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Tourism in religious sites as type of ethnography tourism

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Biographies

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Abstract

This paper aims at examining the relationship between popular devotion and tourism in the case of Catalonia (Spain), which has a diverse religious heritage that often is of interest of tourists. Devotion to the Virgin Mary is clearly rooted in this territory: from churches and shrines to pilgrimages and events, most usually of local and regional significance (popular devotion).

This article will explore popular Marian devotion and its links to tourism. Even in the current context, in a largely secularized society, Marian sites remain a major point of attraction, both for devotees and non believers. In these spaces different religious manifestations take place,

promises, religious events, special prayers... and especially pilgrimage routes. However, this study will focus on the *mise en valeur* and communication/scenification of popular devotion core values to tourists and visitors.

Introduction

This article lies between the fields of ethnography tourism (as characterised by Smith, 1989 and Galani-Moutafi, 2000) and religious tourism. The objective is to examine the relationship between popular devotion and tourism by taking popular Marian devotion in Catalonia (Spain) as a case study. Given the multifaceted nature of the tourism experience and industry, only two components will be considered here: specialized guidebooks, and events as a form of intangible heritage. In these spaces different religious manifestations take place, promises, religious events, special prayers... and especially pilgrimage routes. However, this study will focus on the *mise en valeur* and communication/scenification of popular devotion core values to tourists and visitors.

Literature Review

The combination of ethnography tourism, (religious) popular devotion and the religious tourism industry seems to be a gap in the existent literature. Hence, we can only analyse these three different parts and blend them in the present text. The best known academic classification of religious tourist attractions was crafted by Nolan and Nolan in 1992. In it, they identify three types of sites: pilgrimage shrines, religious tourism attractions and religious festivals. This must be combined with the idea that Shackley identified already in 2001: the increase in number of visitors to the churches with a decreasing number of devotees. This raises the question if a visit to a religious site is just a piece of cultural tourism (solely) or not.

From an ethnographic point of view, tourism is identified with recreation and the renewal of life, both needed for mental and physical health. Tourism is a "modern ritual" (MacCannell, 2003) in which we escape from the daily routine. On the other hand, tourists can be seen as a sort of occasional amateur ethnographers: <<Like the traveler, the ethnographer has sought the (exotic) Other because it promised an opportunity for adventure as well as for challenges (physical and intellectual) inherent in difference - qualities he/she has not been able to find in the modern

world>> (Galani-Moutafi, 2000, p.220), walking towards self-reflexive anthropologies. It is a long established notion that tourists seek the unpolluted, the original sense of a place, the one that has been unaltered by the passing of time (Bruner, 1989), and promotional materials strive to present activities, sights and destinations as unspoiled places and practices. Yet, as Bruner notes, many times these places and practices have actually been reconstructed for the enjoyment of tourists, which creates a paradoxal situation. In this context, rural areas and traditional events are seen as still retaining “more authenticity” than cities. On the one hand, rural areas, in social imaginaries, seem to have been “frozen in time” since the industrial revolution. On the other, (some) events claim old roots and are often seen as a “living fossil”, of which modernisation is not always welcome by spectators. This valorization of the “undeveloped” and distant Other is more valued when travelling to “exotic” destinations, whose modernity falls out of interest for travellers (Bruner, 1995), but it is a core part of any holiday trip. Hence, tourists become a sort of amateur ethnographers: they want to discover the core of “the local”, of which popular devotion is an important part although it is rarely regarded as *must see* of the destination.

Popular devotion is understood as pious practices through which the devotion of the faithful finds expression (Thurston 1911:2017) beyond the action of the Church itself. The best known components of popular devotion in tourism literature are pilgrimages and religious festivals.

Methodology

This paper takes the shape of a case study, analyzing two elements of Marian popular devotion manifestations (Christian) in the case of Catalonia: shrines and religious festivals. Information will be taken from secondary data, collected either in former research projects or by other authors.

