

Faith-based activities and religious tourism in southwestern Nigeria: Challenging factors

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Abstract

This paper examines the challenging factors besetting faith tourism products in two religious centres in the southwestern region of Nigeria, namely The Redeemed Christian Church of God and Osun Oshogbo Sacred Grove. Different world religions are associated with faith-based activities which are sought after by adherents, admirers and tourists. The effects of this tourist traffic are highly beneficial to society, as they stimulate other sectors of the economy. However, improperly planned religious tourism may result in untoward negative effects. This paper employs ethnographic research methods (direct observation, interviews and focus group discussion) to address the subject matter. The findings revealed that the major challenge of most religious activities is overcrowding,

out of which other challenges emanate. The study suggested measures to mitigate the challenges. What is new about this study is the awareness it seeks to create about the unique and inherent contents of faith-based activities and how these promote visitation if the identified impediments are properly managed. These findings are invaluable to all stakeholders, namely developers, government and policymakers in the tourism industry, as they re-engage them to revisit emerging challenges in religious tourism development.

Keywords: Challenges, faith-based activities, religious tourism, tourism, tourism development

INTRODUCTION

Faith-based activities have, over the ages, been practised as religious obligations and expression of belief in the powers and influence of Spiritual Beings. This belief gave rise to the different religions, including Christianity, Islam, African Traditional Religion, Hindu, Buddhism, etc., each of which has its creed and moral principles. Nevertheless, spirituality is the core value of every faith.

Participation in faith-based activities is obligatory in most religions, and it is seen as a service rendered in exchange for or anticipation of spiritual and other rewards. They are believed to provide answers to unknown questions or address unscientific needs. This explains why participants in faith-based activities travel to their respective centres of interest for spiritual gratification. Vukonic (1992) citing Dugandijja (1986) averred

that man created religion to fulfil his various aspirations, particularly the transcendental needs. In other words, religion or faith gives hope and provides succour for its faithful, generally at sacred sites. As Vukonic (1992) aptly puts it, all the religions of the world, from the ancient mythologies onward, have promised believers that a visit to a holy place will provide required remedies for spiritual and material needs. This practice, which was associated with ancient religions, continues to date in modern religions. Indeed, the visit to sacred sites or religious grounds gave rise to religious tourism. The perceived efficacy of such visits flourishes sacred destinations and popularizes religious tourism. For this and many other reasons, religion is perceived as a tool that can play an active role in tourism promotion and development.

Tourism is regarded as the world's largest industry, as it employs approximately one in nine workers worldwide, comprises 6% of the global Gross National Product (GNP) and, in many nations, particularly developing countries, has been seen as a panacea for many social and economic problems (McMinn, 1997). As an activity, tourism cuts across all spheres of human life, giving rise to such types as sports tourism, heritage tourism, health tourism, leisure tourism, religious tourism etc. Religious tourism (often also referred to as spiritual and faith tourism) is one of the fastest-growing types of tourism in the world (Tomljenović & Dukić, 2017; Henama & Sifolo, 2018). Affirming this assertion, Henama & Sifolo (2018) stated that over 25% of the travelling public are interested in faith-based tourism. For instance, an estimated 8.67 million tourists travel to Rome, a popular destination for Christian faithful, annually for pilgrimage (Euromonitor in Okpoko, Emeafor, Onyeka & Ukaegbu, 2021). If the above figure is added to the number of individuals who travel for conventions, weddings and funerals, all of which are broadly faith-based activities, the number becomes exceedingly high. This is because religion has become one of the many products offered and sold in

the global "marketplace of ideas" (Kosmin & Keysar, 2006, cited in Tomljenovic & Dukic, 2017). Consequently, religious tourism is perhaps the oldest type of tourism, given the early history of religiously motivated travels (Rinschede, 1992). Thus, despite its spiritual association, religious tourism, like any other form of tourism, is also a money-making venture (Sharman, 2013).

Therefore, it seems evident that religious tourism has a valuable economic impact (Vukonic, 2005), which is anchored on tourist expenditure. This derives mainly from the revenue expended on tourist products and services by the visitors. Invariably, this form of tourism immensely boosts the economy of religious destinations.

In essence, the contribution of tourism to economic growth and development has long been recognised and remains, of course, the fundamental justification for developing and promoting tourism in destination areas (Sharpley, 2002). Thus, travelling to sacred sites or destinations has many beneficial effects. These include the proceeds from tourists' expenditure that diffuse into various sectors of the economy, such as transport, agriculture, hospitals, financial institutions, aviation and the environment, and their multiplier

effects (Ezenagu, 2013). Tourists bring money from their areas of abode to tourist centres, pay for the services offered and ultimately contribute to the development of infrastructural facilities and other services that make tourists' experience worthwhile. The goods typically bought by tourists range from souvenirs to local artworks and clothing. Nevertheless, the transport, hospitality and entertainment industries are indispensable and are therefore immensely beneficial to tourism (Akinaso, 2018).

