Spiritual (walking) tourism as a foundation for sustainable destination development: Kumano-kodo pilgrimage, Wakayama, Japan

Kumi Kato *, Ricardo Nicolas Progano

Faculty of Tourism, Wakayama University, Japan

Abstract

Spiritually motivated travels and specifically pilgrimage, have been an important part of tourism, and today carries a much wider connotation beyond religion including health, wellness and self-improvement. Pilgrims, especially those travelling on foot, have specific interests closely related to sustainability and this mode of travel, which may be defined as slow tourism, helps shape the kinds of tourism services provided by surrounding communities and direct destination planning and development. This is observed in the case of the World Heritage nominated pilgrimage trail, Nakahechi, Kumano in Wakayama, Japan. Referring to the evolving meaning of spirituality and tourism globally and in Japan, the paper explores the significance of today's spiritualities in destination management from local communities' perspectives. This is part of an ongoing study that employs critical and hopeful tourism perspectives as a platform, situating spirituality as a basis for sustainability and advocating slow engagement with local place and its people.

1. Introduction

Wakayama Prefecture has two sets of pilgrimage trails registered as part of the World Heritage site, Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Ranges (UNESCO, 2004). The pilgrimage trail includes Kumano-kodo, consisting of five trails that lead to three grand shrines and Koyasan Choishi-michi and culminating at the Buddhist temple town Koyasan. The former represents Japan's native animist beliefs blended with Buddhism which flourished around the 11th century through to the 19th century, and the latter symbolizes Shingon Esoteric Buddhism founded by Monk Kukai in 816. While the combination of the two sites makes Wakayama a unique destination, Kumano-kodo, and specifically one of the trails, Nakahechi, has evolved as a popular walking destination due to distance, accessibility, authenticity and promotion.

Today, Nakahechi, and other pilgrimage trails are visited by those who are not necessarily motivated by religious reasons, but rather, seek qualities such as positive elements of natural environment - serenity, beauty, cleanliness, a sense of spiritual and physical wellness, as well as a sense of achievement gained through completing a certain distance on foot. Visitors, or more specifically walkers on these trails, prefer 'treading lightly on the ground', having minimum impact on the local environment, community and culture. This shapes the kind of tourism services offered (food, accommodation, activities) and the direction of tourism development in the area. Through the case of Nakahechi, Kumano, this paper explores how “spirituality” sought by today's pilgrims’ (walkers) interests shape tourism development in relation to sustainability (Fig. 1).

The data from which this paper is drawn is based on interviews with local service providers of lodging, food, tours and guiding, as the focus here is on local involvement in tourism development rather than tourists themselves, although both are part of an ongoing and wider study. This project is situated within the critical and hopeful tourism agenda, which addresses “co-transformative learning and syncretic growth” (Pritchard et al., 2011, 957–958), closely related to “the challenge of creating a more just and sustainable world” (Pritchard et al., 2011, 942). It also responds to the need for a “more ethical, philosophical and reflexive approach to tourism knowledge” (Tribe, 2009), and it makes a specific connection between spirituality and sustainability in tourism as a foundation for sustainable destination management and development, and employs the concept of “slow tourism” (Caffyn, 2012; Dickinson & Lumsdon, 2010) as a framework – letting the “walk” set the pace and context of development.

2. Contemporary spirituality and tourism

Modern narratives of secularization have often predicted the disappearance or at least marginalization of religions under the development of modern scientific knowledge and rationalization (Hanegraaff, 2000; Heelas, 2006; Houtman & Manscini, 2002). Even under increasing secularization (Houtman & Manscini, 2002), religion is still very much alive, but the way religiosity or spirituality is understood and practiced has experienced radical changes in contemporary times (Hanegraaff,
Spirituality and religiousness have not therefore declined in our contemporary era, contradicting secularization that predicted the disappearance of religion with the rise of science and rationality. Rather, the way religion is practiced in the contemporary world has changed. Traditional religious institutions, particular theistic ones, have seen their influence diminish as individuals increasingly disregard their final authority on spiritual life. As a result, spirituality has been “deregulated” from religious institutions, and individuals have obtained freedom of choice in defining their own spiritual life; spirituality is a matter of personal choice, and the individual is free to practice different spiritual traditions as they see fit, no longer under dogmatic restrictions from external religious institutions. This has given rise to syncretism and hybridization of an eclectic group of religious and non-religious themes and practices.

Spiritually motivated travels are by no means a modern phenomenon (Rinschede, 1992). Sacred places such as Mecca, Bodhigaya, Jerusalem, Notre Dame Cathedral or Uluru have become important destinations. Explicit conceptualisations of such travel as part of tourism however is a relatively recent phenomenon, and thus the number of...
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