Managing Tourism and Islam in Peninsular Malaysia

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with international tourism and the Islamic religion, using the example of Malaysia as a case study to illustrate the problems and opportunities which arise when the two come into contact. Some general observations are made about the difficulties of the relationship, and conflicts between religious practices and tourist demands are identified. The authorities in Peninsular Malaysia, where Islam is central to everyday life for the dominant Malay Muslims, have responded differently to resolving this dilemma. Contrasting actions at state, national and international levels are discussed, alongside the presentation of Islam in official tourism marketing. The federal government is shown to place a high priority on meeting the needs of tourists while certain states give precedence to the dictates of religion, and international initiatives seek to promote intra-Islamic travel. Insights are thus offered into the management of tourism and Islam which may have a wider applicability beyond the particular circumstances of the case.
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1. Introduction

Tourism is traditionally closely linked to religion which has acted as a powerful motive for travel from the time of early pilgrimages to contemporary journeys to sacred places. Religious buildings, rituals, festivals and ceremonial events are important tourist attractions for those with a casual interest as well as more devout followers of the particular systems of belief represented. However, there is scope for misunderstanding between believers and non-believers in every religion with the possibility of tensions when the lives of residents and tourists of different faiths intersect at destinations visited. This is especially apparent in the case of non-Muslim tourists and resident Muslims, with considerable misunderstanding and a degree of mutual mistrust between the two worlds in general compounded in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks in the USA. In view of these developments, it seems timely to address issues arising when tourism and Islam come into direct contact and consider some ways of managing the relationship. It should also be acknowledged, albeit optimistically, that tourism does have the capacity to facilitate the cultural exchange necessary to overcome the damaging stereotypes which prevail.

This paper examines circumstances in Malaysia, a South East Asian country in which Muslims are dominant, and assesses official responses to the challenges of effectively balancing the demands of a religion which is central to everyday life and those of modern international tourism. Findings are derived from a review of print and electronic media and content analysis of promotional material, supplemented by data gathered during a period of fieldwork. The information collected helps to construct a composite picture, allowing comment on the interaction between tourism and religion and conclusions about the implications of such connections. Contradictions between religious observances and visitor requirements are identified and alternative methods of resolving them at an international, national and state level are assessed. Malaysia is an interesting context within which to explore these processes given the friction in society between modernisation and Islamic revivalism which has economic and political repercussions. Divergences in positions on religion between the federal government and an opposition party which has gained control of two states have consequences for tourism, evident in the series of recent events to be outlined.

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The multiracial composition of Malaysia's population adds another layer of complexity to the debate about religion there and the study focuses on Peninsular Malaysia where Malay Muslims form a majority, although other ethnic groups are present with some concerns about fragmentation. In contrast, Malay Muslims are in a minority group on the island of Borneo where the indigenous peoples of the states of Sabah and Sarawak and their unique cultures are distinct tourist attractions, heavily promoted in the marketing of ecotourism which evokes images of native primitivism, a jungle environment and colonial adventures (Douglas, 1999). Malaysian diversity is further apparent in divisions separating urban and rural dwellers and the progress and prosperity found in the capital of Kuala Lumpur is not typical of the whole country; such heterogeneity must be taken into account in any discussion. Nevertheless, East Malaysia is still exposed to the privileging of Islam and the erection and redevelopment of state mosques in the capitals confirms the priority attached to its affirmation by the federal powers (Cleary, 1997).

2. Tourism and Islam

Research has been conducted into aspects of the interconnectedness between religion and tourism (Rinschede, 1992; Vukonic, 1996) and parallels are often drawn between the two (Allcock, 1998; MacCannell, 1992; Schmidt, 1980). Tourist sites are shown to have acquired a sacredness, travel to them exhibiting the qualities of pilgrimage (Cohen, 1992; Smith, 1992), while actual pilgrimage venues display some of the trappings of the tourism industry so that the boundaries between them are obscured. The topic thus has a place in the literature that deals with the creation and representation of tourism spaces (Britton, 1991), many of which combine secular and spiritual meanings as evidenced in Indonesia (Dahles, 2001). These centres may be visited by religious and other tourists whose motivations, expectations and experiences are at variance. For example, the Taj Mahal is an Islamic emblem for Indian Muslims and symbol of national heritage to all Indians while its fame has given rise to a sense of universal ownership amongst Westerners who also lay claim to it, each group possessing their own 'imagined geographies' which shape interpretation (Edensor, 1998, p. 40). The commercial potential of the religious travel market has also been highlighted (Bywater, 1994; Russell, 1999) and Shackley (2001) writes about the effective management of sacred sites.

Tourism and Islam has, however, been relatively neglected which is surprising in view of the resurgence of the latter. An early study (Ritter, 1975) compares the evolution of tourism in Europe and the Middle East, revealing different patterns partly linked to religious doctrine. Din (1989) records the influence of the religion on tourism movements and policies in Islamic countries as a whole, concluding that inbound and outbound travel is relatively low in volume. Such conditions persist and these nations are now estimated to generate only about 7% of international tourism (BBC, 2001), although several such as Iran (Travel & Tourism Intelligence, 1998) are increasing their commitment to tourism development and its revenues are vital to the economies of the Maldives and the Gambia. Current leading destinations are Turkey and Malaysia, followed by Egypt, Indonesia and Morocco (World Tourism Organisation, 2002). Regional instability has had a detrimental impact on tourism growth in certain instances, one example being terrorist attacks by Muslim groups in Egypt (Aziz, 1995). Other commentators have noted this effect and the significance of Islam more generally in tourism research with a wider frame of reference (Burns and Cooper, 1997; Richter, 1999; Sharpley, 2002).

Several authors recount how Islam historically enjoined particular types of travel which have retained an important religious and social function, albeit constantly adapting to the changing world. The hirja incorporates an obligation to migrate, and the hajj (pilgrimage) is one of Islam's five pillars alongside belief in Allah and the prophet Mohammud, prayer, fasting and the giving of charity. Kessler (1992a, p. 148) additionally lists 'rihla (travel for the acquisition of learning or some other appropriate purpose such as commerce) and ziyara (visits to various shrines)', these visits a form of voluntary pilgrimage which exemplifies the 'spatially distinctive cultural traditions of Islamic populations' (Bhardwaj, 1998, p. 71).

According to readings of the holy text of the Koran, Muslims should also travel in order to visit friends and relatives and fully appreciate the beauty of God's world. They have a responsibility to provide hospitality to visitors who, under Islamic law, enjoy the rights of citizens. The emphasis is on purposeful movement with the objective of fostering unity among the larger Muslim community or ummah, and the long history of Muslim travel is documented by Eickleman and Piscatori (1990). In contemporary society, over a million travel annually to Saudi Arabia for the hajj (Aziz, 2001) which requires a massive organisational effort by the authorities (Travel & Tourism Intelligence, 1997). Its scale is depicted in accounts of Islamic religious circulation (Rowley, 1997), but Bhardwaj (1998) argues that the large numbers who take part in religiously inspired travel to centres besides Mecca should not be neglected. Many Muslims also appear to share the common enthusiasm for leisure travel as domestic and outbound tourism rise with growing affluence.

Gender differences in tourism involvement observed elsewhere (Kinnaird & Hall, 1994; Swain, 1995) are,