However, despite the above benefits, the tourism industry can be highly volatile and sensitive to environmental, political, health and economic changes within destinations. In other words, the industry is not immune to huddles emanating from its operations and surrounding. As McMinn (1997) rightly observed, tourism is a source of income for some groups but poses a potentially serious environmental problem for others. Thus, on the one hand, tourism is an industry where, after the business has started, the income can be derived relatively quickly as in other economic activities. On the other hand, tourism is extremely vulnerable to external shocks from economic, environmental or political situations

(Prifti & Zenelaj, 2013), which pose challenges to tourism development in destinations. As McMinn (1997) noted, a tourist destination's carrying capacity poses a serious challenge to the tourist experience and also to the destination's image. The destination carrying capacity of a site is the level of use beyond which environmental degradation may occur and may be reviewed in terms of the natural environment, the social and cultural environment, heritage structures, infrastructure capability and/or tourist enjoyment (McMinn, 1997). This implies that most of the challenges facing religious tourism emanate from its large population. Such a population usually overwhelms available facilities. As Hall (1992) observed, the well-known infrastructural, superstructural and service quality shortcomings in accommodation, transport, utilities and telecommunications continue to be substantial. The absence of essential facilities certainly will impede tourist experience and indirectly affect the benefits accruing to a destination from tourist activities. Kimbu (2011) buttressed this assertion when he stated that necessary service infrastructure or enabling environment of tourism

guarantees the tourist destination experience and encourages repeat visits. Nigeria is a nation where faith tourism can potentially become a big business considering that there are numerous religious centres of African traditional religions, Christianity and Islam (the three main religions in the country), each with a differing number of adherents and admirers. This research examines the challenges of faith tourism in Nigeria using The Redeemed Christian Church of God and Osun Oshogbo Sacred Grove as case studies. Since their inception purely as religious centres, these centres have continued to attract faith participants from across the globe to their unique ritual activities, which are believed to address different issues affecting human life, ranging from diseases to poverty, barrenness, etc. However, the increasing visitation over the years has resulted in growing challenges, particularly overcrowding and its attendant consequences. These challenges constitute a barrier to the exploitation of these centres for faith tourism development. This paper was, therefore, conceived to study these challenges using the ethnographic research method.

Geographical Location of the Study Areas

The two religious centres under study are located in southwestern Nigeria inhabited

by the Yoruba, one of the three predominant ethnic nationalities in the country. They are international headquarters of The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), known as The Redemption Camp, located at the KM 46 Lagos-Ibadan Expressway, Ogun State with geographical coordinates of 6.80212 and 3.448887 (nigeria.worldplaces.me/); and the Osun Sacred Grove in Oshogbo, Osun State, on 74520.016North and 4337.992East (whc.unesco.org/en/list). The RCCG was founded in 1952 in a once-remote area of Lagos State, Ebute-Meta as an independent prayer group by Late Mr Akindayomi Josiah Olufemi. Before the demise of the founder in 1979, he nominated Enoch Adejare Adeboye as his successor. On the other hand, Osun Sacred Grove was, in the distant past, established as a place of worship by the Oshogbo people, a Yoruba sub-group. It is located on the bank of the Osun River and covers about 75 hectares of land. The grove was declared a national monument in 1965 by the Federal Department of Antiquity, now National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM), and in 2005 endorsed as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO (Ezenagu, 2020). Both RCCG and Osun Grove are centres of attraction to people across the globe.

