thus, the political crisis in Syria, which began in 2011, has exposed the fault lines around holy relics as well as other religious and cultural heritage of the country. Although some sites of cultural heritage such as Palmyra, the Old City of Aleppo, and Qal‘a al-Ḥuṣn (Crac des Chevaliers)[10] have been seriously damaged in the continuous battles, these cultural heritage sites have garnered a strong consensus, across religious and ethnic affiliations, for their recovery from the Syrian people as well as from international institutions. In this situation, conservation of cultural heritage has become a central point for recovery among stakeholders.

However, religious heritage sites in the country have followed different paths in comparison with cultural sites, and this became a crucial issue in the Syrian political conflict. As various religious heritage sites, as well groups such as Christians and other religious minorities faced harassment during wartime, Shi'ite people at religious sites also suffered

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9 For instance, Convent of St. Thecla (Mār Taqlā) in Ma‘lūlā and Our Lady of Saydnaya Patriarchal Monastery in Ṣaydnāyā contain various holy relics, including the bodies of saints, and attract a variety of visitors, including tourists. Moreover, Umm al-Zunnār Cathedral (or Saint Mary of the Holy Belt Cathedral) in Homs contains the venerated Holy Girdle of Virgin Mary [Burns 2009], and other cathedrals and churches have also conserved holy relics to showcase their religious authenticity. In the case of Islam, various Islamic shrines and mausoleums highlight the rich culture of Islamic holy relics in the country, especially *taṣawwuf* and Shi'ism, and attract Muslims from around the world for *ziyāra* (religious visits) [Meri 2002; Burns 2009].

10 Palmyra, Old City of Aleppo and Qal‘a al-Ḥuṣn were registered as UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1979, 1986 and 2006. Both sites were seriously damaged in the battle in the country, and recovery projects in cooperation with UNESCO and other international institutions are underway [UNESCO 2020].

continuous attacks from some opponents of the Syrian government. Since the end of 2011, these groups have harassed Shi'ite visitors at religious sites by raiding, kidnapping, and killing them in the course of their religious treks in Syria [BBC 4 Aug 2012]. Moreover, they have assassinated figures at religious sites, including Shi'ite religious scholars, administrators of shrines, and residents. As a result, most Shi'ite people became reluctant to undertake visits to Syria for *ziyāra*, and the management of the religious context of holy relics, which is sustained through the mass consumption of religious commodities, has become strained through pressure from the opposition.

Furthermore, some holy relics and religious heritage sites have been intentionally destroyed by Islamic militias or takfirists [Isakhan 2018a].[11] Takfirists strongly oppose holy relics and related heritage sites through the negative emotion toward Shi'ism, Sufism, and other religions which takafirists recognise them as *kāfir* (infidel), and seek to physically delete un-Islamic objects from the earth. In this situation, some shrines and holy relics of various religions were targeted by takfirists for demolition in order to obliterate every un-Islamic entity. Groups such as the Jubha al-Nuṣra (al-Nusra Front)[12] and Daesh (Islamic State)[13] have actively destroyed holy relics as well as religious facilities such as churches and monasteries in Syria to publicly express their political and religious attitudes,[14] and have sparked sectarian emotion leading to further conflicts. Some Islamic militias have escalated their activities to attack and demolish Shi'ite religious sites, such as, for instance, the Sayyida Zaynab Mosque in Rif Damascus province, the center of Shi'ite religious sites in the country, which has faced repeated blasts and assaults.

However, the first crucial incident of the demolition of holy relics in 2013 raised serious issues among Shi'ites. On 2 May 2013, some members of Jabha al-Nuṣra destroyed the tomb of Ḥujr b. 'Adī al-Kindī, exhumed his body, and moved it to another location [AIM News 2 May 2013]. The startling photos and videos of this event were uploaded on SNS by Islamic militias, and spread rapidly through Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram among Shi'ites across the world. This activity fuelled a sectarian awakening among the Shi'ite people across the world.

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11 Also named takfiri, those who accuse and harass other people by labelling them as *kāfir* (infidel).

12 An Islamic militia that has strong connection with al-Qā'ida.

13 It is also named *al-Dawla al-Islāmīya* (Islamic State), or *al-Dawla al-Islāmīya fī al-'Irāq wa al-Shām* (Islamic State in Iraq and Levant).

14 Jubha al-Nuṣra and Daesh demolished Sufi and Shi'ite mausoleums as well as other religious facilities such as the Maqām Shaykh 'Aqīl Manbijī in Manbij in Aleppo province on 5 March 2014 [SANA 5 Mar 2014], Maqām Mūsā Ḥusaynī in Shīḥa, Hassake Province on 4 May 2014 [SANA 4 May 2014], Maqām Uways al-Qaranī in Raqqa on 15 May 2014 [SANA 15 May 2014], Maqām Takīya al-Rāwī in Deir ez-Zor, Deir ez-Zor province on 6 January 2015 [SANA 6 Jan 2015], and Maqām Imām al-Nawawī in Nawā, Dar'ā province on 6 January 2015 [SANA 6 Jan 2015].

Figure 3: Photos of Ḥujr b. ʿAdī al-Kindī in ʿAdrā after the Demolition
Source: [AIM News 2 May 2013]

Following these demolitions by Islamic militias, various Shiʾite figures and institutions began to condemn the situation and prepared for the intervention of the Syrian political crisis to protect holy relics and religious places in the country, so as not to repeat the demolition of holy relics in the country [Iskhan 2018b; Suechika 2018]. As a result, these occurrences have agitated Shiʾite sentiment to defend holy places in Syria, and some began to participate in volunteer militias [Isakhan 2018b; Suechika 2018]. The defence of Shiʾite holy places became part of the political agenda among Shiʾite people throughout the world. Shiʿite political parties and organisations have been strongly involved in the battle against the anti-Shiʾite Islamic militia to defend religious sites, which also fueled further intervention by Islamic militias to oppose Shiʾite intervention. As strong involvement in the defence of Shiʾite religious sites has developed, the eulogy of martyrs in the crisis has been seen among Shiʾite communities in the world. These practices have magnified political and sectarian tensions in such places.

4. Narrating the Vanished *Ṣaḥāba*, Constructing Divine Materiality

Although the photos and videos of the demolition of the tomb of Ḥujr b. ʿAdī al-Kindī evoked sectarian emotion and tension among Shiʾite people, rumours regarding the incident have also spread widely. As the Islamic militia showed the body of Ḥujr b. ʿAdī al-Kindī in order to provoke a reaction and fuel sectarian tension, his imputrescible body became the focus of attention among Shiʾite viewers in the digital media, and people began to interpret his body.

Figure 4: Imputrescible Body of Ḥujr b. ‘Adī al-Kindī after the Demolition
Source: https://www.facebook.com/pg/violationofShrine/posts/

Despite the uncertainty of videos and photos, and while some people claimed them to be fake, others began to talk of the divine context of Ḥujr b. ‘Adi al-Kindī through the interpretation of his imputrescible body. Some figures insist that the freshness of the body after more than a thousand years demonstrated his prominent *baraka* from Allāh to ensure his religious righteousness. Others said that it was the *karāma* (miracle) of Allāh that showed Allāh's greatness through supernatural powers.

These narratives indicate the development of the religious commodification of Ḥujr b. ‘Adī al-Kindī in the digital media, which strongly influenced the religious context and circumstances of management of the relics. In the previous sense, the religious context of holy relics was strictly controlled through the established management environment for holy relics. However, emancipated references and the citation of photos and videos in the digital media have driven religious commodification, which enhances personalisation of individual piety and religious sensibility [Kitiarsa 2010: 570]. In the process of religious commodification, mass production and consumption, such as reference and citation of holy relics for individual piety and religious sensibility, construct a 'divine materiality', which encourages a certain religious context in emancipated practices. In the case of Ḥujr b. ‘Adī al-Kindī, the commodified materiality in the digital media attests to a certain religious context, which relates to the divine force of Allāh linked with *baraka* and *karāma*, in the emancipated practices in the digital media with religious commodities.

This divine materiality of the vanished *ṣaḥāba* has actively promoted donations and support from Shi'ite religious institutions as well as from local communities for the recovery of the shrine. Despite the physical disappearance of the body of Ḥujr b. ‘Adī al-Kindī, the reconstruction of the shrine and its recovery for the religious visits from outside the country became a central achievement for local communities as well as the Shi'ite people. In this sense, the divine materiality of holy relics embedded within religious commodification

assured the significance of holy relics.

5. Conclusion

This paper examined the materiality of holy relics within Islamic commodification through the case study of the tomb of Ḥujr b. ʿAdī al-Kindī at ʿAdrā during the Syrian political crisis.

The development of religious commodification of Ḥujr b. ʿAdī al-Kindī has been promoted through the development of religious tourism in the country. In the aftermath of the political crisis in Syria, which has continued since 2011, some Islamic militias accelerated the demolition of holy relics as well as religious heritage sites in the country, leading to the aggravation of sectarian tensions and conflicts. Various holy relics and religious heritage sites have been physically demolished, and the management environment for holy relics has also been destroyed along with their materiality in the actual situation. The shrine of Ḥujr b. ʿAdī al-Kindī at ʿAdrā was also demolished, and the holy relics contained within lost their materiality as a result.

In this situation, the materiality of Ḥujr b. ʿAdī al-Kindī was attested through the construction of a religious context embedded in the material by the narratives and interpretation of his imputrescible body in the digital media. As the continuous production and consumption of the vanished ṣaḥāba in the digital media have promoted religious commodification among users by enhancing individual piety and faith in the process. Indeed, the process of religious commodification has encouraged stakeholders to construct a certain consensus over the religious context embedded in the material via privatization to form a proper management environment for holy relics that attest to their divine materiality, referred to as Allāh's *baraka* and *karāma*.

In conclusion, the materiality of holy relics has been constructed through the process of its religious commodification, which has constructed divine materiality through the mass production and consumption of holy relics in the field. Religious commodification has promoted the transformation of holy relics from a strict structure of management of their usage, into their mass and free consumption for individual piety and religious sensibility, leading to a certain consensus among stakeholders. In this sense, the divine materiality of the vanished ṣaḥāba has encouraged a new sacred canopy to enhance religious context and consensus among stakeholders.

Acknowledgement

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