



# Exploring faith-based tourism products in selected sacred spaces of south-western Nigeria

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## Abstract

*Travel for religious-related purposes – faith-based tourism is gradually becoming a renowned form of tourism. Experiencing this type of tourism has turned sacred spaces into tourist destination where visitors participate in different faith-based tourism products or activities. These are dynamic ritual performances wherein the powers of spiritual entities are invoked and utilized by man. The results of the study revealed that the efficacy of the faith-based tourism activities attracts huge tourist traffic to sacred spaces. The huge tourist traffic overcrowded the sacred spaces consequently causing heavy traffic congestion along Lagos-Ibadan expressway, increase in crime rate, depletion of heritage resources and insufficient accommodation. To address the above issues, this paper employed ethnographic research to investigate the challenging factors of faith-based tourism products of three sacred spaces (Redemption Camp, Osun Osogbo Sacred grove and NASFAT camp) in south western Nigeria. The study identified the challenges militating against the utilization of faith-based tourism products in promoting sacred spaces as tourism destination. The findings concluded that the major challenge is overcrowding but with improved infrastructures and instructions other issues militating against the growth of faith-based tourism can be managed to maximize the benefits therein.*

**Keywords:** Redemption Camp, Osun Osogbo Sacred grove, NASFAT camp, sacred spaces, ritual performance.



## Introduction

Travel for religious-related purposes is gradually becoming a renowned form of tourism known as faith-based tourism and pilgrimage tourism. Experiencing this type of tourism requires visits to sacred spaces. It is at the sacred place that man communicates and communes with Beings in the other worlds (Ezenagu, 2016). Such places make the connection between human life and the divine concrete, tangible, palpable (Kilde, 2008). Hence, visits to sacred spaces are intended for one to consume faith-based tourism products – a blend of different ritual enactment is most times obligatory and seen as a service rendered in exchange for, or anticipation of spiritual and other rewards. These ritual enactments are faith-based activities which are believed to provide answers to unknown questions or address the often unscientific needs of man. Vukonic (1992) concurred that “all the religions of the world, from the ancient mythologies onward, have promised believers that a visit to a holy place will solve some or all of their spiritual or material troubles”. Also Korstanje and George (2020) affirmed that religious tourism not only revitalizes the psychological frustrations of citizens in the day-to-day life but also boosts the social trust, which is necessary for the society to function properly. This notion is supported by Nicolaidis (2020; 2015) and various other researchers.

Thus, the efficacy of such visits promotes faith-based tourism which is one of the fastest growing types of tourism in the world (Tomljenović & Đukić 2017, Henama & Sifolo 2018). Hence, religious products have become one of the major drivers of faith-based tourism and other forms of religious related travels. Affirming this claim, Griffin, Radhakrishnan and Griffin (2018) maintained that religious events and rituals are drivers for religious tourism. They further added that:

movement of people for religious purposes is widespread, such that major tourism destinations have developed as a result of their connection to the sacred, with a range of hospitality services and sanitary, health and safety facilities all developing to support the visiting pilgrim tourists (p 110).

This implies that faith-based tourism with all its associated ritual performance has never been far removed from money-making (Sharman, 2013). It brings benefits to commerce, as the pilgrim does not give up on the use of means of transport, security, hotels and the restoration of the place to which he/she goes (Teixeira et al.,2021). Thus, there are probably no orthodox theologians or other theorists who would deny the economic impacts of religious travel (Vukonic, 2005). This contribution of tourism to the economic growth and development of regions has long been recognised and remains, of course, the fundamental justification for developing and promoting tourism in destination areas (Sharpley, 2002). Thus, Ezenagu (2013) affirmed that travelling to sacred spaces has many beneficial effects not limited to the proceeds from tourists' expenditure that diffuse into various sectors of the economy through transport, agriculture, hospitals, financial institutions, aviation and environment, and their multiplier effects.

However, despite the above benefits faith-based tourism also has negative effects (Prifti & Zenelaj, 2013). The negative effects emanate most times from the implications of movement of mass tourists to destinations. By such mass gathering, visitors outnumber resources within the environment as McMinn (1997) observed that tourist destination carrying capacity poses a serious challenge to tourist experience and also to the destination image. This implies that most challenges of faith tourism emanates from its population which is usually large. Affirming this



assertion, Henama and Sifolo (2018) stated that in the world over 25% of the travelling public are interested in faith tourism. When one adds to this the number of people who travel for faith-based activities such population usually outnumbers available facilities. Nicolaidis and Grobler (2017) assert that tourism is regularly analyzed as an expression of human behaviour and thus where people go and why they travel there is worth investigating. Tourism marketing and promotion is reflected upon as an essential aspect for successful tourism development. Consequently, all tourism traffic, both local and international, for a wide range of purposes including religious and spiritual purposes, has increased significantly.

Therefore, the main focus of this study is to examine the challenging factors of faith-based tourism in three selected sacred spaces of south-western region of Nigeria; a nation where faith tourism has become a big business. Attesting to this claim, Janson and Akinleye (2015) observed that visiting prayer camps in Nigeria as a means of solving problems related to health and wealth is practiced on a grand scale. With the growth in this trend of touristic movement, sacred sites are gradually opening up to tourism development in Nigeria (Ezenagu, 2018). Hence, the study purposively selected the three renowned sacred spaces, each representing one of three religions practiced in the country. To study the challenging factors militating against the growth of faith-based tourism of the above sacred spaces, this study adopted ethnographic research method.