Cartographic maps of study areas

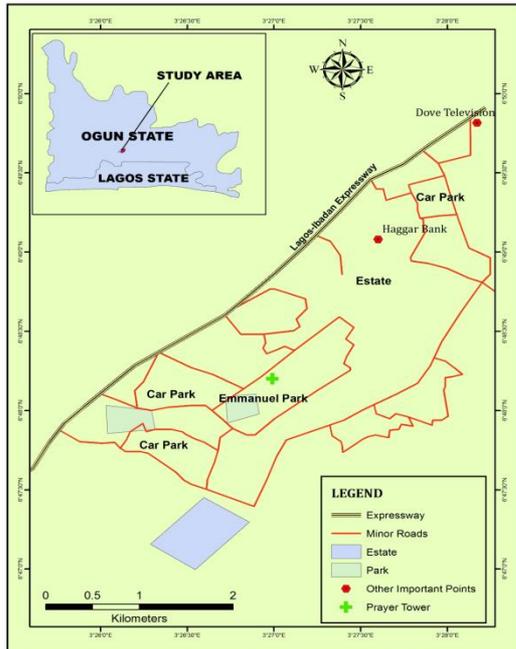


Figure 1: Map of Redemption Camp
Source: www.domedia ltd.com

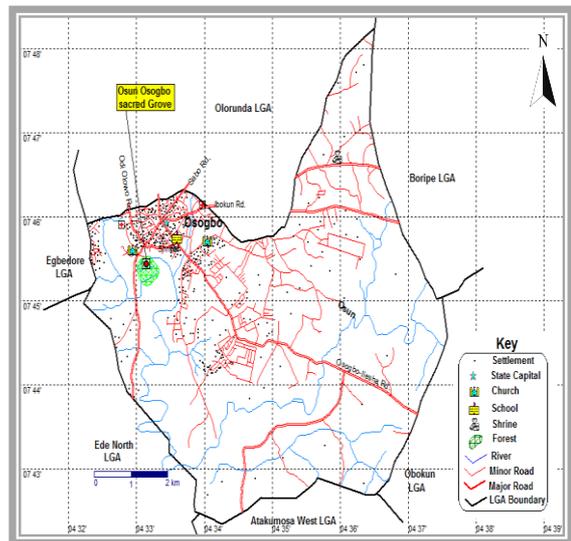


Figure 2: Map of Osun Osogbo sacred grove
Source: Department of Geography,
University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 2012

Religious Tourism Activities that Attract Visitations

The three series of activities that take place in The Redeemed Christian Church of God's The Redemption Camp are the Monthly Holy Ghost Services, Annual Holy Ghost Convention and Holy Ghost Congress, collectively known as the Holy Ghost festival. These events were established by Pastor Enoch Adejare Adebayo fondly called Daddy GO (General Overseer). Holy Ghost Service is an all-night miracle service, said to be characterised by signs and wonders, words of prophecies, healing of chronic diseases, most especially deliverance prayers and blessing of ritual objects. Holy Ghost Convention marks the end of the church's calendar year and the beginning of another. Its major activities include an inventory of the church's annual activities, the graduation ceremony of students from The Redeemed Christian Church of God's Bible College, ordination of clerics, appointment into new offices, deliverance services, seminars, bible teachings, preaching, and Holy Ghost baptism. While Holy Ghost Congress is believed to be a Holy Spirit-charged festival that started in 1998 as an all-night church service but

metamorphosed into a six-day event in 2002. A wide variety of Christian musical ministrations and gospel songs by different choirs of the church, seminars, workshops, preaching and biblical teachings, the blessing of mantles (ritual objects), anointing, healing, communion services and, above all, prophetic ministrations by Daddy GO take place at this event.

Osun Osogbo festival is a two-week-long event held annually in honour of the Osun goddess. It commences with *Iwode Osun*, a public announcement that heralds the Osun Osogbo festival, followed by the ritual washing of the paraphernalia of Osun known as *Ikunle Osun* using sacred leaves (*ewe orisa*) and *Íwópópó* the official opening of the festival. A public procession led by Osun drummers, the King, *Ataoja* and his wives, chiefs (*Baales*), Priestesses (*Yeye* or *Iya Osun*), devotees and visitors to the city centre take place during this event. The people pay homage to the king who, in return, prays for them and gives them monetary gifts. There is also the ritual dance by the King and the entire Osogbo community around the sixteen-point sacred lamp (*atupa Olojumerindinlogun*), a legendary magical lamp which one of

the founding ancestors (*Olutimehin*) of Osogboland was said to have seized from some spirit beings. Thereafter comes *Ibori iboade* (an appeasement ritual), performed in supplication for the benefits of *Ataoja*, using the crowns and other paraphernalia of deceased *Ataojas*. This activity is followed by *Ijo arugba*, which is celebrated in appreciation of the living past *arugbas* (sacrifice bearers) for their services to the community. Then comes the *Ayaba Isale* ceremony, used to appease the deceased wives of past kings. Thereafter, the *arugba* are spiritually fortified via a ritual known as *Idafa Arugba* on the eve of the festival. The grand finale begins with a ritual procession, at which time, the *Arugba* carries the people's offerings to the Osun goddess at Ojubo to appease her. A large crowd converges to offer prayers and appease the goddess. Finally, *Iya Osun*, *Iworo* (priest) carries the food items to the river bank where he eulogizes Osun deity and pours the sacrificial items into the river. It is believed by adherents that the water taken from the river from this moment is no longer ordinary, but filled with healing powers. This marks the official end of the festival.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Religious tourism, also known as "faith tourism," refers to travel that is undertaken solely or predominantly for pilgrimage, missionary or leisure (fellowship) purposes (Stausberg, 2011; George, 2014). This is because both terms are connected to the abstract belief in the supernatural. Therefore, participation in activities inherent in belief in the supernatural could be termed faith-based activities and/or religious activities. Such activities, according to Nolan and Nolan (1992), whether or not they are associated with pilgrimage shrines, serve as actual or potential tourist attractions. Sacred places and ceremonial events are among the most ancient travel destinations, endowed by believers' extraordinary links with the divine (Nolan & Nolan, 1992). In other words, faith-based activities attract faith participants to religious centres and destinations participating in ritual enactments. These ritual activities help in satisfying their inner spiritual longing. The perceived efficacy of the events gives impetus to the activities, which explains why such religious centres are always overcrowded. The implications of the income realised from such gatherings on the economy of the region cannot be overemphasised. However, the slightest uproar or social unrest can easily obliterate them. To a

great extent, the political, social and economic atmosphere of a nation influences the movement of tourists in and out of the country (Ezenagu, 2018). Nevertheless, tourist traffic indirectly affects the exploitation of the benefits therein. Thus, faith-based activity is a religious product/service, and its exploitation is dependent upon the nature of the environment.