Shrines will be analysed under the light of specialised (niche) tourism promotion, focusing on the analysis of two guidebooks specifically aimed at being a travel companion for those willing to visit Marian shrines. It is already important to note that only two such books have been found. If the number may seem a limitation, they were published in a time lapse of twenty years, which allows for considering how social changes may have affected the way the contents were shaped.

As far as immaterial heritage, we will center our attention on Girona Temps de Flors (Flower

Exhibiton in Girona), which is experiencing an extreme success as a tourist attraction in the recent years.

Results

1. Marian Shrines Guidebooks

Located in remote rural settings, shrines have an undeniable appeal for tourists (domestic and international), although accessibility is usually a problem. Notoriety (being known to potential tourists) is another common. A system to palliate both these issues is by means of tourist guidebooks, which even in the digital age are widely used.

In spite of their popularity, only two such books have been found specializing in Marian shrines in Catalonia. The following table sums up their main features:

Table 1. Marian shrines guidebooks contents. Source: own work

Feature	1988 Edition	2009 Edition
Editor	Tourism Pastoral	DMO
Pages	479	79
Size and format	17 x 22 cm	12,3 x 22,5 cm
Photos	Yes b/w (at chapters' end)	Yes colour (each page)
Maps	For each bishopric	For each sanctuary (small)
Items used to describe each shrine	General information, etimology, history, legends (extensive), other religious sites nearby, “goigs” and other similar, popular celebrations (explained)	General information, “goigs” and other similar, anecdotes (historical facts, legends, national significance...)
Tourist information	Extensive written description of pilgrimage trails, excursions, accommodation services	Directions and how to get there, list of services (accommodation and food), popular celebrations (listed), nearby itineraries

2. Girona Flower Festival

From the standpoint of tourism product development and visitor attendance we can clearly distinguish four main stages, which can easily be connected to stages identified by Butler (2005):

1. Beginings. The festival started in 1954, organised by two local women, and thanks to the efforts and participation of the old quarter neighbours. Although it is usually forgotten today, it was tied to the Francoist propaganda of the moment as well as to the popular celebration of the Month of Mary, also known as the Month of Flowers (May). The festival occupied more public venues every year, eventually being present in the streets (balconies, courtyards...).

2. Institutional implication. From the late 1970s two associations, and later the Town Hall took care of the organisation of the festival. More private properties opened to the public, always plentiful with flowers, and the festival is extended.

3. Consolidation. Not only more public and private spaces join the event, but also it reaches the 10 day span and tourist operators start including attendance to the event. Organised groups and individual visitors (national and international) add up to more than 100.000 people in ten days, concentrated in the old quarter. As the exhibition gains notoriety, carrying capacity becomes a pressing issue and starts affecting visitor enjoyment. The original aesthetic effect (flower decorations in historical settings) is preserved, yet the ties to popular devotion seem to be clearly forgotten.

4. Post-consolidation. As visitor numbers have not stopped their growing, along with saturation problems that affect both locals and visitors, the festival seems to be losing its original aesthetics, with visitors complaining about the gap between advertising (*flower* festival) and the real experience, since contemporary design elements seem to be occupying most of spaces.

Conclusion and Discussion

The case studies introduced here are of a very different nature. Yet, they seem to point towards a similar direction which has already been acknowledged in several other settings: as a site enters the global tourism imaginary and visitor numbers raise, the “spirit of the place” (or event) seems to recede and ultimately be forgotten not only by foreign visitors, but by intermediaries and in

some cases even local populations. Commodification and banalization of places, in spite of its grown side by side with tourism flows, are against visitor's taste.

The challenge seems to balance the peace of tourist trips, the informal-holiday mood of the visit and different sensibilities with the need to *understand* a place beyond the picturesque value and photo opportunities.

Limitations to this study are obvious: more components of the tourism industry should be analysed before drawing firm conclusions. Even more important, visitors themselves should be interviewed in order to know in what degree cultural tourists are also interested in knowing and experiencing symbolic aspects of the place (core values).

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