

Faith-Based Activities And Their Tourism Potentials In Nigeria

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Abstract

Several religions coexist in Nigeria, all of which attract their adherents and admirers at different centres and in different periods. Religious tourism commonly referred to as faith tourism is a form of tourism whereby people of the same faith travel individually or in groups for religious purposes. In Nigeria, religious tourism comprises many facets of the travel industry ranging from pilgrimages, missionary travel, leisure (fellowship), vacations, faith-based cruising, crusades, conventions and rallies, retreats, monastery visits and guest-stays, Christian and faith-based camps, to religious tourist attractions. However, most tourists in Nigeria embark on religious travel for the primary purpose of sharing faith and fellowship together as they explore the various religious centres within Nigeria and the world at large. Others still seek inspiration and desire to witness significant religious events while assisting others with humanitarian and spiritual needs. This paper examines the tourism implications of religion/religious centres and belief systems in Nigeria with a view to harnessing their potentials for sustainable tourism development. The study uses ethnographic methods to elicit information and analyze the data collected from respondents. It is contended that a well-developed religious tourism will not only promote peace among ethnic groups and nations, but will also create job opportunities as well as raise the standard of living of the communities where such religious centres are located.

Introduction

It is a truism that during the early travel and tourism, people traveled for essential reasons of seeking food, escaping from enemies, obtaining relief from the pressures of over-population, achieving territorial expansion, etc (Inskeep 1991). However, man's reason for movement over time expanded as a result of religious activities, among others. Thus, during the latter part of the Roman Empire, the spread of Christianity led to religious travel to the cities of Jerusalem and Bethlehem (Inskeep 1991).

It is also true that during the Middle Ages (in the eleventh century A.D.), religion became a dominant factor in people's lives and gradually the churches acquired considerable wealth giving rise to the construction of imposing new cathedrals, churches, and monasteries in the new-well known Romanesque, Gothic and other styles and associated religious pilgrimages (Inskeep 1991). It is also on record that in the fourteenth century, religious pilgrimage in Europe was an important type of travel as visit to places like Rome in Italy and Santiago De Compostela in Spain as well as Jerusalem and the Palestinean areas was on the increase (Inskeep 1991). Following the advent of Islam in the sixth century, Mecca and other Islamic centers became major destinations for Moslem pilgrims.

Nigeria is a country with many different religions. The majority of the people are Muslims, but there is also a large Christian community and many different ethnic religious communities. Thus, religious pilgrimages and travels are significant motivations today. Among the destinations of interest are Rome, Jerusalem, Mecca and various Hindu and Buddhist sacred sites in Asia as well as other sacred sites for adherents who believe in traditional religion. Although many Nigerians profess either Christianity or Islamic, they have continued to practice some of the older religious traditions like ancestor worship and the belief in deities.

The paper shall lay emphasis on the three major religions and belief systems in Nigeria to which pilgrimages are common. These are Islam, Christianity and traditional religion with a view to examining their tourism potentials. The study shall cover such areas as pilgrimages, missionary travels, volunteer vacations, conventions, leisure, vacations to holy places, retreats, camps, monastic guest-stays, etc. The paper argues that religion and tourism in Nigeria are powerful forces for economic growth, job creation, cultural preservation, environmental protection and peace.

Religions And Belief Systems In Nigeria

The three major religions and belief systems that form faith tourism in Nigeria are Islam, Christianity and traditional religion. Islam predominates in the north and holds high number of members in southwestern Yorubaland. The Igboland areas as well as Ibibio, Annang and Efik lands are predominantly Christians (Catholicism and Protestantism); while traditional belief systems are practiced in rural areas mainly. Research result reveals that 50% of Nigerians are Muslims, 40% Christians and 10% are members of traditional religion (www.cia.gov/cia.com).

Nigeria's traditional religious practices and belief systems are rooted within rural areas. These beliefs combined family deities with relations to the primordial spirits of a particular site. In effect, the right of a group defined by common genealogical descent was linked to a particular place and the settlements within it. The primary function of such beliefs was to provide supernatural protection and sanctions, as well as legitimacy and regulations governing claims on resources, especially agricultural land and house sites. Also, access rights to resources, political offices, economic activities, or social relations were defined and legitimized by these same religious beliefs (www.country-data.com).

Islamic religion in early eleventh century arrived northern Nigeria and in sixteenth century, it was well established in major cities of the northern states, from where it spread to the countryside and toward the middle belt uplands. It should be noted that before the advent of colonialism, Shehu Usman dan Fodio had established a government in the north; which was based on Islam. It was the structure of the Islamic government that necessitated the introduction of "indirect rule" in the north by the British colonial government. From the north, Islam spread to southwestern Yorubaland. Till date, Nigeria is referred to as one of the countries with largest Muslim populations in Africa.