### **Empirical review: Challenges of faith-based tourism**

The term faith tourism is sometimes used as a synonym for religious tourism (Staus-berg, 2011) or pilgrimage tourism (Nicolaidis, 2014). Faith tourism could be described as travel to engage and or participate in ritual activities (Ezenagu & Okpoko, 2019). More broadly, religious or faith-based tourism refers to travel to a specific location or destination, during a specified time of the year, to either observe or participate in some religious rituals according to ones belief (Kasim, 2011). As mega events, religious tourism follows a bunch of rituals which should be carefully performed (Korstanje & George, 2020). Visitors of this form of tourism immerse themselves in these ritual performances at sacred spaces. Such spaces according to Vukonić (2006) are considered holy, and their holiness is a result of an event that took place there and or, as a place of worship for hosting sacred events or for guarding sacred relics. Therefore, sacred places are behavior settings whose meaning arises from the behaviors that occur there, and the uses and religious practices make the place sacred (Levi & Kocher, 2010). Therefore, sacred sites attract an amalgam of visitors who simultaneously seek spaces for acts of worship (Morpeth, 2011) in ritual performance and are the means with which worshippers connect with the sacred resources (Shinde, 2021). Such performances answer the question why sacred spaces are always overcrowded. It also explains why sacred spaces are increasingly turning into popular tourist destinations. Religious pilgrimage tourism is intended to meet the need for spirituality arising out of a highly secular global society and is loaded with great personal spiritual and also metaphorical meanings (Nicolaidis, 2014).

Hence, tourism destinations are developing at increasing speed as a result of their connections to sacred people, places and events (Romanelli et al., 2021). This development of sacred spaces into tourist destination cannot be over-emphasized. It has in great measure transformed the GDP and economy of many sacred destinations but not without consequences. Buttressing this claim, Yu and Egger (2021: 231) stated that “while revenue generated through tourism activities directly contributes to a country’s GDP, negative consequences emerge from the high number of visitors over a period of time”. On this, Timothy and Oslen (2006: 12) stated that



mass tourism to sites of religious significance has caused some structures to be closed owing to mismanagement and overuse. Also, Harveen and Amit (2020: 88) emphasized that "...these days, visitors to almost all religious sites face common issues such as parking problems, long hours waiting in queues, strict security arrangements, lack of infrastructure facilities or services, unhygienic surroundings which dilute their sacred experience". Shackley (2002) observed that the above challenges arise from the excessive number of visitors to sacred spaces which consequently diminishes the quality of visitors experience by excessive noise, and crowding. Levi and Kocher (2010) added that not only overcrowding but also inappropriate tourist behavior disrupts people's experience of place. Hence, Olsen (2006: 108) affirmed that:

overcrowding, whether consisting of mainly tourists or pilgrims, can have a detrimental effect on the built and natural environment through vandalism/ graffiti, theft, accidental damage, general wear and tear, microclimatic change, graffiti, and litter. Each of these physical impacts diminishes the experience of religiously motivated and other visitors, and in some extreme cases can potentially lead to the site being unable to retain its original functions.

In view of the above, Page and Connell (2009) concurred that one of the factors militating against the consumption of this form of tourism is overcrowding. This happens when the volume of tourists exceeds the capacity of an environment. An example is the September, 2015 stampede in the City of Mina, Saudi Arabia. It is one of the many instances of improper crowd management. The stampede ensued following the popular symbolic ritual of "Stoning of the Devil" rite where all participants throw seven stones each at the three pillars of Jamarat, representing Satan in the City of Mina. Shinde (2012), who examined the implications of overcrowding of religious tourists in the town of Vrindavan, noted that the high demand for services by faith participants depletes the town's resources because the available infrastructure has not kept pace with the burgeoning population. For Orbasli (2000) overcrowding, traffic and parking, insufficient services and infrastructure and the loss of tradition are major challenges of tourism in historic towns. Yu and Egger (2021) also concurred that negative consequences emerge from the high number of visitors over a period of time although tourism activities generates revenue and contributes directly to a country's GDP. They concluded that overcrowding of tourist sites through day visitors are considered as the precursor of 'overtourism'. Buttressing these consequences of overtourism or overcrowding Shackley (2008) observed that many sites, especially in India, are suffering under the weight of increased visitor numbers, within an infrastructure which is unable to cope. It also leads to a decline in the quality of life of residents and worsens tourist experiences (Yu & Egger, 2021).

Another challenging factor of faith-based tourism products are the seasonality nature of the activities. Buttressing this issue, Berhanu (2018: 13) stated that the "tourism industry is seasonal in its very nature...there may be high tourist flows in one period and the opposite at other times. This seasonal nature of the industry...has both off or low and peak or the high season could be considered as both an opportunity and a challenge".

In other words, faith-based tourism is bound to certain seasonality, although some sacred spaces can be visited throughout the entire year yet its activities are slated for auspicious seasons. This seasonality affects the sustainability of faith and economic activities within the region. Consequently during the peak period many businesses flourish as Collins-Kreiner and Wall (2007) observed that after the peak period, on the other days of the year many facilities are



closed because the capacity is very low. As a result, this closure during off peak season means that income is low for those dependent on tourism related businesses. Although the high season may bring the opportunity to generate significant revenue from tourism, the economic gain is not sufficient to allow an income which will support individuals and the economy throughout the year. With seasonality, the numerous employments offered by tourism industries end up as ad hoc jobs which begins and ends with a season.

However, despite seasonality, faith-based tourism products that have become too big and too exposed to the outside world may run the risk of commodification, and could lose its authenticity and uniqueness (Kasim 2011). Morpeth (2012) buttressed that high-profile sacred sites have the challenge of maintaining and upholding a sacred mission, whilst concurrently operating as a major tourist attraction. Thus, commoditization of faith-based activities and the attendant loss of the spiritual essence of an event is one of the challenges to grapple with. Digance (2006) stated that in countries around the world, religion and its associated sites, ritual, festivals, and landscapes are seen as a resource that can be transformed and commodified for tourist consumption. However, this might lead to the loss of its spiritual fabric which is the major attraction. Oakes (2010: 52) stated that the “Tiaoshen masked ritual of some Chinese communities earlier performed over a several-day period during New Year’s celebrations... to invoke heroic ancestors, legendary warriors, and protector deities to exorcise communities of evil spirits and entreat the gods’ blessings for good harvest and fortune in the coming year, as a typical example of the commodification of religious rituals”. 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 also many times a day - in quick fifteen-minute versions - to generate income from tourists and promote Guizhou culture to the world. 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). Therefore, to avoid this loss of spiritual essence, Kasim (2011) suggested that religious events and ceremonies as tourism products must be guided by a sense of understanding about the real purpose of the event.

Furthermore, limited facilities within and outside sacred spaces also impacts negatively on faith tourist’s experience as Harveen and Amit (2020) stated that public facilities such as resting places, toilets, pipe borne water, garbage bins, general cleanliness and hygienic surroundings have a positive impact on tourist experience. Timothy and Oslen (2006: 96) observed from their study that the “...facilities inside the shrine grounds are limited in number and always exceeded by the number of private-sector firms operating outside and around the shrine to cater to the needs of visitors”. In other words, insufficient facilities impede the consumption of faith-based tourism products. Ashikodi (2011) also affirmed that inadequate infrastructure is a major impediment to the growth of tourism destinations in Nigeria. The unstable electricity power supply, according to Mbanefo (2016), is one of the major causes of low investment in the accommodation sector.

Furthermore, sacred spaces not only lack sufficient facilities, but the poor state of most available facilities negatively impact tourist experiences. Harveen and Amit (2020) affirmed that the effective maintenance of facilities is one of the many elements which add to the overall spiritual experience of tourists. From their study it was observed that “sacred pool lacks maintenance; the hawan kund (container for sacred fire) is deteriorating in appearance; the sacred gates are rusting, these and other evidence of neglect hamper the pilgrim experience” (p 94). However, this lack of facilities maintenance culture is prevalent in many tourist attractions especially in



Nigeria. According to Ukabuilu (2009), lack of maintenance of monumental sites is a major constraint to the development of tourism destinations in Nigeria. 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, maintenance of religious structure is not consistent as a result many of the religious relics that attract visitation have been left to dilapidate. This is applicable to many of the attractions managed by the government. One such place is the Confluence Beach Hotel Lokoja that has been poorly seemingly mismanaged by the government agency charged with the responsibility because many of its facilities are in dire need of maintenance (Ezenagu & Umarr, 2017).

Also, the issue of insecurity, especially the danger posed by Boko Haram, an Islamic extremist sect, unknown gunmen attack and Fulani herders-farmers clashes in Nigeria threatens the consumption of tourism products (Ezenagu, 2018). Santana-Gallego and Fourie (2020) affirmed that terrorism is the main security threat affecting tourist arrivals to Africa. This is because “terrorists may attack with little or no warning, targeting tourist locations, transportation hubs, markets/shopping malls, local government facilities, hotels, clubs, restaurants, places of worship, parks...sporting and cultural events, educational institutions, airports and other public areas” (Afanasiev et al., & 2020: 70). With the incessant attack of terrorist and unknown gunmen on public sites including sacred spaces, the country has been divided into safe and unsafe destinations. As a result; many foreign nations have, at one time or another, placed a travel ban on Nigeria. The United States of America placed travel warnings on Nigeria in the wake of the destructive activities of Boko Haram. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) issued warnings that people should avoid public gathering which are one of the major targets of the Boko Haram sect (Smith, 2014). With this high level of insecurity, many international faith tourists have continued to shun Nigeria as an area of visitation for faith activities. Onyedika-Ugoeze and Taiwo (2022) reported that records have shown that terrorists have destroyed or partially damaged no fewer than 13,000 churches and 25, 000 mosques as at last count in the country. With such targeted destruction, tourism activities in sacred spaces face the challenge of insecurity which indirectly affects visitors’ experiences.

### **Contextual overview of the study area and faith-based tourism products**

The three sacred spaces (Redemption Camp, Osun Osogbo sacred grove and Nasrul-Lahi-I-Fatih Society – NASFAT Camp) under study are located in the south western region of Nigeria. Each of the selected sacred spaces host one of the three major religions of Nigerians. Osun Osogbo sacred grove of African traditional religions is located in Osun state while Redemption Camp of Christian religion and NASFAT camp of Islamic religion are located along Lagos-Ibadan expressway in Ogun state. The entire Lagos–Ibadan highway corridor is occupied by more than twenty different religious prayer grounds and has succeeded as a stage for the performance of public religiosity, earning it the moniker the ‘spiritual highway’ (Ukah, 2014; Janson & Akinleye, 2015).

### **Redemption Camp (Holy Ghost festivals)**

Redemption Camp – RC, a sort of sacred space is an outpost of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) located on Kilometer 46 of the 120-km (75-mile) Lagos–Ibadan Expressway (Osinulu, 2014; Ukah, 2014). This camp is arguably the largest physical



environment dedicated to the production, circulation, and consumption of religion in Africa. The camp is a ritual facility that draws several million worshipers each year (Ukah, 2014). It was primarily established in 1983 to host all the faith-based tourism products of RCCG generally known as Holy Ghost festivals. These festivals are according to Osinulu (2014):

...the Holy Ghost Service (HGS; held on the first Friday of every month save December), the Annual Convention (typically held in the second week of August), and the Holy Ghost Congress (HGC; ... held in the third week of December). Of these three, the Holy Ghost Congress and the Annual Convention attract the largest crowds because they are annual events, whereas the Holy Ghost Service is held monthly (p.117 – 118).

The origins of these events are said to be by divine inspiration and revelation to the RCCG leader, Pastor Enoch Adejare Adeboye fondly called Daddy GO (General Overseer). The Holy Ghost Congress according to Pastor Tunde, is an exciting Holy Spirit charged festival divinely revealed to Pastor Adeboye which commenced in 1998 as a one-day and night vigil but is today a six-day affair since 2002 (pers. comm. 2018). Another major ritual performance of RCCG is the Holy Ghost Convention which according to Mr. Henry, head of ushering RC “marks the end of Redeem Christian Church of God calendar year and the beginning of another. It is an important spiritual activity of RCCG which tells the story of the founder of the church with God (pers. comm. 2018). The third major festival of RCCG is the Holy Ghost Service. This event according to Mrs. Okunlol, is an all-night miracle service which holds on the first Friday of every month at the Redemption Camp. As we were told by Daddy GO the Holy Ghost Service started in March 1986 as a divine birthday gift from God. For this reason, the Holy Ghost Service of the month of March, is tagged “Holy Ghost service March Special (pers. comm. 2018). The common ritual activities of these events include the following, a wide variety of Christian musical ministrations, seminars, workshops, preaching and biblical teachings, blessing of mantles (ritual objects) anointing, healing, communion services, deliverance prayers and above all prophetic ministrations. Unique to Holy Ghost Convention are the following activities: inventory of church annual activities, graduation ceremony of students from Redeemed Christian Church of God Bible College, ordination of clerics, and appointment into new clerical offices. In view of the above ritual activities Ukah (2014) stated that RC is a sacred space where angels guard and home for the production and circulation of miracles. These activities translate to faith-based tourism products attracting mammoth crowds to the sacred space.

### **NASFAT camp (*Tahajjud* and *Lailatul Qadr*)**

*Nasrul-Lahi-il Fathi* Society of Nigeria – NASFAT’s prayer camp, also known as NASFAT Islamic Centre, is being projected as a model city for Muslims (Janson, 2020). NASFAT is an Islamic organisation with spiritually refreshing faith-based tourism activities/products. This camp was established in 2000 to accommodate the increasing population of participants to its regular prayer rituals especially *Tahajjud* and *Lailatul Qadr*. This large prayer camp ground was allocated on a wide expanse of land along the spiritual highway at Mowe-Ibafo on the Lagos–Ibadan Expressway (Obadare 2016; Adetona 2012). It is primarily designed to host certain faith-based activities otherwise faith-based tourism products of Islamic religion.

This camp setting generates a palpable experience of the divine presence as a result of the sensational religious practices (Ibrahim, 2020). These ritual performances especially *Tahajjud* and *Laylatul Qadr* were initiated to meet the varying spiritual needs of man in the society.



Adetona (2012) stated that *Tahajjud's* aim is to provide NASFAT members with problem-solving or healing means consequently often attracts thousands of worshippers, including Christians, waiting for 'miracles' to happen in their lives. *Tahajjud* ritual performance is an all-night vigil with prayers. Ibrahim (2020) observed that:

nasfat holds *tahajjud* prayers, or night vigils, during the night of every first and third Friday of the month for purposes of sustaining spiritual rejuvenation... The prayers consist of long performances of *nawafil*, or supererogatory ritual prayer, and varieties of melodious recitation led by the chief imam and his assistants (p.91)

Another ritual performance of NASFAT that attracts thousands of participants to the camp is *Laylatul Qadr* – A Night of Majesty observed in the Ramadan season. The *Laylatul Qadr* is one of the nights during Ramadan when the first verses of the Qur'an were allegedly revealed to Muhammad (Janson, 2020). Ibrahim (2020) describes it as "...a special night on which God pours out his blessing, mercy, and forgiveness. It occurs on any day during the last ten days of Ramadan, but it is most likely to take place on the twenty-seventh day of the month" (p. 91).

According to Mr. Salami "the month of Ramadan is the most blessed month in which the Qur'an itself was sent down to Muslims. The night on which it was sent is known as *Laylatul Qadr* – Night of Majesty. It is one of the holiest and most blessed nights of Islam. The night the Quran was sent is one of the odd nights on the last ten days of Ramadan called *Rakat*" (pers. comm. 2018), He further buttressed that the actual night of Night of Majesty, Allah has concealed from people thus only the devoted shall discover it by their relentless ritual worship. For this reason the main activity that makes this night unique is the observance of numerous ritual prayers offered from dusk to dawn.

### **Osun Osogbo sacred grove (Osun Osogbo festival)**

Osun Osogbo sacred grove is the biggest and one of the surviving sacred groves and rain forests in Yoruba land (Ezenagu, 2020). The grove is a large area of undisturbed primary forest along the banks of Osun River which covers about 75 hectares of land and, it is a typical example of a true primary rainforest that is fast disappearing in the West African Sub-region and one of the few vestiges of the rainforests in Nigeria (NCMM, 2004). The longevity of the grove is attributed to its cultural relevance to the Yoruba of South-western Nigeria. The continuity of this cultural process made the grove a symbol of Yoruba identity. To protect this identity it was declared a National monument in 1965 by National Commission for Museums and Monuments – NCMM and in 2005 enlisted as world Heritage Site by UNESCO.

However, the major spiritual and cultural relevance of the grove is the Osun sacred River. The sacredness of the grove is attributed to the deity, Osun goddess, and the preference of the grove is her abode with evidence of her liquid body (Osun River) flowing therein (Ezenagu, 2020). She is one of the Yoruba pantheon of gods and a spiritual guardian of Osogboland. The River is her point of contact, interaction and the seal of her covenant with the people of Osogbo. The product of her relationship with Osogbo people is the Osun Osogbo festival celebrated in the sacred grove. The event is a two long weeks of traditional activities that have never ceased to attract people from across the globe. The activities commence with *Iwode Osun* a two week long event preceding the commencement of Osun Osogbo festival. The activity entails the announcement of the on-coming Osun festival to the people. Once awareness for the event has



been created this is followed by the the ritual washing of all the paraphernalia of Osun known as *Ikunle Osun*. Concerning this ritual activity, a devotee (pers. comm. 2018), said the washing also includes the paraphernalia of worship of other deities with altars inside Osun palace shrines like *Obatala, Ogun* etc. using sacred leaves (*ewe orisa*). All the washed paraphernalia are displayed in the Osun palace shrine for devotees and visitors to appreciate it with praises. Hence, with objects ready for the numerous rituals ahead, the event is officially declared open on a Monday with *Íwópópó* activity. This ritual according to Ayomide (an Osun drummer) involves a public procession of our ruler, his wives, all royal officials, Iya Osun, devotees and visitors to a street where the ruler welcomes all to another Osun festival (pers. comm. 2017).

Once the event has been declared open, the next is the ritual dance of the entire Osogbo community around a scared sixteen-point lamp (*atupa Olojumerindinlogun*) on a Thursday. This is the legendary magical lamp which one of the founding ancestors (Olutimehin) of Osogboland was said to have seized from some spirit beings. This wise, Osunkolabi (pers. comm. 2017), narrated as follows: Olutimehin, a great hunter while on an expedition on a certain day in the night saw some spirit beings – ewi dancing around a lamp with 16 light burners. Because of the mystical nature of the lamp he went into their mist and ceased the lamp from them. After the ritual dance is the *Ojoajo- Oba* – Ataoja committee's day. Concerning this activity of this, Mr. Odeyemi (Osun devotee) said: this day is reserved for royal entertainment (pers. comm. 2018).

The next ritual activity is *Ibori iboade* as Osunkolabi (pers. comm. 2017), said it is a form of sacrifice performed for the destiny of the ruling Ataoja using the crowns and other royal paraphernalia of deceased Ataojas of Osogboland. This sacrifice is performed to maintain the communion between the living and deceased Ataojas. After the ritual involvement of the deceased Ataoja for the success of event, the next activity is the ceremony in appreciation of the living past arugbas (sacrifice bearer) for their services on a day called *Ijo arugba* – Arugba's day. After the arugba berth, comes *Ayaba Isale* ceremony. This ritual according to Osunkolabi (pers. comm. 2017), is a ritual performance which takes the pattern of *ibori iboade*, but in this ceremony we appease deceased (sic) royal wives of past Ataoja. Iya Osun performs the ritual beseeching them to assist in the upcoming event.

The next activity is the spiritual fortification of arugba for the task ahead known as *Idafa Arugba*. It takes place on the eve of the final sacrifice and the rituals are performed by an Ifa priest and Iya Osun. The next is *Ojo Osun*. This is the day arugba carries a sacrifice to Osun goddess in the sacred grove in a procession followed by all including the king. The Arugba is dressed in traditional regalia, her head covered with a cloth decorated with cowries (*aso ofi*) to conceal both the calabash (*igba* Osun) and her face. Two lobes of bitter kolanut are stuck into her mouth to prevent her from talking. Thereafter, the procession to the sacred grove commences. As the people proceed to the sacred grove prayers are offered at certain sacred spaces. During such prayers the people snap their fingers and make a circular sign above their heads rejecting and averting evil omens.

Once inside the sacred grove the *Igba* Osun is taken inside the shrine while all await the arrival of the Ataoja to complete the ritual. To complete the ritual the Ataoja wore the veiled crown and proceeded to commune with Osun goddess inside the shrine. With the completion of this ritual Iya Osun gathered all the food gifts items in a bowl which *Iworo* (priest) carried to the river bank and then poured the sacrificial items into the river to spiritually charge the Osun River for use by the participants. The last ritual performance to end the festival is an assemblage of all Osun



devotees and visitors again at the sacred grove to appreciate the goddess on *ikooserodo* day. This concluding Osun ritual takes place five days after the sacrifice to Osun goddess at the River bank where Iya Osun jingling the Osun brass bell blesses the people.

## **Methodology**

The study employed an ethnographic research method using the instrumentality of semi-structured interviews, direct observation and focus group discussions. The research was conducted in 2016 through 2018. The informants were purposively selected and consisted of faith tourists, ritual actors, host communities and owners of business enterprises in the study areas. The above persons were selected based on their knowledge and understanding of the subject matter. Having purposively selected the population for the study the sample size comprised 40 persons. For the focus group discussion, three sessions, consisting of a maximum of five persons were conducted in the three locations. The researchers observed faith activities at the destinations through self direct participation in the events. During such events certain faith tourists were purposively selected and interviewed although most participants interviewed withheld identities for personal reasons. The focus group discussion was administered specifically to local entrepreneurs at each destination. All the questions asked focused on the informants' perceived challenges of faith-based activities at the destination. Data collected were analysed descriptively.

## **Thematic data presentation: challenges of faith-based tourism in selected sacred spaces**

The challenging factors recorded here were elicited from views of tourism service providers, faith tourists and direct field observations by researchers at the respective sacred spaces. The challenges are discussed below:

### **a. Overcrowding of Sacred spaces**

Overcrowding is one of the major challenges of faith-based tourism because of the large gathering it tends to attract. Such large populations, many a times exceed the carrying capacity of the camp ground. Attesting to the above fact, one of the respondents at the focus group discussion in Redemption Camp responded as follows:

...too many people attend Holy Ghost festivals. And this large number of people is difficult to manage. In fact, the camp is usually overcrowded. With so many participants one can barely enjoy the spiritual essence of the event. As the camp ground is littered with waste, noises everywhere especially from road side traders, in the midst of the crowd some of us lose our personal belongings just name it. So at the end many things distract us from being spiritually alert (pers. comm. 2017).

To further buttress the effect of overcrowding, Miss Temilade, a faith tourist at Redemption Camp complained that:

... many of the faith tourists refuse to follow and abide by the camp rules. For instance, look around inside this auditorium you see people littering the whole place with empty water cans, beverage bottles, nylon name them. Food vendors do not even help matters as they sell wares inside the auditorium despite the fact that they know the rule. Such things



should not be seen in a place of prayer if only there are adequate control measures (pers. comm. 2018).

Findings from Osun sacred grove site also revealed that overcrowding contributed to the depletion of numerous wildlife resources in the grove. The focus group discussants concluded that the disappearance of the grove's commonly seen animals such as black and white throated monkeys, birds, reptiles and other animals are as a result of the noise emanating from the population of faith tourists. Also Mr Adesina (NCMM Osogbo) affirmed that:

...the Osun Osogbo sacred grove in past few decades was teeming with wildlife before the endorsement of World Heritage status. However, with the new status came increased population of faith tourists and consequently the disappearance and or possibly the migration of most of the wildlife to other forested regions (pers. comm. 2017).

Also, at the NASFAT camp the many of the faith participants detested the consequences of overcrowding especially its distraction during the important rituals.

#### **b. Insufficient infrastructural facilities**

Direct observation revealed that the population of visitors greatly outnumbers the available infrastructures at the sacred spaces. Commenting on the insufficiency of facilities at Redemption camp, one of the faith participants (name withheld) said:

Daddy GO on seeing the mammoth crowd in 2015 August Holy Ghost Convention struggling for virtually everything, including seat in auditorium announced that foreign delegates from other continents should stop coming to Nigeria for Holy Ghost Convention as the same programme will hold henceforth in UK and US. Even with this arrangement, population grows at each event. That is the reason why Daddy GO commenced the building of the new auditorium proposed to accommodate about 12 million people at a seating (pers. comm. 2017).

In Redemption camp, the inadequacy of accommodation infrastructure can be vividly explained from the report of interviews with a staff of Christ Redeemer's Ministry who said: "As at 2017 there are about 3000 rooms on lease to visitors excluding Redeemer's University student hostels and the VIP villas which is only given out to international and special guests from Nigeria" (pers. comm. 2017). This factor as observed greatly affects participation in the ritual performance at the camp. As one participant narrated:

...coming here only to be told that there are no available rooms, is not really pleasant. As a result one is forced or 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 (pers. comm. 2018).

The effect of insufficient accommodation made it impossible for the Chalets in Redemption camp to accommodate the new customers thereby discouraging their participation. The researcher witnessed the following act in the responses of a receptionist in "All Sufficient Chalet" during the August 2016 Convention. A new customer walked in to book a room for the December 2016 Congress and was told that all available rooms have been fully booked. The researcher was



shocked to hear that by August, 2016 all the rooms in the chalet were already fully booked for an event scheduled for December 2016. When the researcher asked the receptionist how, she replied:

...our rule says that we should give priority to old regular customers during any Holy Ghost festival. For this reason, we neither book nor reserve room for new customers since our room unit supply is lower than demand. So we reserve rooms first for our regular customers, if for any reason the customer fails to show up then we lease out the room ((pers. comm. 2016).

Consequently, many of the faith tourists end up lodging in the auditorium throughout the duration of the event subsequently inconveniencing and distracting others spiritually. Furthermore, the independent restrooms strategically positioned all over the Redemption Camp sometimes seem inadequate compared to the crowd at the event as it witnessed by the long queue at the restrooms areas.

In NASFAT camp there is no accommodation infrastructure inside the camping ground. In view of this, Sergeant Azeez is of the opinion that since faith tourists like those of Hajj (Saudi Arabia) left the comfort of their homes to seek spiritual succor at the camp ground they should not seek after comfort but rather seek Allah. With comfortable hotel rooms many might end up sleeping rather than engaging in necessary rituals for maximum spiritual experience (pers. comm. 2017). Thus the idea of worship in simplicity is supported. In addition, concerning insufficient facilities on NASFAT camp Mrs. Lawal lamented as follows:

...the limited number of restroom encouraged improper disposal of human waste (urine and excreta) at points where prerequisite ritual cleansing are done before prayer which not only pollutes the camp but also profanes the sacredness of the place (pers. comm. 2017).

However, at the Osun Osogbo sacred grove there is absence of rest-rooms for faith tourists. The absence of such essential facilities coupled with overcrowding at the grove during many of its faith ritual performances has also led to littering the sacred grove with dirt.

### **c. Increase in crime rate**

The increase in the crime rate in the region as a result of faith-based tourism activities affects economic activities in the area. Many of the tourism service providers in the focus group discussion concluded that doing business outside the camp is risky because of robberies. Reports from interviews also supported the above claim as many occupants of the Mowe community complained that Holy Ghost festivals attract criminals to the area. Mrs. Bankole (pers comm, 2017), a petty trader narrated a robbery ordeal of a woman, also a petty trader who was robbed in her home at the end of a day's sale. In order to curb the activities of robbery, many business participants came together to fund a vigilante group. According to one business participant, "with the vigilante group the cost of doing business in the area increased as a result many of us opted out of the vigilante thing which led to its abandonment. So our fate is now in our hands. For this reason, many close business early and participant in the faith activities inside Redemption camp to avoid been robbed" (pers. comm. 2016). From the aforesaid, the



absence of a stable security services and personnel around the area gave rise to the menace of *alaye/area boys/hoodlum* activities. In response to this Mr. Harris, a resident of the area said:

Holy Ghost Festivals have increased the number of hoodlum (*alaye* or *area boys*) in the area. Because of the number of participants, it brings in thieves and more *area boys* into the community. These boys rob us (residents and local business owner) at night because of insecurity in the neighbourhood and Redeem Christian Church of God despite the fact they make profit from Holy Ghost Festivals, does not offer social welfare service to us the host community. We benefit nothing from all of activities, no security, they mess up the environment, and there is increase in transport fare. Also there is increase in house rent, and food items and stuff (pers. comm. 2016).

Buttressing the above Mr. Emeka, a business participant complained as follows:

I come here just to do business although at the end of a day's sale I equally participate in the rituals. Because I could not afford to purchase business space from the Christ Redeemer's Ministry inside the camp where security is sure I bought from the locals around as you can see. The problem is not with sales but the menace of "*area boys*". These hoodlums officially extort money from us using different means (pers. comm. 2017).

Also Mr. John a dealer in the restroom business concurred that "faith-based participants constitute a nuisance to the community and Redeem Christian Church of God does not offer social responsibility to the host community" (pers. comm. 2017).

#### **d. Poor maintenance of infrastructures of cultural heritage monument**

From direction observation many of the religious heritage objects at sacred grove were fast dilapidating as a result of spirogyra infection and other weathering elements. Many of these heritage objects/sculptors are used for ritual performance during the festival and therefore should not be left to deteriorate as they are. The factor responsible for the above, according to Mr. Adesiyani (a staff of NCMM Osogbo) said: "The Osun sacred grove is directly under the management of NCMM Osogbo but lacks adequate staffing especially conservationists consequently the religious sculptors and objects are not effectively maintained" (pers. comm. 2017).

