



# Religious Tourism in South Africa: Preliminary analysis of a major festival in Limpopo

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## Abstract

Despite the fact that religious tourism has been in existence for centuries, there is still a dearth of academic focus on this tourism niche area especially in the developing context. Along similar lines, the academic analysis that has focused on tourism in South Africa has largely neglected aspects of religious tourism, despite the significant growth experienced by the sector in contemporary South Africa. This paper presents in part, a preliminary analysis of a longitudinal based study and with specific reference to the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) Easter Festival in Moria, a major religious tourism event that takes place during the Easter period in Limpopo, South Africa. In terms of the methodology, the data was collected through the use of questionnaire surveys, administered face-to-face to event attendees using a stratified random sampling method. The perceptions were measured on a five-point Likert-type scale. The results show that, while respondents were enthusiastic with regards to socio-economic opportunities created by the event for local residents, major concerns remained in key tourism facilities such as banking, transport, cleanliness and being a responsible tourism destination. The study underscore the need for the relevant authorities to consider a new approach to the event planning and execution that will holistically improve attendee concerns and ensure the event sustainability.

**Keywords:** Preliminary study, religious tourism, attendees, event planning, longitudinal study

## Introduction

The rapid growth of tourism in the developing countries has given an abundance of opportunities for the development of new tourism niche areas to capitalise on by the relevant authorities (Ivanovic, Khunou, Reynish, Pawson, Tseane & Wassung, 2009; Rogerson & Collins, 2015). Religious tourism, as one of the tourism niche areas, has displayed a rapid growth over the past few decades (Jackowski, 2000; Olsen, 2006; Rojo, 2007). According to Rojo (2007), there are an estimated 240 million people around the world who travel every year for religion, including Christians, Muslims and Hindus, amongst others. Timothy and Nyaupane (2009) suggest that religious tourism will continue on an upward trajectory in economic significance only when given full recognition by tourism industry leaders, academics and governments in Africa, and will only realise its true potential once taken seriously as a socio-economic tool for development.

Even though religion is an important motivator for domestic and international travel, religious tourism, as a market niche, has not been a major focus within the tourism literature (Olsen, 2006). As religious tourism niche markets continue to expand, religious tourism will become even more of an area of future research growth, particularly when the economic importance of this niche market has been fully realised by tourism industry leaders, academics, and government officials (Timothy & Nyaupane, 2009). At the present time, however, the



religious tourism literature can be characterised broadly as being fragmented, and as such, lacking in synthesis and holistic conceptualisation, being very much in its infancy in comparison to other tourism niche markets, like ecotourism and sport tourism (Olsen, 2006).

The growth and socio-economic significance of religious tourism and festivals in particular, as a niche tourism typology cannot be underestimated (Rogerson & Collins, 2015). This is because religious tourism is one form of tourism which has existed for a long time, with billions of people across the world being members of different faiths and thus, travelling to participate in religious pilgrimages, or other religious purposes (Travel and Tourism Analyst, 2005; Wall & Mathieson, 2006). According to Wall and Mathieson (2006), whilst religious pilgrimages have remained a major part of religious tourism, there has been a recent shift in focus of religious tourism, with other religious places such as cathedrals and churches becoming increasingly popular as tourist attractions and places of worship simultaneously. Henderson (2011) adds that religion and tourism share a very close relationship wherein religion motivates people to travel, and where religious spaces serve as attractions for the visitors. Henderson (2011) argues that the religious sites provide a strong motivating force for travel and a source of tourist attractions which ultimately attracts those who are devout spiritual visitors as well as those with a far more casual interest in the sites.