Christianity is regarded as the second largest religion in Nigeria and is believed to have entered southeast (Onitsha) Nigeria in 1857 from Sierra Leone through Christian missionaries. As earlier mentioned, majority of Christians and churches are found in the southeast and south south. Protestant and Anglican churches are found mainly within Yoruba area, and Roman Catholic Church in Igboland. There are other denominations as well. It should be noted that early Christian missionaries representing diverse denominations set up rural networks by providing schooling and health facilities. Many of such facilities, particularly schools, have been taken over

by state governments in order to standardize curricula and indigenize the teaching staff.

Nigerian Religions/Belief Systems And Tourism

Tourism and religion are inter-woven in the sense that most religious tourists travel for a period of not less than 24 hours and often they do not pick up jobs to earn money. People travel to religious centers because they want to have experience, explore where their ancestors might have worshiped, or better still, understand their religious background. It is therefore believed that religious tourists travel to religious centers/historic places in the bible because it will not only enrich their understanding of scripture, create good atmosphere where peace reign supreme among religious groups, but will also create wealth and job opportunities for the communities where such centers are located. It will therefore be of great help for us to look at the various religious sites that Nigerian pilgrims visit so as to help us appreciate the religious implications of tourism.

Tourism has simply been defined as the movement of people from one place to another for a period of not less than 24 hours and for purposes of leisure, recreation, site-seeing, relaxation, visiting friends and relations (VFR), religious purposes, conferences, educational purposes, etc; and money spent at the vacation should be derived from home. Thus, a group of people who embark on a trip for religious purposes are religious tourists, but they are technically referred to as pilgrims. Oftentimes, it is a journey literally “far a field” to a sacred place or shrine of spiritual importance to a person’s beliefs and faith. Examples of such places include Jerusalem for Christians and Mecca for Muslims.

It is a shared belief amongst the many peoples of Nigeria that ancestral spirits and gods influence the affairs of the living. They not only protect the people from mishaps, but also serve as a link between the world here and the world beyond. This explains why many traditional societies maintained constant communion with these spirits through sacrifices, libations and other religious observances (Okpoko 2001:94). Groves and shrines are believed to be the dwelling places of these spirits. In southeastern Nigeria, certain forests and water bodies are designated as sacred. Selected species of trees such as *Oji/Iroko* (*Chlorophora exelsa*), *Ofo* (*Deterium senegatense*), *Kola nut* (*Cola acuminata*), *Ogirisi* (*New bouldia laevis*), *Abasi* (*Baphia nitida*) etc., are perceived sacred as well as shrines and temples.

Indeed, there are several places that have assumed sacredness because of their religious importance in the life of their adherents. Such places

become very important in the history of man. In Nigeria, there are numerous examples of local shrines that have been points of attractions for adherents and admirers. The two prominent centres worthy of mention are the Omo-Ukwu temple in Ohaofia and Oshun shrines at Oshogbo. The latter as noted by Okpoko (2008) has recently assumed a “tourist Eldora do for local and international visitors. He further argued that the Omo-Ukwu temple can also be exploited for tourism. It is an impressive monument not only because of its size, but also because of the carved figures with which it is adorned. The figures are over life size and the walls of this temple are well decorated with geometrical designs” (Okpoko 2008:9). Other holy places Nigerians visits are the annual Yahoshians tour to Omok in Rivers State and Ududonka shrine at Agulu in Anambra State (Okpoko 2008).

In the southwest for example, there are a number of religious cults, each with its own priests who perform rituals under the authority of the king (*alafin*) in the public interest. *Shango*, god of thunder, symbolizes the power of the king of central government; *Ogboni* represents the fertility of the land and the monarchy’s role in ensuring the well being of the kingdom. The adherents to *Ifa* religion among the Yoruba believe in *Olodumare* or *Olorun* as the supreme deity. The Igbo believe in deities such as *Ana* (the earth goddess), *Anyanwu* (the sun god), *Igwe* (the sky god), *Amadioha*, *Ogwugwu*, etc.