One of the factors militating against the exploitation of this tourism product is overcrowding. This happens when the volume of tourists exceeds the capacity of an environment (Page & Connell, 2009), which comes with obvious consequences. In essence, the influx of thousands of faith participants into religious centres usually results in overcrowding, and under such an atmosphere many societal ills thrive. Thus, the inability of the organisers of faith-based activities to properly control the crowd constitutes social problems. For example, the September 2015 stampede in the City of Mina, Saudi Arabia, is one of the many instances of improper crowd management. The stampede ensued following the popular symbolic ritual of "Stoning of the Devil" where all participants throw seven stones each at the three pillars of Jamarat,

representing Satan in the City of Mina which is some kilometres away from Mecca. At least 2,426 lost their lives during the stampede. Studies have shown that the influx of tourists into certain destinations can cause damage, including the depletion of local resources. Shinde (2012), who examined the implications of overcrowding of religious tourists in Vrindavan, a town in India, noted that the high demand for services by faith participants depletes the town's resources because the available infrastructure has not kept pace. For Orbasli (2000), overcrowding, traffic and parking, insufficient services and infrastructure and the loss of tradition are major challenges of tourism in historic towns. He pointed out that while tourism is a major source of income and may contribute to the costly process of preservation and conservation, a large number of tourists are damaging heritage sites and therefore the historic parts of towns.

Another challenging factor of faith activities is their seasonality. As Rinschede (1992) argues, despite the fact that some religious sites can be visited several times annually, faith tourism is often influenced by certain seasonality. Important influential factors are the

schedule of religious ceremonies and commemoration as well as the climatic location of the sites and the work calendar of the population. In other words, seasonality affects the sustainability of faith and economic activities within the region. This is because, during the peak periods, many businesses flourish, thereby increasing their staff strength, some of which cannot be maintained outside this season. As Collins-Kreiner and Wall (2007) observed, many facilities are closed after the peak period because the capacity is very low. Thus, income from tourism is mainly supplementary given the low annual income and turnover. Arguably, the peak season often provides an opportunity to generate an appreciable revenue, but the accruable gains must be significant to support individuals and the economy all year long. With seasonality, the numerous employments offered by the tourism industry end up as ad hoc jobs that begin and end with the season. Most tourism-related industries that are solely dependent on tourism activities during the off-peak season close down entirely in order not to incur costs that might lead to the collapse of the enterprises. Also, commoditization of faith-based activities coupled with the attendant loss

of their spiritual essence is one of the challenges to grapple with. Digance (2006) stated that in countries around the world, religion and its associated sites, rituals, festivals and landscapes are seen as a resource that can be transformed and commoditized for consumption. This ultimately leads to the growth of leisure and ancillary activities that promote destination areas. Nevertheless, this might have a negative implication, including the loss of the spiritual essence and values that the sacred sites are intended to project. Oakes (2010) presents the Tiaoshen masked ritual of some Chinese communities as a typical example of the commodification of religious rituals. This ritual was performed annually, over a period of several days, to invoke heroic ancestors, legendary warriors and protector deities, to exorcise the communities of evil spirits and seek gods' blessings for good harvest and fortune in the coming year. He stated that Tiaoshen was later transformed to Dixi and consumed on-demand. Consequently, Dixi is now performed not once or twice a year to cleanse villages of malevolent powers, but many times a day - in quick fifteen-minute versions - to create revenue from tourists. In other words, performing Dixi is no longer an obligation

to the ancestors but to the nation, and to the tourists who consume them (Oakes, 2010).

The lack of insufficient infrastructural facilities also impedes the exploitation of faith activities. Ashikodi (2010) noted that inadequate infrastructure is a major impediment to the growth of tourism destinations in Nigeria. For instance, epileptic electricity power supply, according to Mbanefo (2016), is one of the major causes of low investment in the accommodation sector. Also, the lack of maintenance culture prevalent in Nigeria challenges the patronage of tourism. Another key impediment to the development of tourism destinations in Nigeria, according to Ukabuilu (2007), is the poor maintenance of monumental sites. Faith tourists would love to consume religious products in the growing sacred places in Nigeria but are constrained by their deplorable physical state due to neglect. In Osun Sacred Grove, for instance, the maintenance of the religious structure has been poor; as a result, many of the religious relics that attract visitation have been left to dilapidate. This applies to many of the attractions managed by the government. One such place is the Confluence Beach Hotel Lokoja which has been poorly

managed and/or mismanaged by the government agency in charge of it (Ezenagu & Umarr, 2017).

