

Japanese pilgrimage: A key to regional development

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Introduction

Pilgrimage is a key resource in contemporary tourism, with sacred sites becoming iconic destinations for both domestic and international tourism markets. Modern advances in transportation, economic improvement, and health care made pilgrimage locations more accessible to larger markets, and people were eager to visit for both religious and non-religious reasons (Mori, 2005; Stausberg, 2011). Japan is no exception to this phenomenon. Its different pilgrimages are developed as destinations through tourism promotion initiatives carried out by diverse regional stakeholders who realize the potential of their pilgrimage-related resources, following the national government's support for tourism since the 2000s. In this brief, the importance of pilgrimage tourism in Japan for regional communities is discussed, as well as development challenges related to economic impacts and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Japanese pilgrimage and its importance in regional communities

Pilgrimage practices have historical connections to sightseeing and leisure in Japan, and thus their relationship is not perceived as problematic, showing a clear contrast with Western discourses regarding the de-sacralization of pilgrimage locations through tourism development (Stausberg, 2011). Perhaps the most iconic example of the relationship to sightseeing and leisure was the popularity of undertaking pilgrimages to the Ise Grand Shrine during the Edo period (1603 - 1868), as the population cleverly undertook the pilgrimage as a way to evade the shogunate's travel restrictions. With the development of transport infrastructure and economic growth during the post-war period, the Japanese population found it increasingly easier to access pilgrimage sites that were previously perceived as remote or even dangerous. Shikoku Henro, the 88-temples pilgrimage that extends to the four

prefectures of Shikoku Island, is a clear example of this. During pre-modern times, the pilgrimage was seen as a remote and complex pilgrimage, suitable for religious figures willing to undergo ascetic practices towards spiritual enlightenment.

However, post-war transportation development and tourism promotion transformed the Shikoku Henro from a sacred and remote pilgrimage to an accessible destination that was visited for both religious and secular reasons (Mori, 2005). Through this process, regional communities found in pilgrimage-related properties and intangible traditions new sustainable resources to assist their economies, which were immersed in challenging situations due to depopulation, ageing and the slowdown of their traditional economic activities, such as forestry, fishing and agriculture. Contemporary society's broad approach to spirituality, outside of religious institutions' dogma, made pilgrimage destinations attractive to visitors who are not strictly religious. In this context,

wellness has become an important factor in destinations, as heritage is reinterpreted and commodified as relaxation for busy urban dwellers (Mori, 2005; Kato & Prozano, 2017).



Figure 1. Koyasan, Japan
Source: Author

The increase of inbound tourism to Japan provided new venues for tourism development for regional communities. Wakayama prefecture is an example of this, as two of its pilgrimage sites, Koyasan and Kumano Kodo, became important tourism destinations for visitors, particularly from Western developed countries. International visitors were interested in pilgrimage-related tangible and intangible heritage, which was perceived as a window to traditional Japanese culture and a contrast to the bustling urban landscapes of other destinations such as Tokyo or Osaka. Destinations found international tourists to be an attractive complement to domestic visitors, as international tourists spent more time and money. Also, international tourism provided a steady flow of visitations even during weekdays, when domestic tourism tends to diminish. Two important factors helped both Koyasan and Kumano Kodo in their international tourism development. Firstly, their designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2004 provided them with a valuable tool for tourism promotion through a brand recognized worldwide as awarded to unique and valuable locations. Secondly, local stakeholders in both destinations collaborated not only on tourism promotion but also on different initiatives to facilitate the tourists' overall experience in locations which were not accustomed to receiving inbound visitors. Such initiatives included the establishment

of online reservation systems, and the production of signposting and promotional materials in different languages, among others (Prozano et al, 2020; Prozano & Kato, 2021). To summarize, it can be observed that pilgrimage has become an important tourism resource for regional areas of Japan.

Present challenges

Pilgrimage tourism is an important tourism resource for regional communities. However, several challenges in the sector are noted. Perhaps one of the more salient ones is the uneven and unclear economic effects of pilgrimage tourism in regional areas. This is a question of utmost importance, since policy-makers promote pilgrimage as a remedy for their economic ailments and ageing societies. Prozano (2018) notes that previous research on this topic shows inconclusive results. For example, it is acknowledged that pilgrimage's characteristics may not be conducive to economic spending, as travelers tend to stay for a relatively short time in each location and limit their shopping in order not to burden themselves during their treks on the pilgrimage trails. In this context, tourism spending is noted to increase at the end of the pilgrimage (Lois-Gonzalez & Santos, 2015), showing that, while different communities are promoted as a unified tourism product, results are uneven. This may create rivalry between communities if the regional stakeholders do not address the situation. The promotion of tourism services and experiences is seen as a way to address this situation. For example, Kumano Kodo offers wellness programs based on the natural and cultural features of the pilgrimage.

While the study of this issue is of long-term importance, the current COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent measures imposed by different governments throughout the world are perhaps one of the most urgent challenges of the tourism sector, with regional areas dependent on inbound tourism undergoing a critical situation. Perhaps the most noticeable impact was the virtual cessation of international tourism, which was an integral component of the tourism market in pilgrimage destinations. This sudden termination of inbound visitors meant that regional areas could only rely on the domestic market, at least temporarily.

However, the different states of emergency declared by the national government during 2020 and 2021 have convoluted domestic tourism's recovery.

Still, pilgrimage destinations have the potential to play an important role in the post-pandemic tourism scenario. Their locations in rural areas with low population density may be an attractive feature for visitors trying to avoid large gatherings commonly found in urban destinations. Also, pilgrimage's recent emphasis on wellness programs may prove to be an attractive product for urban dwellers seeking to refresh themselves. Still, some challenges remain in the sector. For example, festivals and events are an integral part of pilgrimage locations, where the locals and the larger community of believers gather to celebrate together different ritualistic dates. These festivals constitute important intangible resources for the destination, that may also serve to further distinguish one destination from another. COVID-19 prevention measures, however, discouraged these gatherings in an attempt to curb infection numbers, with many events being cancelled during 2020, such as the religious festivals of Koyasan. The re-opening of events and festivals in pilgrimage locations may prove to be a complicated issue due to the current prevention measures in place.



Figure 2. The Hongu Grand Shrine of Kumano Kodo, Japan
Source: Author

Conclusion

Pilgrimage is considered to be an important tourism resource in Japan, sharing an historical connection with sightseeing since pre-modern times. Currently, pilgrimage is perceived as an important resource by regional communities that aim to revitalize their economies, leading to different locations to promote their pilgrimage sites to both

domestic and international markets, with Kumano Kodo and Koyasan being two examples of this. However, challenges exist that require the attention of both researchers and stakeholders, with the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic as the most urgent point. At the same time, pilgrimage tourism holds certain characteristics that have the potential to make it an attractive form of post-pandemic tourism, such as its rural settings and the presence of wellness programs.

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