In everyday life, misfortune, sickness, political rivalries, inheritance disputes and even marital choices or the clearing of a new field could be incorporated and explained within this traditional religious framework. Given these beliefs, causal relations were stipulated and explained through the actions of supernatural entities, whose relations to the living involved interventions that enforced morality and traditional values (Cline 2003). In addition to ensuring access to and the continual fertility of both land and people, the spiritual entities (deities) protected their adherents from misfortune, which often is strengthened by charms, amulets and medicinal products sold by special practitioners referred to as “chief priests”. They also adjudicate disputes through trials by ordeal or through messages divined by special seers and punish personal or communal immorality through personal and group failures, sickness, drought, fires and others catastrophes (Cline 2003).

Pilgrimage to Mecca popularly known as *Haji* is one of the five pillars of Islam. Nigerian Muslims are strong adherents and they abide strictly by this injunction. It is a common belief among members that *Haji* should be attempted at least once in the lifetime of Muslims who can afford

its cost; thus, it is regarded as the most important of all Muslim pilgrimages. Another site valued by Nigerian Muslims is *Ziyarah* (located in Medina, Saudi Arabia), which is associated with Prophet Muhammed, his companions, and/or other venerated figures in Islamic history such as *Shi'a* Imams or *Sufi* (saints). The site spontaneously commands respect and thrill pilgrims when visited. Other sites of pilgrimage include mosques (their pyramidal nature/architectural settings marvel tourists), graves, battlefield, mountains and caves. Local pilgrimage traditions such as visits to local graves are also found throughout Muslim countries including Nigeria. In Nigeria, the grave sites of Muslim heroes have very strong notion as visiting the graves at auspicious times is a display of natural and community identity (www.wikipedia/religioninnigeria.com). It is pertinent to note also that some traditions within Islam have negative attitudes towards grave visiting.

Other pilgrimage sites for Muslims are the *Alquds* mountain in Jerusalem, which hosts *Al-Aqsa* mosque and the Dome of the Rock; the city of Medina (the second holiest place in Islam), *Al Masjid al Nabawi* (the mosque of the prophet), the district of *Eyup* in Istanbul (the fourth holiest place).

Every year about 2 million Muslims converge at Mecca the holiest place in Islam for the Haji (BBC News, 6th Jan. 2006). In Nigeria, a total of 3, 645 pilgrims went to the Haji from Lagos state out of the 81, 750 pilgrims that went from Nigeria. The figure is aside from another 10, 000 Nigerians that embarked on pilgrimage through other countries (Garba 2008). Two holy cities, 'Makkah' and 'Madinah' hosted about 2.4 million pilgrims during the 2007 edition of Haji. About 95, 000 pilgrims from Nigeria participated in the 2008 edition. It should also be noted that religion pulls lots of pilgrims to holy places, thus, the economy of the host areas are improved, seasonal jobs are created, local life is improved as many embark on the production of crafts and other souvenir items, which are purchased by pilgrims.

Like the Muslims, many Christians travel abroad for spiritual gratification – visiting magnificent cathedrals, ancient temples and other historic religious sites – which can have profound effects on anyone that encounters them. In 2009, the number of pilgrims from Nigeria to Israel was estimated to 20, 000 (Sydelle 2009); thus, many experts agree that Christian pilgrims are one of the fastest growing vacation trends, and that the travel industry had no way to qualify these spiritual sojourners. In Nigeria, some Christian gatherings that constitute religious tourism include conventions, retreats, conferences, Catholic and Anglican synods, crusades as well as monastery visits etc. Examples of centres for religious gatherings in Nigeria

are the Living Faith Ministry convention at Sango-Ota, Lagos State; the Grace of God Mission convention at Onitsha, Anambra state; the Redeemed Christian Church of God convention at Lagos, to mention but a few.

According to the US Office of Travel and Tourism Industry, overseas religious and pilgrimage travel attracts more than 600, 000 American participants a year. Premier Tourism Marketing also noted that of some 450, 000 churches in the USA, about 50, 000 now have some kind of travel program. That's up an estimated 20% in the past five years (Laura 2008). According to the Israeli Tourism Ministry, Americans accounted for 460, 000 of the more than 1.9million tourists visiting Israel in 2005, a 21% boost over the previous year. Evangelical and other Christian visitors worldwide rose by 62% in the first half of 2005 (Laura 2008). It should be noted that pilgrimages to the holy land and short term volunteer missions to natural – disaster zones and poverty stricken areas remain the mainstays of faith-based travel. Example is Samaritan's Purse, a north Carolina-based Christian relief agency, which sent nearly 4, 000 volunteers (many of them were vacationers) to the Gulf Coast last year in the aftermath of hurricanes Katrina.