Furthermore, the issue of insecurity, especially the danger posed by Boko Haram (an Islamic extremist group) and Fulani herders-farmers clashes constitute a national menace that tarnishes Nigeria's tourism image. As Oluwole (2000) avers, political instability and violence have battered the political image of Nigeria. As a result, many foreign nations have, at one time or another, placed a travel ban on Nigeria. The United States of America placed a travel warning on Nigeria in the wake of the destructive activities of Boko Haram. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) of the United Kingdom also issued a warning that people should avoid public gatherings which is one of the major targets of the Boko Haram sect in Nigeria (Smith, 2014). With such a high level of insecurity, many international faith tourists have continued to shun Nigeria. There is also the issue of the economy. Global economic downturn adversely affects emerging economies, including Nigeria, and consequently tourism development. As Babalola (2016) puts it, Nigeria's reliance on oil as a significant source of foreign income, along with the

tremendous cost of operating and maintaining the political system, was bound to fail from the start. Indeed, the exchange rate of the dollar to the naira is skewed tremendously in favour of the former as soon as there is a decline in global oil prices. Consequently, the cost of living is greatly affected. Thus, many faith tourists see finance as one of the major factors that prevent their regular participation in faith-based activities. Famakinwa (2016) noted that economic crisis takes a toll on almost every sector of the economy, including faith-based activities.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed an ethnographic research method involving focus group discussion, in-depth interviews and direct observation. Ethnographic researchers use several techniques either individually or in combination to study socio-cultural issues and their dynamics in context. The aim is to understand the study of interest from the point of view or lenses of the research subjects. More often than not, ethnographers make an effort to describe in detail the subject matter in a manner that is insightful and incisive, and therefore, intelligible both to the outside reader(s) and person(s) within the research domain. This entails visiting the

research sites, identifying and delineating the contextual characteristics of the hosts and their social milieu, and conducting an in-depth study to understand them. Consequently, the researchers undertook two pre-field visits to the centres, one to each of them. The aim was to familiarise themselves with the study sites, and also to inform the research subjects about the research project and its aims. Thus, in an attempt to understand the subject matter, the authors used the above three key data-collection tools often employed by ethnographic researchers.

Purposive sampling was used to select the first set of informants. Successive respondents were selected using the snowball sampling method. This approach enabled the researchers to identify members of each group of interest in the target population in collaboration with the research subjects. These consist of faith participants, members of the host communities, religious tourists, owners of business enterprises in the study areas, pastors/priests and church workers. These were first screened to ensure that they understand the topic of interest and have the requisite knowledge to address the subject matter. In other words, the above persons were selected based on their

knowledge and understanding of the subject matter. Overall, 60 persons constituted the sample size for the study.

Focus Group Discussions (FGD) was adopted to ensure that we captured the challenges faced by faith-based centres from a collectivity of people who have adequate knowledge of the centres and their activities. A total of 24 participants participated in the FG sessions. Four focus group sessions, consisting of six persons each, were held in the two locations. In other words, two focus group sessions were held in each of the religious centres. The discussants were drawn from business owners and members of the host communities. All the questions asked were delineated in the questioning route with a focus on the informants' perceived understanding of the challenges facing faith-based activities at the destinations. The remaining 36 persons constituted the informants for the in-depth interview who were purposively selected from faith participants, priests, church workers and tourists. The in-depth interviews were aimed at evaluating, from the point of view of active members of the religious centres and regular visitors, the challenges of tourism to the growth of religious tourism. An interview guide was

used to ensure that vital issues were not glossed over during the research exercise. In both instances, tape-recorders and field notes were used to collect data, which were subsequently transcribed. Finally, the researchers used direct observation to elicit on-the-spot and first-hand information on the subject matter.

Data collected were disaggregated into subheads, each of which represented efforts to address the research objective. These were analysed descriptively using direct quotations and literary sources to make the report more intelligible.

RESULTS: CHALLENGES OF FAITH-BASED ACTIVITIES

The results revealed the multiple challenges that affect the development of religious tourism in the centres under study. These challenges are discussed in the following sections.

Overcrowding of Venues

The main challenge emanates from overcrowding. The activities attract thousands of participants, oftentimes exceeding the carrying capacity of the centres. Discussants at the focus group session at the Redemption Camp reveal that

... the camp is usually overcrowded, making it difficult for participants to enjoy the spiritual essence of the events. It is always littered with wastes, while the noise that comes from roadside traders is distracting. Some of us also lose our personal belongings in the process.