According to Triantafyllidou, Koritos, Chatzipanagiotou and Vassilikopoulou (2010), increased affluence amongst the world population has also fuelled demand in religious tourism pilgrimage and subsequently, religious and non-religious agencies promote, sell and arrange pilgrimage tours, and are a very lucrative market. Fox (2008) adds that, whilst there still exists a strong presence of penitents and pilgrims within the religious tourism industry, there are many other people who participate in faith-based journeys who specifically look to combine a vacation with their religious travel. Liebelt (2010) asserts that religious tourism has grown in part as a result of people of faith finding ways where they integrate their beliefs into their daily lives as well as the success of faith-based films, books and other events. The journeys of such people results in both positive and negative economic outcomes, socio-cultural, political as well as environmental implications on the host destination (Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Henderson, 2011). For example, the festival can generate significant business activity and income for the host community (Tassiopoulos, 2011). In most cases, such business activity is associated with direct employment, indirect employment, and the development of local businesses (Swarbrooke, 1999).

According to Yolal, Gursoy, Uysal, Kim and Karacaoglu (2016) other notable economic impacts of festival include tax revenues for the government, increased employment opportunities, entrepreneurial opportunities and additional income for host cities. Other commentators (Getz, 2010; Getz & Page, 2015; Yolal *et al.*, 2016) add that festivals can also assist in the construction of new facilities and the improvement of infrastructure which they feel is a fair justification of the investment in the said festivals and events. Prayag, Hosany, Nunkoo and Alders (2013) also mention that organising festivals can assist destinations to develop their tourism industry through increased visitor numbers and usually extending the normal length of stay and the spending in the local community. Festivals are also known to make use of existing facilities and infrastructure, thereby minimising the capital investment required for their development and organisation (Getz & Page, 2015; Yolal *et al.*, 2016).

Festivals can also be used in revitalising a country's declining small towns and rural areas, by promoting regional development (Rogerson & Collins, 2015). According to Yolal *et al.* (2016) festivals can also provide opportunities to enhance social interactions and relationships and thereby improve residents' wellbeing and quality of life. Moreover,



numerous researchers (Bob & Swart, 2010; Getz, 2013; Tichaawa, Bama & Swart, 2015; Bama & Tichaawa, 2015) have suggested that festivals can contribute to community cohesion, family and group togetherness within the community, cultural recovery and cultural exchange between visitors and hosts amongst other socio-economic benefits. Tichaawa *et al.* (2015) caution however that there are numerous negative aspects to festival and events hosting, such as crime, congestion, displacement effects, environmental aspects relating to increased pressure on resources, as well as the short-term nature of the economic reliance on an event by the community. These impacts therefore need careful planning and management so as to ensure effective organisation of the festival.

This study aimed at providing comprehensive analysis of a major religious tourism event in South Africa, the ZCC Annual Easter Festival in the Limpopo province. Whilst there has been considerable growth in the number of studies conducted on events and festivals globally (Getz, 2010; Getz & Page, 2015; Bama & Tichaawa, 2015; Yolal *et al.*, 2016; Nyikana, 2016), there is a dearth of analysis on religious festivals and the ensuing impacts that they have on host regions. This holds especially true in the developing context where studies conducted on events and festivals (Nyikana, Tichaawa & Swart, 2014; Bama & Tichaawa, 2015; Tichaawa, Moshoeshe, Swart & Mhlanga, 2015) have largely ignored religious aspects of tourism, despite the significant growth experienced by this subsector. Where such studies exist, the tendency has been to put much focus on individual components which are linked to development, and not in a comprehensive and systematic manner.

This study was therefore designed to address the lack of research, especially in a holistic way on religious festivals in South Africa. The aim of the study was to assess the event in a longitudinal manner as the festival under investigation is an annual recurring event. It is anticipated that the findings from this study will assist in the organisation, the management and the sustainable development of religious tourism in South Africa. This paper presents a preliminary analysis of the results.

## **Methodology**

The study was conducted in Moria, which is a rural area located approximately 35 kilometres outside Polokwane on the way to Tzaneen, in the Limpopo province of South Africa. Moria is where the headquarters of the ZCC are. During the Easter period and during September, millions of people gather at Moria for religious purposes, and thus the first phase of the study was conducted during the Easter period of 2015. The study employed both qualitative and quantitative research approaches of design. The two approaches are viewed as ones that are mutually supportive, given that each contains strengths that can benefit the other in ultimately solving problems and in the decision making (Pellisier, 2007). A qualitative research method is one that uses in-depth interviewing techniques as well as focus groups, while a quantitative method entails large samples of the target population whose findings can be statistically analysed with precise estimations (De Vos, Strydom, Fouche & Delpont, 2011; Pellisier, 2007). In terms of survey population, the study included all visitors, besides locals, who travelled to Moria for the ZCC Easter pilgrimage. A structured questionnaire survey was administered face-to-face to the respondents using a stratified random sampling technique. A total of three hundred and ninety five ( $n=395$ ) questionnaires were gathered and analysed using the IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software version 21.



## Results and Discussion

### ***Demographic profile***

In terms of the demographic profile, an overwhelming majority of the respondents (95%) were from South Africa, whilst there was representation from Zimbabwe (2%), Malawi, Botswana, and Namibia at 1% equally. In terms of provincial representation for those that came from South Africa, the main provinces which dominated were Gauteng (23.5%), Limpopo (15.7%) and North West and Mpumalanga at 11.8% equally.

The majority of attendees were male (60%), with an average age of 30 years of age. It can also be deduced that the respondents were reasonably educated when considering that a combined 52% were at minimum in possession of a diploma, with others having postgraduate education as well. An overwhelming majority of the respondents (83.9%) were at the festival because of religious purposes as expected, whilst there were minorities that indicated that the festival was a secondary reason for travel as they were there primarily for holidays, business, Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) and for medical purposes. 98% of the respondents were repeat visitors to the area and to the event.

### ***Perceptions of religious tourism***

As mentioned previously, the perceptions of the respondents were measured using a Likert-type scale and the findings therefrom are presented in this section:

The respondents generally had positive experiences and perceptions towards the event. However nuances of negative experiences were noted. For example, there were notable percentages (23.2%) who felt that the event resulted in significant negative socio-cultural impacts on the local community. Amongst other issues raised, many of the respondents (99.1%) raised concerns over the traffic congestion caused by the event in the area and on the way to the festival area, pollution resulting from the festival (37.4%) as well as the fact that the event increased the cost of living for the local community (54.4%), even though they said these were temporal issues which lasted for the duration of the festival and normalised post-festival. These findings generally support existing literature on festivals and the socio-economic impacts they have on host communities. For example, Tichaawa *et al.* (2015) indicated that, whilst festivals generally tend to be associated with positive impacts, there are times where they result in negative impacts on aspects such as increasing traffic congestion, contributing to significant levels of pollution and increasing the cost of living for host residents.

Of the total respondents, 39.7% indicated that attending the event had raised their awareness of tourism facilities in the area. This is particularly significant in that it plants a seed of interest in re-visitation on the part of the attendees. The onus therefore rests on the relevant officials to capitalise on this in attracting the attendees for tourism specific intentions beyond the festival itself. Moreover, 97.9% felt that the event is good for the economy of the area in that it creates opportunities for employment and temporal jobs for the local community. As suggested in existing literature (Getz, 2010; Getz & Page, 2015; Bama & Tichaawa, 2015; Yolal *et al.*, 2016; Nyikana, 2016), festivals of the magnitude of the ZCC Festival have socio-economic, environmental and political implications on the destination. But arguably, the most mooted benefits are those of an economic nature (Yolal *et al.*, 2016). It is therefore key for relevant authorities to better manage and coordinate the employment



opportunities presented by the festival by training and upskilling entrepreneurs who can capitalise on the economic value of the festival. When asked what other events they had engaged in during their stay at the festival, the majority of the respondents indicated shopping, social (VFR) and visiting natural attractions as the main activities. This further supports the notion that religious festival attendees have, in recent times, looked at amalgamating religious intentions with other leisure-based interests. This presents the host destination with a new challenge of introducing complementary products and experiences which can be used to enhance the overall stay of the attendees. This will also assist in increasing the contribution of the festival into the local economy.

The respondents were requested to rate key tourism facilities available in the destination based on a scale of: Good, Fair or Poor as depicted in the table below. Many of the items in question received positive ratings, apart from transport, personal safety, cleanliness, banking, value for money and Moria being a responsible tourism destination. Whilst the items were not heavily criticised, greater efforts could be put into improving these ratings especially given that the festival takes place annually.

<b>How would you rate your general impressions of Moria in terms of the following? (n=395, in %)</b>			
<b>ITEM</b>	<b>GOOD</b>	<b>FAIR</b>	<b>POOR</b>
Friendliness	99.0	1.0	0
Helpfulness	99.0	1.0	0
Transport	63.6	0	36.4
Personal safety	81.8	18.2	0
Cleanliness	43.4	40.4	15.3
Banking	61.6	28.3	10.1
Entertainment	79.8	20.2	0
Value for Money	61.6	38.4	0
Responsible tourism destination	58.6	31.3	10.1

## **Conclusion**

The study presented part of a broader longitudinal-based study that is currently being conducted on religious tourism events and festivals in South Africa. Key themes emerged from the preliminary research findings which give an indication of what is to be expected from the overall results of the research.

Firstly, the study revealed that the typical attendee at the festival was fairly young and educated and mostly male. This implies that if the festival is to be developed and other elements added in order to complement the festival experience, then the marketing and information material should be material that is relevant to the youth. For example, when communicating important information about the event, the organisers and the officials involved in the planning and management of the festival should make use of platforms such as social networks which are hugely popular amongst the youth. Whilst the research acknowledges that the attendees are first and foremost there for religious purposes, there is strong evidence to suggest that they are open to other complimentary activities on offer during the duration of the festival.



Secondly, the study also revealed that the festival has a wide sphere of influence as there were respondents who came from other southern African countries who visited the area because of the festival. In this regard, an effort should be made by relevant authorities to use target market-specific marketing efforts in packaging the festival with a view to meeting the expectations of the attendees to the festival.

Thirdly, given that this is an annual festival, and that the majority of attendees are repeat visitors, the fact that many are uncomfortable with key tourism facilities such as the travel (transport) element raises serious concerns moving forward. Initiatives to manage the transport and congestion aspects should be made so as to reduce the distress of the host communities and the attendees themselves. Perhaps the regional and local government authorities could consider the possibility of encouraging an increase in the supply of affordable accommodation and other amenities, whilst enhancing supporting infrastructure for the festival as a way of improving on the overall festival product/experience.

Moreover, expanding the capacity of key infrastructure such as roads leading to and from the festival spaces could play a key role in better developing the festival. The local government could also consider partnering with the private/commercial sector in looking to subsidize, enhance and modernise the transport used to the festival which would improve on the experiences of all road users (attendees and others).

Lastly, it has been noted that the attendees do not only engage in religious activities, but other tourism related engagements whilst at the festival. In light of this, the study recommends that the local government enhance the banking facilities currently on offer at the festival area, which in turn would promote spending on the local economy as the attendees also indicated shopping as one of their main activities away from the religious activities.

### *Limitations*

This study is not without limitations. This paper forms part of a larger research project on a longitudinal-based study on religious tourism in South Africa. In this regard, the findings should be read with caution as they present a preliminary indication of what was found in the first phase of data collection. The second phase of data collection is planned for this year, 2017 and the last phase in 2018, after which the final analysis will be conducted. Due to time and financial challenges faced, data could not be completed in the 2016 year. Nevertheless, it is envisaged that such an analysis will allow for an assessment of how perceptions change over time and therefore raise critical questions and point to strategic directions for those involved in the planning, organising and managing of the festival going forward.

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