There is an up-surge in Christian evangelical crusades, conventions and retreats in Nigeria. Among them are the Reinhard Bonnke and Daniel Kolenda 'Great Gospel Campaign' tagged "Nsukka 2008". The event took place between 8th and 12th October, 2008 at University of Nigeria Agricultural Farm, Orba Road, Nsukka and over two million people were in attendance. Another example is the All Anglican Clergy Conference (AACC) held at Diocese of Nsukka, University of Nigeria, Nsukka from 8th to 14th of September, 2008. The theme for the 2008 conference was "The Ministry and Anglican Liturgy". The conference provided the clergy of the province of Nigeria with opportunity to reflect prayerfully and sincerely on their relationship with God in the ministry and mission of the church. Ethnographic research revealed that approximately 9,000 clergymen were in attendance. Such religious gatherings have incorporated the use of information technology in their services as members who are not privileged to travel to the venue will be opportuned to view the proceedings/event via live satellite transmission through television, internet, etc. In 2007, it was estimated that over two million people gathered for the event. Outside the above example, other Nigerian religious crusades, conferences, summits, evangelisms etc that form religious pilgrimage emanate from churches such as Grace of God Mission, Assemblies of God Mission, Redeemed Christian Church of God, The Lord's Chosen, Christ Embassy, to mention but a few.

Also, worthy of note are the annual Catholic and Anglican synods often performed between October and November each year.

It is also pertinent to note that such religious gatherings as mentioned above are often equipped with tourism facilities, which ensures tourist comforts. Among them are accommodation provision (some of which are in form of hostels), catering services, ushers' guides (often well trained men) etc. Good access roads, electricity and communication facilities are also put into considerations by the organizers of such gatherings. In addition, the Nigerian Police Force and Federal Road Safety Commission work hand-in-hand with the organizers of crusades, evangelisms etc to ensure tourist security and free flow of traffics.

Tourism Implications Of Religion And Belief Systems In Nigeria

Religious travel can provide spiritual enlightenment and understanding of how culture, history and the heritage of one's faith interact in today's life. It provides a wonderful way to vacation; thus, religious travel touches all aspects of the human person – spiritually, physically, intellectually, socially and emotionally. It is also argued here that group travel is one of the best ways to develop a close bond among members. Visits to religious sites enhance one's faith, provide wonderful opportunity to experience natural or historical destinations and enrich the lives of members.

The rise in demand for religious travel is clearly part of a larger trend toward more interest in religious products of all sorts. Nigerian greeting card producers confirmed that the market for Christian products has increased tremendously in recent times. A similar boom is recorded in the market for religious musical titles, video and books. Reinhard Bonnke's book titled "*Evangelism by Fire: Igniting Your Passion for the Lost*", which was also printed in 47 languages sold 3, 000, 000 copies; while his gospel campaign in Lagos State pulled a total number of 1.6million people in a single meeting (Bonnke 2008). Bonnke's booklet titled "*Now that You are Saved*" was printed 65, 000, 000 copies in 50 languages and were distributed freely to people of southeastern Nigeria. Also, over 4 million of the same booklets were shared to Christians all over Nigeria freely. It is pertinent to note here that the production of these books and its shipment to Nigeria as well as local transportation of the books cost huge amount of money, all of which accrued as religious tourism dividend.

Socially, *haji* levels everybody, high and low, old and young, men and women, black and white in a way that no event in human history has ever done. Pilgrimage tends to enrich the meaning of life and often brings to

sharper focus the mission of man on this temporary abode. Too often, people returning from haji have influenced, engineered and sometime led major transformations of their societies. Indeed, the region of West Africa had undergone some of the most dramatic transformation either in the hands of or through the agency of these pilgrims returning from haji like Yahya B. Ibrahim, the patron of the Murabitun Movement; Mansa Musa of Mali, Askia Muhammad of Songhay and Hajj Umar al-Fati of Sene-Gambia etc. For the region of West Africa, as indeed many other parts of the Muslim world, haji has been the primary source of thoughts and ideas, moral and social regeneration as well as political and economic transformation.

It is worthy of note here that religious tourists are often involved in sustainable efforts at conservation or in cultural education. Many missionaries arrive in host countries with the strong desire to make a difference, not just in people's spiritual beliefs but also in the physical world in which people form those beliefs. Education, conservation, and the establishment of basic medical and agricultural services are activities that allow visitors to foreign countries, be they on holiday or religiously inspired missions, to close the gap between themselves and the people they have come to get to know and in many cases, to serve. Tourism in this way furthers development as an active and vital meeting ground where both religious and secular activities are at play (Jill 2006).