Buttressing the above view, Miss Temilade, a respondent to the in-depth interview complained that:

many participants do not abide by the camp rules, some litter the place with empty drink cans, bottles, nylon etc. Food vendors do not even help matters as they sell wares inside the auditorium too despite the fact that this is prohibited. This could not have been the case if there are adequate control measures. Sometimes, it is even difficult to pray because of too many distracting things...

Findings from the Osun Sacred Grove site also revealed that wildlife has continued to deplete as many animals such as black

and white-throated monkeys, birds, reptiles and other animals are said to have migrated elsewhere due to the noise emanating from the growing participants. Of course, the absence of wildlife would affect the grove's tourism patronage. This is because many also visit the grove to "consume" the natural resources therein.

Insufficient infrastructural facilities

The population of visitors greatly outnumbers the available infrastructures at the camp, including seats in the auditorium. This explains why Pastor Adeboye, in August 2015, advised foreign delegates to stop coming to Nigeria for Holy Ghost Convention as the same programme will hold in the UK and US. Even with this arrangement, the participants at each subsequent event still outnumber available facilities. Thus, a new auditorium with a 12 million seating capacity has been proposed to address this challenge.

Apart from the above problem, another basic infrastructure deficiency that constitutes a challenge is guest accommodation. In all, there are about 3000 rooms for visitors excluding Redeemer's University students' hostels and the VIP villas that are reserved for international guests and special guests

from Nigeria. The analysis revealed that part of the problem emanates from the fact that only one organ, Christ Redeemer's Ministry, has the mandate of the camp's management to provide accommodation in the camp. Although most of the accommodation structures are presently being expanded to increase the number of rooms, the available rooms are grossly inadequate. Thus, priority is given to regular customers during any Holy Ghost event. As a receptionist puts it: "... we reserve rooms first for our regular customers, but if for any reason the customers fail to show up, we allocate the rooms." Even the private restrooms strategically positioned in the neighbourhood did not provide the needed solution given the mammoth crowd that attend the event. One of the participants lamented that "people resort to sleeping in the auditorium with children; it is a difficult arrangement. However, knowing the spiritual benefit of the event, I sometimes do not mind where I sleep but many might be discouraged from repeat visits in the absence of proper hotel rooms."

Increase in crime rate

Generally, the large influx of religious tourists into a region increases the crime rate. A high crime rate in any region

threatens the economic development potentials of the area, particularly that of the tourism industry. Many tourism enterprises in the neighbourhood of Redemption Camp complained of crime perpetrated by hoodlums, locally called "area boys" attracted to the region. Mr Emeka, a businessman who participated in the study complained as follows: "Our problem is not with sales, but with the danger of extortion from 'local people,' who use different strategies to extort money from us. Although I have never been and will never be a victim, those who have been victims have never returned, having lost money and possessions."

Focus group results show that many of the tourism service providers agree that "doing business outside the camp is risky because of hoodlums." Reports from the interviews also reveal that some traders are robbed at the end of a day's sales away from the campground and its neighbourhood. Even the residents are not spared this menace of criminality. According to Mr Harris, a resident, "Holy Ghost Festivals have increased the number of touts (Alaye or Area boys) in the community. These boys rob us (residents and local business owners) at night." Furthermore, Mr John who

manages a restroom business noted that "faith-based participants constitute a nuisance to the community and The Redeemed Christian Church of God does not offer social responsibility to the host community." To curb the excesses of criminals, many business participants now fund a local security outfit/vigilante group. Some others close business early and participate in ongoing faith activities inside Redemption Camp to avoid being robbed.

Poor maintenance of infrastructure and the Commercialization of sacredness

In Osun Sacred Grove, spirogyra and other weathering elements are gradually covering the beauty of the objects. Many of these objects project the image of the Osun goddess and therefore should not be left to deteriorate. Mr Adesiyani, a staff of Osun Museum, attributes this to the lack of personnel, especially conservationists and financial resources to maintain the religious structures. Furthermore, the spiritual flavour of the grove is gradually being eroded via the commercialization of the sacredness of the ritual activities. The funding of the festival by companies has brought with it secular programmes to diversify ritual activities of the Osun festival, but they are gradually overtaking the spiritual

essence of the event. Consequently, some of the participants no longer seek spiritual fulfilment, but the secular benefits from the various sponsors of the event. An Osun devotee lamented thus: "Look around and you will see our youths drinking alcohol and dancing to secular music instead of participating in the ritual activities with a sane mind to appreciate our great mother." However, a youth who sees it differently said: "For my part, I am here to appreciate the blessings that our mother Osun has bestowed upon us."

Apart from secular activities, many of the devotees affirmed that the Osun Osogbo festival is being commercialized and perverted to please the tourists. Some sacrifices that were done in seclusion for devotees are now made open for public entertainment as Osun priests and priestesses seek to make money from tourists and researchers. According to Osunkolabi, "Rendering services to Osun goddess is the only profession I know, so I must make a living from it. People come from different parts of the country and the world to learn about our goddess and they pay us for that."

