



Religious tourism in southern Mexico: Regional scopes of the festival of the Immaculate Conception



Ilia Alvarado-Sizzo*, Enrique Propin Frejomil, Álvaro Sánchez Crispín

Circuito exterior s/n Ciudad Universitaria, Col. UNAM CU, Del. Coyoacán, Mexico City CP 04510, Mexico
 Instituto de Geografía, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, México

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Religious tourism
 Regional scopes
 Pilgrimages
 Marian celebrations
 Our Lady of Izamal-Yucatan
 Izamal

ABSTRACT

In Mexico, pilgrimages to Catholic sanctuaries are a common cultural practice. Considering the relevance of Izamal sanctuary for the regional context of the Yucatan peninsula, this paper explores the territorial scopes of its celebration of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception. The aims were: to analyze the origin and historical evolution of the cult to Our Lady of Izamal; to understand the regional scopes and dynamics of the celebration; and to identify the profile and motivations of visitors to the sanctuary. Quantitative techniques (structured interviews of 91 visitors in December 2015; Principal Components Analysis [PCA]), as well as qualitative ones (participant observation, a photographic record, unstructured conversations with pilgrims) investigated the regional influence of the celebration and of the devotional aspects. The results reveal that the celebration, therefore the influence of the sanctuary, has a local scope restricted to the peninsula area due to a historical process associated with Maya culture. Believers who travel to Izamal on this date are moved by the conviction that Our Lady of Izamal is the protector of the peninsular Maya territory. Both regional scopes and motivations of visitors are revealed in the PCA. The fact that individuals choose to displace to a certain location, even if only for a few hours, motivated by their faith, is an example of tourism as a manifestation of human motilities.

1. Introduction

Faith is a forceful reason for travelling, since religion has been one of the main motives for visits to sites that are considered sacred and linked to a divine presence on earth. This phenomenon is common to several religions such as Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism and Catholicism; the most popular religions include pilgrimages in their practice. Indeed, many of the top tourist destinations in the world are associated with holy places, people or festivities (Timothy and Olsen, 2006), examples being Rome, Santiago de Compostela and Jerusalem. Sacred places, sanctuaries in most cases, may owe their urban and economic development to the growth of tourism and the arrival of pilgrims, as in the cases of Lourdes (France), Fatima (Portugal), Mecca (Saudi Arabia), Varasani (India) (Shackley, 2001) and the city of Moira (South Africa) (Kruger and Saayman, 2016).

The study of religious tourism began around 1950 (Martínez Cárdenas, 2012). Pilgrimage and tourism have been seen as antagonist: the first is associated with religion, salvation or sacredness; the second is perceived as profane, enjoyable and banal. Nevertheless, the two are not so polarized: religion is not averse to commercialism or entertainment and tourism is not necessarily meaningless, superficial consump-

tion since it also has to do with meaning, identity, social status and relationships. Also, pilgrims may use tourist facilities and services, and vacationers may become involved in religious activities (Timothy and Olsen, 2006; Gatrell and Collins-Kreiner, 2006; Stausberg, 2014).

In the international panorama several scholars from different fields -anthropologists, sociologists, economists, geographers, ecologists and physicians- have researched about pilgrimages in different sanctuaries around the world and belonging to different cults (Al-Harthi et al., 1990; Preston, 1992; Vukonic, 1998; Timothy and Olsen, 2006). Relevant works have been published about Mecca, Holy Land, Vatican, Mazu festivities in Thailand, Zion Christian Church in South Africa (Kruger and Saayman, 2016), as well as Santiago, Lourdes and Fatima (Timothy and Olsen, 2006). In Mexico tourism and religion have been subject of several academic studies by anthropologists, sociologists and geographers; Propin Frejomil and Sánchez Crispín (2015) note a variety of perspectives in the research: regional scopes; religious diversity; relation between sanctuaries and pilgrimages; links between patronal devotions and migration of Mexican population to the U.S.A.; territoriality and spatial fuzziness of Catholicism; regional significance of specific sanctuaries; and religious influence and symbolic territoriality. Some researchers have focused on the classification of sanctuaries in

* Corresponding author at: Circuito exterior s/n Ciudad Universitaria, Col. UNAM CU, Del. Coyoacán, Mexico City CP 04510, Mexico.

E-mail addresses: ialvarado@igg.unam.mx, ilitzin@hotmail.com (I. Alvarado-Sizzo), propinfrejomil@igg.unam.mx (E. Propin Frejomil), asc@igg.unam.mx (Á. Sánchez Crispín).

Mexico; pilgrimages and shrines as cultural heritage; tourist use of the space; influxes of pilgrims to religious destination; religious festivals, artistic expression, manifestation of miracles, urban infrastructure, and devotional practices.

The study of regional scopes of religious tourism is based on the concept of spatial interface, i.e. the movement of phenomena from one site to another, as well as human interactions from one place that influence other distant sites through the influx of raw, merchandise, people and information. Such interaction is evaluated in relation to geographical scale, and once a study site has been selected, concepts such as regional scopes can be applied (Propin Frejomil, 2003). In the case of religious tourism, regional scopes refer to the origin of visitors to a certain sanctuary and the scale can be international, national and regional-local. The regional scope is measured through mapping the official data referring to the origin of visitors (Ángeles, 2010); owing to the scarcity of sanctuaries with reliable information, a survey *in situ* may be required (Propin Frejomil and Sánchez Crispín, 2012; Martínez, 2015).