The researcher observed that the poor state of sacred sculptures is clearly seen in the early months of the year before the Osun Osogbo festival when these were only painted to hide the true dilapidated state as the festival approached. If these sacred sculptures and objects are not frequently maintained their destruction would affect the cultural value and spiritual essence of the grove which is the very *raison d'être* of Osun Osogbo festival.

#### **e. Commercializing sacredness**

The commercialisation of the sacredness of the ritual activities poses a huge threat to the utilisation of the faith-based tourism products. The spiritual essence of the faith-based tourism activities is one of the major reasons religious tourists flood sacred spaces. For the Osun Osogbo festival its commercialisation arises from the sponsorship of the festival by various companies. These funding companies initiate some secular programmes, traditional games,



dance and drinking competitions. The researcher observed that many of the festival participants are not after spiritual fulfillment but rather secular benefits from the various sponsors of the event. To this, an Osun devotee laments: look around and you will see our youths drinking alcohol and dancing to secular music instead of participating in Osun ritual performance (pers. comm. 2018).

Also many of the devotees affirmed that Osun Osogbo festival is being commercialized and perverted to please the visitors as some ritual performance secluded for only devotees are now made open for public entertainment while Osun priest and priestess make money from visitors and researchers. In this regard, Osunkolabi said: "...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. That is the only way we survive here in the Osun palace shrine. This is because most times nothing is remitted to us from money collected from the various sponsors who funded the festival and we have no other job apart from serving Osun goddess" (pers. comm. 2017).

Thus, with commercialization Osun Osogbo festival might lose its spiritual essence in the near future. For instance, the Goldberg beer village in Osun Osogbo sacred grove designed for decent drinking is usually abused by Osogbo youth by the indecent consumption of alcohol. This poses a huge threat to the spiritual essence of the festival.

#### **e. Seasonality**

The seasonality of faith-based tourism products limits its economic benefits. The most affected benefit is the employment opportunity. According to a food vendor at Redemption camp, Mrs Ologunde, who had been in food business for the past fifteen years said: "Whenever am coming to Redemption camp for business I usually employ more hands to help out in the cooking and serving while others are strategically positioned to advertise our variety of food using the canteen flyers. After the programme I have no need of workers. So I have no choice than to lay them off" (pers. comm. 2016).

Also, at the NASFAT camp a business vendor (name withheld) affirmed that businesses within the area flourish only during the faith-based tourism activities. Thus, many businesses only boom during the peak period of faith tourism at sacred spaces afterwards decline.

#### **f. Heavy traffic**

The Lagos-Ibadan expressway is best described as a "religious highway", a home to both Christian and Muslims prayer camps. The proliferation of sacred spaces along the expressway has adverse effect on traffic flow affecting both religious tourists and commuters. For the religious tourists, the long hours spent under traffic jam some say discourages repeated visit. In response a faith participant (withheld) said that the traffic jam majorly affects Holy Ghost service ritual which is just a night event.

It was also, observed that the traffic jam obstructs the flow of business transaction in the region during the event. A staff of one of the companies that purchased a business space inside Redemption camp complained that "when the products we brought to the camp were sold out. An order was placed for reinforcement for more products which delivery was delayed due to



traffic congestion along the Lagos-Ibadan expressway; consequently, the sale of the new ordered products were not successful” (pers. comm. 2016).

Apart from participants and business activities, the traffic jam along Lagos-Ibadan expressway also affects residents in the area. As Mr. Vincent (pers. Comm. 2017), a resident of Mowe community said “the major challenge of Holy Ghost Festivals and NSAFAT events for members of Mowe community is the heavy traffic along the Lagos-Ibadan expressway”. The researchers experienced the traffic congestion during the field work for the study. Indeed, the long hours spent in traffic congestion clearly frustrates the spiritual experience of faith-based activities.

## Discussion of findings

The efficacy of the ritual performance attracts large populations of visitors to sacred spaces. Considering the population of visitors, Timothy (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 heritage is located. In view of the above, direct observations revealed that the management of the ever-increasing population with scarce facilities at the sacred spaces could lead to the loss the spiritual ethos of faith-based tourism activities.

Hence, the lack of suitable infrastructure (e.g. toilets and food services) may also cause discontent and have a negative effect on visitor experiences (Oslen 2006). It was observed that at the three sacred spaces that insufficient facilities especially accommodation negatively affected visitor’s experience of the rituals. To this, Raina (2005) asserted that accommodation infrastructure is the most crucial component of tourism. Consequently, the deficiency of accommodation which most times emanate from overcrowding challenges both the spiritual and economic utilisation of the activity. At the sacred spaces specifically Redemption and NASFAT camps respectively visitors were found sleeping in the open auditorium. Similarly, Harveen and Amit (2020: 95) from their study of the temple of Shaktipith as goddess observed that

there are a number of hotels and lodges near the temple and the temple has visitor lodges where accommodation and bedding are provided on first come first served basis. However, the visitor numbers are so high that they exceed the local ‘carrying capacity’. Many of the people who cannot afford expensive rooms in nearby hotels opt to sleep either in open areas or the corridors of the temple at night.

In the view of this, Osinulu (2014) stated that RCCG has place several administrative, commercial and municipal facilities to accommodate the immense crowd that gather at Redemption Camp during the Holy Ghost festivals. Despite the administrative efforts, visitors at Redemption camp at most times outnumber the crowd management team. An example is the distribution of ritual handkerchief by Daddy GO during the Holy Ghost Congress of 2016. Almost everybody wanted to get the ritual handkerchief at the same time consequently the auditorium became rowdy. It almost led to stampede as faith participants where desperate to get the miracle handkerchiefs. This is comparable to the September, 2015 stampede in the City of Mina, Saudi Arabia which led to the loss of many lives.



In the light of the above, Adogame (2011: 114) attested that the effect of this large population at sacred spaces “cannot be ignored, not at least because they cause massive disruptions for local publics and commuters”. The ever increasing population of visitors to sacred spaces along the Lagos-Ibadan expressway during faith-based tourism activities usually causes traffic congestion on the route. Buttressing this claim, Olagunju (2015) affirmed that the

...the Lagos – Ibadan expressway unarguably is one of the busiest...location of major religious organizations worship centers that attract several hundreds of thousands of worshipers periodically compounding traffic on the road whenever major activities are taking place at the centers...Camp of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) at kilometer 46, the Mountain of Fire Prayer Ministry at kilometer 1, the Deeper Life Ministry at km 42 and Nasrul-Lahi-L-Faith Society of Nigeria (NASFAT) moslem camp sited at kilometer 20 all from Lagos (p. 5 – 6).