Thus, with commercialization, the Osun Osogbo festival might lose its spiritual essence in the nearest future. For instance, the Goldberg beer village was

designed to entertain visitors, but many of the youth misuse the opportunity and become drunk to the extent that they rarely abide by the norms of decency. This poses a huge threat to the spiritual essence of the event, which is the major reason religious tourists flood the area.

Seasonality and Economic Hardship

The seasonality of faith activities limits the exploitation of its economic benefits. The most affected is the employment opportunity it creates. In other words, although faith activities create employment opportunities, such jobs are grossly affected by their seasonality. Thus, many businesses only boom during the peak period and decline afterwards. According to a food vendor, Mrs Ologunde, who has been doing business in Redemption Camp for the past fifteen years:

I usually employ more hands to help out in the cooking and serving while others are strategically positioned to advertise our variety of food, giving our canteen flyers to the numerous participants passing by. But at the end of the programme, I don't require them [the

workers]. As a result, I have no choice but to lay them off, vowing to re-engage them in the next event if they remain jobless.

Furthermore, with the increasing economic hardship in the country, the discretionary income often designated for tourism activities by people are being eroded by other priority needs. Many of the discussants at the focus group session described the economic situation as unpleasant, and money already saved for the event was spent on other pressing needs that arise. As Mr Ade puts it, "I attended the Osun festival alone lately because of the economic situation of the country. I cannot afford the financial commitments. But in the past, I attended in the company of my wife and children". Also, Ms Temmy who attends Holy Ghost festivals said:

Coming from Port Harcourt to Ogun State monthly to participate in Holy Ghost Service is becoming too expensive for me considering the consistent increase in the cost of living. To cut costs, I participate only in the December annual Holy Ghost Congress and watch other Holy Ghost festivals online. Many others do likewise.

Heavy traffic

Today, the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway, a gateway to many religious centres, is best described as a "religious highway". There is a proliferation of religious activities along the expressway, each with varying contents and adherents. These faith activities adversely affect traffic flow, subsequently taking a toll on religious tourists, community members, and other travellers. The long hours spent in the traffic jam, some say, discourage repeat visits. A participant is of the view that the traffic jam affects participants and business transactions. While faith participants noted that it is discouraging to come for just an all-night event, for example, only to be locked up in the traffic for hours and again in the next few hours when the event is over. Businesspeople complained that they find it difficult to replenish their stock or move around freely as a result of traffic jams on the expressway.

Apart from the participants and business activities, the traffic jam along the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway also affects residents. As Mr Vincent, a resident of the Mowe community said, "The major challenge of Holy Ghost Festivals for members of Mowe community is the high traffic resulting from the influx of visitors to the

events. Most times, if you don't leave your home early enough you may not get to your place of work on time." Indeed, the long hours spent in traffic is always frustrating and does not encourage further visitation by spiritual tourists.

Competition

The world today is replete with various faith-based activities of different religious bodies. There are also numerous religious centres in the country each of which is competing for adherents and admirers, with many new ones springing up. Consequently, any such event that is not well-packaged would not achieve its purpose of luring religious tourists. One of the participants interviewed at the Redemption Camp had this to say:

I participate in many faith-based activities of different churches because of my problems. I have a preference for those that are spiritually powerful; this explains why I have limited my participation to Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministry because of their prayers and Holy Ghost festivals because Pastor Adeboye usually gives prophecies which I always claim.

For a participant in the Osun festival: "I believe in our traditional religion so I

partake in the ritual activities of many deities especially Osun, Ogun and Sango. Nevertheless, I now attend only Osun rituals since Osun water healed me of my lingering ailment."

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The influx of thousands of participants into a tourist centre results in overcrowding, a constant occurrence in most religious centres in the country. Dallen (2011) revealed that when thousands of tourists at a time descend upon small towns and villages, or hundreds of visitors at individual historic sites, overcrowding becomes a serious problem. Not only does this have ecological implications, but it also deteriorates the social environment within which the heritage is located. Field observation revealed that the ever-increasing population in the study area poses a huge threat to the success of the events. A good example was the uncontrollable behaviour displayed by faith participants during the 2016 December Holy Ghost Congress, when blessed handkerchiefs were being shared at the Redemption Camp. The crowd surged at the ushers managing the process as almost everybody wanted to get the handkerchief at the same time. The auditorium became so rowdy and

seeing the desperation to get the perceived miraculous handkerchiefs, the ministers sharing the handkerchiefs ran for their lives as the desperate participants broke into the altar. Such desperation could lead to a stampede, akin to the September 2015 stampede in Mina, Saudi Arabia, which led to the loss of many lives. As Adogame (2011, p. 114) averred, the effect of large population at religious centres "cannot be ignored, if not only for the massive disruptions they cause the local public and commuters, but also the heavy traffic which makes it difficult to get to any point without being held up for hours." Wiersma & Robertson (2003) stressed that traffic congestion along highways poses a serious threat to the quality of tourist experiences. Apart from traffic jams on highways, increases in the tourist population often lead to an increase in crime rate. This is because tourists are perceived to possess valuable items and therefore can fall victims to theft during such periods. The loss of valuable items can easily distract tourists' participation in sensitive ritual activities, subsequently reducing their visitation and ultimately preventing tourism development in the area. Glensor & Peak (2004) argue that the most important prerequisite for a successful tourism

activity is a reputation for keeping crime under control.