Many Christian churches in Nigeria have evangelical mobile medical teams, which provide a clear example of the way religion and development activities can combine with tourism to create tangled and hybrid situations that push against any simple definition dividing religious motivations from secular. Thus, praying for sick people, taking pictures of the landscape of the host communities visited and attending to and/or distributing medications for communities are all part of a larger complex in which religion, tourism and development can intertwine and have done so in the course of their engagement in the world (www.google.com/religiontourismanddevelopment). Nigerian Christian Monasteries have adapted themselves to modern society by offering computer services, accounting services, management as well as modern hospital administration in addition to running schools, colleges and universities. Church hospitals such as Bishop Shanahan Hospital, Nsukka; Faith Foundation Mission Hospital, Nsukka, etc. are classical examples. Church schools such as St. Theresa's Collage, Nsukka; Covenant University, Madonna University, Okija; Tansian University, Umunya; etc are good examples at hand. The Prayer/Apparition Ground, Umunya and Awhum Monastery in Awhum, Enugu State are other holy places that have

contributed spiritually and socially to the development of religious tourism in Nigeria. Religious activities have also brought about the introduction of Micro-finance banks and transportation systems aimed at community development as well as alleviating poverty in the host communities.

The tourism implications of religion and belief systems represent somehow, a complete picture of the multitude of ways that religion and development interact in the space tourism creates. The above cases highlight the manners in which religion and development can and do find common expression in acts of tourism and in “tourists” themselves. By mixing religious motivations and development activities into hybrid forms, participants in religiously motivated development projects challenge common scholarly assumptions that development is a purely secular endeavor (Escobar 1995).

Above all, the potentials of religion and belief systems for tourism development and promotion in Nigeria can never be over-emphasized as it ranges from economic, cultural and political to environmental benefits. Holy lands act as a focal point for the pilgrimages of many Nigerian religions. Hence, once an area is declared a holy place, it is usually beautified and this enhances the commercial value of the area. As Okpoko *et. al* (2008) rightly argued the obvious implication is that many investors both within and outside the country would like to establish their enterprises there. Markets for tourists shopping, banks and transportation facilities will be put in place for tourists to enjoy themselves. Another implication is that religion and belief systems help to improve the infrastructural base of the place it is developed. This is done through the establishment and maintenance of the existing access roads, electricity, healthcare delivery and communication network. Again, religious tourism helps to promote peace and unity among host communities, states and nations as it rings about improvement in the quality of life for both urban and rural dwellers, through the provision of leisure facilities and healthy relationship with others.

Finally, religious tourism in Nigeria creates jobs for the local people. It also creates other industries namely transportation, accommodation, catering/restaurants etc., which in turn create employment opportunities for the local residence; while increasing the standard of living and income of the host population.

Conclusion

Although religious travel is one of the historic forerunners of today’s mass tourism; faith tourism is of recent making significant economic contributions

in many nations that have harnessed its potential resources for tourism development. Faith tourism is a market that is currently experiencing extraordinary growth on multiple fronts and is poised to continue this trend if adequate attention is given to the sector. The establishments of National Haji Commission of Nigeria (NAHCON) for Muslims and Christian Pilgrims' Welfare Boards (CPWB) for Christians are good efforts directed towards the development of religious tourism in Nigeria.

Viewing the abundant tourism implications of religion and belief systems, it is argued in this paper that Nigeria should take advantage of the economic, social and religious benefits that accrue from the development and promotion of religious tourism. Some religious tourists are motivated not only by faith but also by an interest in the history of the place in question and/or by other subjects best known to them. It should also be noted that religious tourists bring religious beliefs and practices with them to host countries, often maintaining these beliefs and practices in the face of divergent cultural norms; thus, religious tourists abide by the rules and regulations guiding the destinations visited. Hence, their code of conduct is guided by the ethics of their religion/belief systems.

This paper also advocates that more research works should be directed towards religion, tourism and development in Nigeria. The reason is that little work has been done to study the effects of missionaries who are often directly involved with development projects, despite the fact that many Nigerian missionaries engage in aid activities. At the same time, most studies on tourism do not consider religiously motivated visitors. Therefore, for us to fully appreciate the tourism implications of religion and belief systems in Nigeria, we must take into account religiously motivated activities, including tourism and the relationship between faith-based tourists and the communities with which they interact.

If visits to holy places, conventions and rallies, retreats, crusades, monastery visits and guest-stays, missionary travels, leisure (fellowship), vacations, faith-based cruising, Christian and faith-based camps, etc. are encouraged by government at all levels, religious tourism will not only be brought to lime-light, but will also help in securing a prominent position for Nigeria in the world tourism map.

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