

## **Faith based tourism in the contemporary Nigeria: Challenges and prospects**

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### ***Abstract***

*Tourism industry is one of the most lucrative industries in recent times. This is because it has witnessed an upsurge among people from both developed and developing countries. Hence, it is seen as a sector that has potential for rapid development when it is well planned and controlled. Faith based or religious tourism as a subset of tourism has also recorded a huge number of attendance which almost outnumbers other aspects of tourism. This is traceable to the quest, interest and man's eagerness to always have a relationship with the ultimate reality. In this regards, faith based tourism is outstanding and laudable which is because, it is a religious travel aimed at enriching one's spirituality. This paper therefore intends to have an examination of the challenges of faith based tourism and its prospects in Nigeria. Hence the work will be done using sociological method and the theory of social exchange. The paper therefore finds that many people are always interested in attending faith based tourism but are often discouraged because of number of challenges encountered on the process. It concludes that faith based tourism is an aspect of tourism that should be encouraged because of its numerous positive contributions to the people and the society at large. It recommends that the government and religious leaders should try to help in reducing those challenges that are being faced by the people in order to encourage more turnouts which will invariably yield a better economy.*

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**Keywords:** *Faith, tourism, contemporary, Nigeria, challenges, prospects*

## **Introduction**

Travel and tourism industry with a vast amount of economic, socio-cultural and environmental returns, is one of the most important economic sectors of the world. Tourism has in recent times provided over 200 million jobs and generates the largest amount of foreign exchange and contributes about 10% of the world's GDP. Tourism is currently considered to be the most developed industry across Europe, with considerable economic impact and the highest annual growth rate between 2 to 4.5 % in terms of turnover. It is also the most rapidly growing industry in the world, achieving many consecutive years of continuous growth (Berhanu, 2018).

Religion has been an integral motive for undertaking journey since antiquity and it is usually identified as the oldest form of travel. Religious or faith based tourism as one of the oldest type of tourism has various definitions from different writers. The UNWTO has defined religious tourism as a kind of tourism that reflects itself with socially responsible actions by respecting the sacred and thorough stewardship of sacred sites (2011). In the opinion of Esteve (2009), it is seem as a tourist activity through which the tourists seek spiritual grace, looking for the proximity, immersion or contact with the sacred aspects of life. Hence, it deals fundamentally with religious beliefs and involves people who mainly want to have a religious experience of one sort or another to affirm their faith. More so, Rinschede (1992) posits that it is the type of tourism in which travelers are motivated either partially or solely for religious reasons. All these definitions indicate that religious tourism is the movement or travel of peoples to churches, mosques and other religious and sacred places for religious purposes.

Religious or faith based tourism market is a market for a particular purpose with it playing a very important role in the economy of each country. As other aspects of tourism are growing and increasingly advancing, so is religious tourism increasing. It is in view of this fact that this work is aimed at examining the concept of faith based or religious tourism and the challenges they face in the contemporary Nigerian context. This is owing to the fact that every aspect of tourism has its challenges and difficulties and that of religious tourism cannot be ignored, hence this study.

### **Theoretical framework**

The theory adopted in this work is Social Exchange Theory. This theory is a concept of social behaviour that was initially based on exchange. Prior to 1958, exchange was most commonly associated with material goods. The notion that it also could have a symbolic value was presented by Homans (1958) and laid the foundation for new theories of social exchange. Despite differences between theorists, Cropanzano and Mitchell, (2005) maintain that they all agree upon the central parts of SET. These are, that social exchanges consist of interactions which over time provide reciprocal and rewarding relationships that are sustained by a two-way exchange of material, social or psychological resources between people. In terms of tourism, previous researches show that the degree of community support for tourism exchanges can vary.

A fundamental principle within SET is that relationships are continually developing over time. The more time spent in the relationship the stronger commitment, loyalty and trust is developed. For social exchanges to be successful, actors must follow certain rules and norms which are considered to be guidelines of exchange processes. The foremost and perhaps best known exchange rule is reciprocity (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). Reciprocity consists of three different types;

reciprocity as a transactional pattern of interdependent exchanges; reciprocity as a moral norm and reciprocity as a folk belief (Gouldner, 1960).