In Mexico, religion is an important dimension of cultural life; it is closely linked to the national history, and in many cases it defines local identities and traditions. Since the pre-Hispanic period, pilgrimages have been part of the culture of Mesoamerican civilizations, including those settled in the current Mexican territory such as Maya and Nahua (Aztecs). According to the traditional beliefs, ancient deities were protectors and guides of different towns and consequently those gods had their homes in the towns, roads, mountains, caves or lakes. Attendance at these sanctuaries was a social and religious duty (Puebla Rodríguez, 2012). Pilgrimages gave rise to commercial routes and communication between towns; therefore those journeys were an essential part of the social and economic configuration of the territory. From 1521 onwards, the Catholic religion was imposed on the indigenous population by the Spanish invaders; ancient sanctuaries were destroyed or the original deities were replaced by new figures¹ from the Christian-Catholic tradition. During the colonial period, former pilgrimages had continuity within Catholic practices. Pilgrimages to Catholic sanctuaries in Mexico started during the 16th century. Devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe, the most venerated in the country, began during that century after her appearances on Tepeyac Hill in 1531¹ (Martínez Cárdenas, 2012).

In Yucatan state, in southern Mexico where the culture has a strong syncretism between Maya traditions and features such as the Catholic religion, there are many sites and devotions associated with miraculous apparitions of saints or virgins (López, undated). The pilgrimage of the Maya to ritual/sacred places has survived through to the present day (Palka, 2014), together with other aspects of social organization, subsistence and religion. Some authors suggest that pilgrimages, as popular religion practices, helped to build and reinforce social identities. Study of the triad sanctuary/peregrination/patronal festival in different sites revealed the expression of various social identities: religious, local and national, including a Maya identity apparent in the customs, dances, language and food. At the same time, a pilgrimage to places considered sacred is a way to re-conquer and mark the territory for indigenous groups (Fernández and Negroe, 1997; Quintal Avilés, 2000; Quiñones Vega, 2002; Quiñones Vega and Quintal Avilés, 2002; Medina and Rejón, 2002; Medina and Quiñones Vega, 2006).

In the Yucatan Peninsula, there are more than twenty Catholic sanctuaries (Fig. 1), most within Yucatan State (Medina and Quiñones Vega, 2006). Izamal, in northern Yucatan, is one of the most visited of these sanctuaries. Since the 16th century, inhabitants of the region have displayed a great devotion to the image of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception, whose patronal festival takes place on 8 December. Besides

the significance for residents, the celebration attracts pilgrims/visitors from locations around Izamal. Moved by the desire to thank and commemorate the Virgin, thousands of believers arrive in the village to prove their devotion. Therefore, the religious celebration carries an array of spatial implications, which will be described in this paper, focusing on the territorial scopes of visitors attending the celebration on 8 December.

This paper aims to explore the regional scopes of the celebration in Izamal of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception. The territorial influence of the festival and of the devotions is analyzed through the use of quantitative techniques (interviews of visitors), as well as qualitative ones (participant observation, non participant observation, photographic register, informal conversations with pilgrims), and the consequent presentation of maps and information charts. The basic questions were: (1) What is the origin and historical evolution of the cult to Our Lady of Izamal? (2) What are the regional scopes and dynamics of the celebration of the festivities? (3) What is the profile of visitors to the sanctuary during the celebration? The purpose of this research is to address more knowledge about religious travels and pilgrimages in Yucatan peninsula as well as adding new information to the study of pilgrimage centers in Mexico.

2. Methods

2.1. Study area

The small town of Izamal (population ~16,000; INEGI, 2010) in southern Mexico has, because of its pre-Hispanic and colonial buildings, become a tourist attraction for travellers visiting the Yucatan peninsula. In recent decades, Izamal has been struggling to grow as a tourist destination. The town has some valuable resources: pre-Hispanic pyramids, colonial buildings, several traditional festivities, the co-existence of Maya and Spanish speakers and a recognized gastronomy; since 2001 it has been listed in the category of “Magical Town” awarded by the Ministry of Tourism. Nevertheless, only some 20,000 visitors are registered per year (SECTUR, 2013)

The low development of tourism in Izamal can be attributed partially to its territorial context: it is close to the consolidated destinations of Mérida, Chichén Itzá and Cancún, all of which have access to resources –cultural, natural, and infrastructural- with which Izamal cannot compete. Consequently, it is set aside as a secondary destination where most visitors spend a couple of hours but rarely stay overnight (Alvarado-Sizzo, 2015).

As a typical Mexican town, Izamal has many traditions associated with religious motifs, the most important of these being the celebrations on 8 December, when the liturgical calendar commemorates the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary. In Izamal, this Marian devotion has a historical importance and the image -held in the Franciscan convent- is popularly known as Our Lady of Izamal.

2.2. Geohistorical analysis

The geohistorical perspective of the image of Our Lady of Izamal was essential to an understanding of the origin of the cult and to an analysis of its regional influence. Such information was provided by historical sources as well as in scholarly publications. Considering that religious beliefs are part of popular culture, the legends and myths surrounding Izamal’s Virgin were taken from documental sources and in some cases the information was confirmed by local informants during the fieldwork. The result of both documental and ethnographic inquiry gave a perspective of the veneration through time but also provided a link to the geographical context. At the same time, the history of the image is linked to concepts from religious studies, such as spiritual magnetism, in order to explain the sacred aura surrounding the shrine and its relationship with religious tourism.

¹ The clearest example is the case of the Nahua divinity Tonatzin -goddess of fertility-, whose temple on Tepeyac Hill was replaced by a chapel dedicated to the Virgin of Guadalupe.

متن کامل مقاله

دریافت فوری ←

ISIArticles

مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات