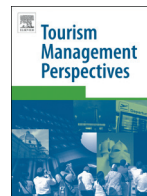




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Spiritual (walking) tourism as a foundation for sustainable destination development: Kumano-kodo pilgrimage, Wakayama, Japan

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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.

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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 & Mancini, 2002). Even under increasing secularization (Houtman & Mancini, 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,

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Fig. 1. Kumano Hongu Grand Shrine.
(Source: Author)

2000; Heelas, 2006; Houtman & Mancini, 2002; Okamoto, 2015). This is partially due to the rapid modernization and technological development that has led to a fast-paced lifestyle where few people have time or space to relax, expand their interests, and develop their physical and mental health (Timothy & Conover, 2006).

One of the most prominent characteristics of modern spirituality is the dissociation from institutional religious authorities on matters that were traditionally under their guidance, such as the parameters of spiritual life and the articulation of morals. Ito (2003) has pointed out that in contemporary society, affinity with traditional religion tends to be disregarded, while the number of people interested in spirituality continues to grow. On a similar note, Okamoto (2015) asserts that as the influence of religion in the public spheres of society decline, the interpretation of the world and societal values has diversified and religion has become increasingly confined to the private sphere. Okamoto (2015, 16) refers to this tendency as the “privatization of religion”, which has had two consequences. One is a shift in the social position of religion, from the public sphere to the private sphere of the individual, and the other is the “customization” of religion in the sense that the individual is now free to accept or reject certain aspects of their own religion, as well as combine elements of different religions in their own faith practice.

Heelas (2006) argues that while religion and “alternative spirituality” has experienced growth in the West, theistic beliefs are becoming less popular among the general population in line with wider socio-cultural developments. The process of pluralisation has contributed to the growth of a humanistic, inner spirituality; at the same time, the increased awareness of different religions has contributed to the loss of faith as it has become problematic to view a single religion as the sole holder of truth. The development of the autonomous self can be seen in a similar light, and “forms of spirituality which resource one’s subjectivities and treat them as a fundamental source of significance” (Heelas, 2006, 57) have become more favoured. This “deregulation” of spirituality had led to the expansion of alternative spiritualities.

Perhaps the most prominent example of the deregulation of spirituality is the New Age movement; a counter-culture that developed during the 1970s in the United States in response to dissatisfaction with modern Western lifestyle and social uncertainties, alongside criticism of institutionalized Christianity and overemphasis on rationalism (Hanegraaff, 2000; Houtman & Mancini, 2002; Timothy & Conover,

2006). As the movement lacks unified ecclesial organization or authoritative dogmas, individualistic quests of self-discovery and spiritual growth are often emphasized along with eclectic practices (Timothy & Conover, 2006) which may be achieved through observation and performance of neo-paganism, yoga, astrology, tarot cards, Ouija boards, shamanism, acupuncture, crystals, power spots, Tai Chi, holistic or alternative medicine, and vegetarian or organic food (Timothy & Conover, 2006).

The New Age idea has also given spiritual twists to quantum physics theories, sociology and psychology (Hanegraaff, 2000) as it has expanded into different parts of the world since its conception in the United States. As the movement sees the Earth as containing many power spots and energy sites that facilitate the transformation of individual consciousness (Attix, 2015), its spirituality is place-oriented, making its quest an opportunity to leverage tourism growth (Attix, 2015; Timothy & Conover, 2006). Today, the New Age spirituality is a movement appealing to many people of different social levels (Hanegraaff, 2000), as it is “...based upon the individual manipulation of religious as well as non-religious symbolic systems, and this manipulation is undertaken in order to fill these symbols with new religious meaning” (Hanegraaff, 2000, 304).

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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