Reciprocity as interdependent exchanges means that a two-way exchange is performed. When something is given and something returned, an interdependence relationship evolves. Therefore, in the opinion of Molm (1994), interdependence is considered to be a defining feature of social exchange. This means that reciprocal interdependence is based on contingent interpersonal transactions where a party's actions depend on the other's behaviour. It becomes an exchange process where interdependence has the ability to reduce the risk and encourage cooperation; each consequence of the process can create a self-reinforcing cycle that is likely to be continuous (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005).

Reciprocity as a norm refers to how one should behave. If one chooses to follow the norm, one is obligated to behave reciprocally. The level to which one chooses to support reciprocity differs between individuals. People with a high exchange orientation are more likely to track obligations and are therefore more likely to return a good deed. Individuals who exhibit less concern have shown to care less if exchanges are reciprocated (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). Having a strong exchange ideology and a positive reciprocity orientation have been found to foster stronger relationships where positive treatment generates positive treatment (Eisenberger et al., 1986). This suggests that an individual's reciprocity preference influences behavioural and informational choices. To what extent visitors are aware of the consequences their exchanges have on communities and its residents are an important component of SET. By inspiring them to engage in the development of management strategies, negative impacts can be reduced or possibly prevented. By exploring how visitors perceive tourism impacts across the Triple Bottom Line,

sustainable strategies can be optimized. This theory is suitable for this research because it is used as a tool to better understand how tourists perceive, evaluate their impacts and express the reciprocal relationship that exist among the people with the attending economic benefits which has a positive contribution for the betterment and development of the society.

### **Conceptual understanding**

Before going further in the discussion on this paper, it is important for us to have a vivid understanding on some concepts that need to be clarified. It is on this note that the concepts of tourism and religious or faith-based tourism will be discussed.

**Tourism:** This is a concept that has received myriad of definitions. In the words of Tasié and Ogwunka in Kilani and Onu (2016), tourism encompasses human and business activities associated with one or more aspects of temporary movement of persons away from their immediate home, communities and daily work environment for business, pleasure or personal reasons. This activity ranges from various taxonomy of tourism; culture, eco, sports, health etc that gives the desired pleasure to the tourist. Also Onu in Kilani and Onu, sees the concept of tourism to have started with a movement of people to places they seem to be important to them. Hence he defines tourism as the temporal movement of people within or beyond a country to destinations other than their usual place of residence and staying for not less than 24hours and includes the services specially created to meet their needs, with intension of advancing personal, religious or business schemes and appreciate the many beauties of the world without connecting any remuneration activity within the place visited. Also Hunziker and Krapf in Onu (2015) posit that tourism is the sum of the phenomena and relationships arising from the travel and stay of non-residents, in so far as they do not lead to permanent

residence and are not connected with any earning activity. Furthermore, Onu captures the definition as maintained by Tourism Society of England as the temporary, short term movement of people to destination outside the places where they normally live and work and their activities during the stay in each destination. Tourism can be seen in three forms which are domestic, inbound and outbound (Onu, 2015).

Tourism in the words of Aktas (2002) is the travel and temporary accommodation of consumers other than the habitual residence. It is the whole of events and relations caused by the travel and accommodation of individuals provided that it does not deal with a profit making activity (Kurar, Akbaba and Inal: 2015). Collins – Kreiner (2010) posits tourism to mean the travel of persons for cultural and leisure and it is derived from the word “Torius” which means traveling and returning of a person from one place to another for satisfaction. Goeldner and Ritchie (2009) followed the line of Collins but go further in their explanation. In their view, it is the activities of people for leisure, business and other purposes not lasting more than one year and not consecutive of each other in a place other than residence by leaving the habitual residence in order to join travel activities. Tourism has helped in creating broad employment on the international scale and providing employment to over millions of people all over the world. Tourism has provided economic factors by foreign exchange earnings and creation of employments. Its socio-cultural aspects include offering of services to tourists, meeting their requirements, leisure, rest and other needs and bringing different cultures together.