Traffic congestion happens to be a chief attribute of a religious trip that has the power to strongly affect visitor behavior and the quality of experiences (Harveen & Amit 2020; Wiersma & Robertson, 2003). Apart from traffic congestion on highways, increases in tourist population many a times leads to increase in crime rate. This is because the tourists are perceived to possess valuable items. Hence, amidst overcrowded sites tourists fall victims to theft. The loss of valuable items can easily distract religious tourist participation in sensitive ritual activities. To encourage regular participation in faith-based activities it is imperative to keep crime under control at sacred spaces.

Also, the findings of the study revealed that an increase in the demand for ritually imbued objects gave room for the commercialization of the sacred which challenges the spiritual essence of faith-based tourism activities. In view of this, Kasim (2011) stated that there is nothing wrong with making money out of religious tourism, but cautioned that the excitement of making profit should not be allowed to overshadow the spiritual healing and piety. In this regard, Shackley (2006) noted that the sale of official religious items and relics has existed for centuries. However, it was observed at sacred spaces that ritually imbued objects and ritual performances are sold to visitors thus commercializing the sacred. In view of this, Morpeth (2011) affirmed that sacred sites are just another venue for consumers to consume experiences and that in doing so the sacredness of sites is jeopardised. Buttressing the claim, Shepherd (2002) argues, that once a destination or event is sold in the tourism market it becomes a commodity and, as a consequence, often loses its authenticity to tourists. This implies that sacred rituals stand to lose its authenticity when perceived economic gain overshadows their spiritual expression. Confirming this assertion, Bahuguna (1998) from his study of Himalayan culture said “due to luxury tourism which is regarded as a soft industry, we have lost our identity. We have become...half Westerner. This is a...concept, which regards everything as a marketable commodity...” (p. 22). This concept of selling ritual performance as a commodity was observed from the activities of some Osun ritual actors who allow visitors to participate in some scheduled spiritual rituals in a bid to financially maintain office and maximize profits from the large number of faith participants. Eades (1992) also affirmed the above claim that the presence of large numbers of tourists could inevitably lead to the commercialization or commoditization of the religious activities.



Another challenge is the seasonality of the events which Page and Connell (2009) stated as being one of the major disadvantages in tourism and can cause negative economic effects on a destination. However, since faith activities are scheduled to hold in spiritual auspicious time Rinschede (1992) asserted that it is bound to some certain seasonality. This challenge hinders economic benefits of the event. For this reason, many of the tourism service industries enjoy wide patronage only during the event. After this period, on the other days of the year as Collins-Kreiner and Wall (2007) observed many facilities are closed because the capacity of visitors is very low. Therefore, most industries that are solely dependent on tourism activities during the off-peak season might invariably close down leading to loss of employment.

In addition to seasonality, is the issue insecurity looming in the country. The security issues bother on religious crises, unknown gunmen attack, ethnic crises, kidnapping, terrorist attack etc. resulting in regional unrest. These enumerated factors are matter of concern to tourism industry because they create an atmosphere of insecurity. And the more a tourist feels unsecured, the less he visits (Chiu, 2008). The activities of Boko Haram and Fulani herders ravaging the economy, destroying the tourism image and reputation of the country have been of a great concern. In Nigeria, Boko haram terrorist sect has attacked many sacred spaces especially those of Christian organizations. These terrorists consider faith-based institutions as potential targets for a variety of reasons, including their symbolism, perceived lack of security, direct encouragement from terrorists overseas, and violent extremist messaging glorifying recent attacks (NCTC, DHS, FBI 2019). With the constancy of such attacks, Chowdhury, Raj, Griffin and Clarke (2017) are of the opinion that terrorism impedes travel to religious sites. In view of the above, Nigerian government is working hard to annihilate terrorism from country especially in the north where the impact is most felt. The southwestern sacred spaces are flourishing as tourist destination due to relative peace within the region. However, the value of the rituals has continued to lure participants.

## **Conclusion**

Religious events or festivals are key factors to narrowing the distance between the Gods and mankind (Korstanje and George, 2020) at sacred spaces. These events are amalgamation of different ritual performance which addresses man-made maladies. The efficacy of the site, on one hand is derived from its believability as a setting for ritual performance (Osinulu, 2014) and on other from the assemblage of positive narrative from participants of the rituals. The continuous positive narratives generated from participation in the ritual performances of faith-based tourism products attracts huge crowd to a sacred spaces most times beyond its carrying capacity. In other words, the study identified overcrowding as one of the major challenges of faith-based tourism in the country.

Overcrowding not only depletes available infrastructure but also distort tourists' experience of the events and the exploitation of their economic benefits. Other challenges emanating from it include commodification of ritual activities, insecurity, traffic congestion, etc. The continued upgrade and provision of new infrastructure is therefore imperative to accommodate the increasing population at sacred spaces. Also, increased visitation can easily be managed by improving a site or by providing better interpretation and instruction (Oslen, 2006) at sacred spaces. In addition, the commitment of sacred spaces management team fulfilling their corporate social responsibilities will address some of the challenges the festivals pose for the environs. The employment of the services of efficient security personnel for the festivals will



manage traffic issue and activities of hoodlums in the environs. Thus, with the proper management of the challenging factors of faith-based tourism, the ritual performance can be promoted with the introduction of more ritual enactments, and recreational religious therapeutic facilities to ultimately reduce the problem associated with seasonality of faith-based activities. Conclusively, this research provides a platform with which to re-engage stakeholders, namely developers, government and policy makers in the tourism industry to revisit emerging challenges in faith-based tourism development so as to ensure explicit maximization of its benefits.

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