Also, the results of the research revealed that the sacredness of the Osun grove was increasingly being eroded following the growing demand by faith participants and the ardent desire of the officials to make quick money. Apart from losing the spiritual essence of the activity, its originality and authenticity are also gradually being diminished. As Wall & Mathieson (2006) argued, the religious significance of holy places, which made them popular destinations, is often eroded with increasing visitation. For instance, the introduction of the raffle draw, traditional games and other secular activities during the Osun festival by some sponsors resulted in high demand for the site. Nevertheless, these activities and the associated products make participants seek more of the entertainment dimension of the festivity than its spiritual values. As Shepherd (2002) argues, a destination or an event becomes a commodity, product or experience with commercial value as soon as it is sold in the tourism market. Henceforth, the economic values take pre-eminence, while their authenticity gradually diminishes. What this means is that the sacred rituals associated with

the Osun festival will begin to lose their original values if the attempt to commoditize them is not controlled. In his study of Himalaya culture, Bahuguna (1998, p. 22) observed that "due to luxury tourism which is regarded as a soft industry, we have lost our identity. We have become...half Westerners. This is a part of the material civilization's concept, which regards everything as a marketable commodity..." In the Osun festival, some religious officials were observed to divulge ritual secrets meant for priests alone to outsiders in their quest for financial rewards. As Eades (1992) asserted, the commercialization or commoditization of the pilgrimage site becomes inevitable with increasing tourists' visitation.

Also, many participants expressed concern over the insecurity looming in the country. These include religious and ethnic crises, kidnapping, terrorist attacks etc. resulting in distrust and suspicion. Typical examples are Boko Haram insurgents that have continued to ravage parts of the northeast for over a decade, Fulani herders-farmers clashes in the north-central and other parts of the country and kidnapping nation-wide, all of which are destroying the tourism image and reputation of the country.

These have generally been linked to religion, which calls for serious concern in the tourism industry. And the more a tourist feels unsafe, the less s/he would (re)visit (Chiu, 2008).

Another challenge is the seasonality of the events, which Page and Connell (2009) see as one of the major disadvantages of tourism and can cause negative economic effects on a destination. Faith activities are scheduled to hold in spiritually auspicious times, and as Rinschede (1992) asserted, they are bound to certain seasonality, which hinders the economic exploitation of the events. Many of the tourism service industries enjoy wide patronage only during the event, but on the other days of the year, as Collins-Kreiner & Wall (2007) observed, many facilities are closed because of low-visitor patronage. Therefore, although the high season may bring the opportunity to generate significant revenue from tourism, the economic gain is usually insufficient and not evenly spread throughout the year. With this limitation, the numerous employments offered by tourism industries end up as ad hoc jobs that begin and end with the season. Most industries that are solely dependent on tourism activities during the off-peak

season might invariably close down in order not to incur additional costs that might lead to the collapse of the enterprise. There is also the issue of economic hardship in the nation and the resultant inflation. Many participants complained that finance was one of the major factors that impede their regular participation in faith activities. However, the value of the rituals has continued to lure participants.

Conclusion

In summary, the study identified overcrowding and insufficient infrastructural facilities as the main challenges hindering the development of religious tourism in the study area. Generally, the world is beset with challenges (economic meltdown, terrorism, crime, Covid-19 pandemic etc), which in varying degrees affect different sectors of the economy. Since tourism is one of the sectors of the world economy, it is also susceptible to such challenges because its progress depends on the sustainability of other sectors. Although tourism has been described by many scholars as a service industry with innumerable benefits, these can only be exploited within the right environment. In southwestern Nigeria, overcrowding in religious centres depletes not only

available infrastructure but also distorts the flow of the events and the exploitation of their economic benefits. Other challenges emanating from it include the commodification of ritual activities, insecurity, traffic congestion, etc. The continued upgrade and provision of new infrastructure is therefore imperative. There is also the need to engage the services of efficient security personnel during the event, eschew the commodification of ritual activities by practitioners in order to maintain their spiritual essence, and curtail the activities

of all security-threatening groups operating in the country. Other measures that will promote tourism include good maintenance culture to ensure the longevity of the attractions, initiation of more ritual ceremonies, competitive games, skills acquisition programmes, and seminars to make the centres activity-oriented and ultimately reduce the problem associated with the seasonality of faith-based activities.

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