**Religious or faith-based tourism:** Religious tourism is seen as an aspect of tourism which is only made up of people going for religious purposes. Onu and Gberegbara in Kilani and Onu (2016) see it as a journey undertaken for the sake of worship and or to pay respect to a site of special religious significance. In a

similar vein, faith based or religious tourism according to Kasim (2011) is a 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. As a mega event, religious tourism follows a bunch of rituals which are careful performed. Visitors to religious site immerse themselves in these ritual performances at sacred spaces. Vukonic (2006) sees these spaces as being holy and their holiness is a result of an event that took place in them and as a place of worship for hosting sacred events or guarding sacred relics. It is in this regard that Levi and Kocher (2010) maintain that those sacred places are behavioural settings whose meaning arises from the behaviours that occur there and the uses, thus the religious practices that are carried on there make the places sacred. This made Shinde (2021) in Ezenagu et al (2022) to say that sacred sites attract an amalgam of visitors who simultaneously seek spaces for acts of worshippers connected with the sacred resources. These performances answer the question why sacred spaces are always overcrowded. It also gives reason to why sacred spaces are increasingly turning into popular tourist destinations. The explanation we are trying to make here can be summarized in the idea of Nicolaides (2015) that religious pilgrimage cum 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.

Kurar, Akbaba and Inal (2015) posit that pilgrimage and faith are the oldest aspect of the tourism sector. In their view, Santiago de compostela is one of the three important pilgrimage centres of Christianity together with Rome and Jerusalem which are included in the world heritage list of UNESCO. They go on to maintain that the three biggest beliefs of the world are Christianity with 33%, Islam with 21% and Hinduism with 14%. It is tourism that reveals sites of these beliefs like Cathedral,

Church, Temple and relic sites. Aksoy (2002) sees religious based travel as very important in history. This is because high increase in number of people join in pilgrimage ritual with Islam caused many social activities among Europe, Anatolia and Middle East. The common feature of all the religions is the visit of sacred sites as prescribed by their religious guide. Faith based tourism joins people having the same feeling of belief from different cultures. In this regards, it emphasizes on the concepts of peace and tolerance as well as creating an economic environment.

By way of further clarity, we can say that faith based tourism in the words of Aksoy is a whole of events and relations arising from the temporary accommodations of people in places other than their habitual residence like faith attraction centres to which they travel in order to satisfy their religious belief and where they derive the good and services of the tourism enterprises. It is important to note that people join in faith tourism activities for psychological reasons, variety of religious supply resources, religious promulgation activities, religious days and festivals. Scholars have named some of the prominent countries that are known for hosting faith base tourism. Among them are Italy, Isreal, India and Spain (Kurar, Akbaba and Inal: 2015). They further maintained that Italy draws nearly twenty five million visitors every year. In Italy, this figure has always increased which has multiplied the number in recent times. Presti and Petrillo (2010) posit that there has been the development of mutual co-operation in Italy between the public and private sectors which represent a new role in the tourism system, hence providing better functioning of society and the Church.

In Italy for instance, faith based tourism combines certain religious days, building and sacred sites within the framework of a tourist visit. Presti and Petrillo go on to observe that the most important role of the Italian Catholic Church includes

differences, spaciousness, popularity of artistic, historic and cultural Cathedrals and Churches. In Israel, some of the areas for faith tourism are sacred sites generally around Jerusalem, Nazereth, Sea of Galilee and Bethlehem. Generally, Jerusalem and the East wall in particular is the official centre of Judaism with symbolic value for Jewishness. The values of the region are considered sacred by three heavenly religions, that is, the Abrahamic religion viz Judaism, Islam and Christianity. Collins-Kreiner in Kurar et al (2015) opines that Rachael tomb is located in a cave in the Hebron region which is respected by the members of the three sacred religions. Hence, the tomb can be grouped with the west wall and is also known as the Rabah Mosque. It is imperative to note that in tours to these holy places, the Catholic pilgrims visit institutional places regarded by Church while protestant pilgrims are always interested in visiting sacred places, monuments, modern city town and Churches. Kurar et al see faith based tourism as taking an important part in the 2023 tourism strategy of Turkey and it is intended to develop substantial culture faith tourism with integration to other tourism types.

### **Purposes of faith tourism**

Every tourism has a purpose and it is the purpose of such travel that informs the tourism. In this regards, faith based tourism is embarked for certain purposes. This can be seen in four ways according to Onu and Gberegbara in Kilani and Onu (2016): visitation, faith education, worship and meditation.

- **Visitation:** it is seen that a visit of persons on pilgrimage to some holy sites are major reasons for people going for it. This means that these persons have been hearing of these sites and their importance to their religious faith and they have in mind of seeing those places and believing that its importance will be seen in their lives.

In this regards, most people attend religious programmes just for religious visitation to some religious places. For instance, in the Anglican Communion, whenever a programme is fixed in the Cathedral, one will record big number of people in attendance. This is not because those meetings are not done in their churches but because it is done in the Cathedral and some of them want to take that opportunity to see the cathedral so that they can have stories to tell when they are back.

- **Faith Education:** In the word of Onu and Gberegbara in Kilani and Onu ed. (2016), during faith based tourism, the history of a religious tradition is exposed to them. They also observed that religious experts present special teachings and talk on the essence of the gathering. For instance, in the Anglican Church, when people gather for their conferences, persons are invited to talk to them on the theme of the conference, bible expositions, seminars, Anglicanism and others. These are targeted to deepen their faith and believe in their church and also to give them the education they need in defending their faith at all times. It also gives room for a better and wider understanding of the backgrounds and special points in the religious body and helps them to be closer to their object of worship.
- **Worship:** Onu and Gberegbara see corporate worship as the centrality of religious tourism. It is seen as a corporate expression of gratitude to the divine and asking for divine guidance and direction in the accomplishment of each day's programme. They go on to observe that tourists on faith based tourism share in the daily fellowship, praises, scripture reading, intercessions and rituals.
- **Meditation:** People that participate in faith based tourism derive great spiritual impact through their

personal preparation and devotion. This according to Onu and Gberegbara in Kilani and Onu ed. (2016) is achieved through private searching of the scripture, meditation, confession and prayer. Meditation in their opinion helps in raising the spiritual antenna of the participant which enables him/her to receive meaningfully the messages from exposition and experiences of the entire programme. Also meditation involves personal reflection on scriptural messages and daily teachings through which people experience spiritual revival.

### **Benefits of faith-based tourism**

No one embarks on a journey without benefits, so also does faith based tourism have benefit to the tourists which is why they embark on it. These benefits include the following as observed by Onu and Gberegbara:

- **People embark on faith based tourism for religious understanding.** This helps them to understand and appreciate their religion through tangible understanding and teachings.
- **Security of belief:** This is achieved by experiences made through religious travels to religious activities. This is because at the one point or the other, they are taught things that will help them to have strong and more faith in God or their ultimate reality despite whatever may come on their way.
- **Divine help:** Faith based tourism is a spiritual journey that provides the people with opportunities to seek divine help for their life challenges.
- **Retreat:** Faith journey is a good opportunity for spiritual retreat for an individual and the group. It provides avenue for prayers and worship. Pilgrimage and

conferences have enough time for personal and corporate bible study and prayers which help to equip the people more after the retreat.

- **Religious bond:** Religion has been a great unifying force and faith tourism is one of it that helps in strengthening religious bond. It serves as a powerful means of forging unity and understanding between people from different places. Faith based tourism is one of the best ways of developing a close bond among members of a religious tradition. This is because, they have the opportunity to form a team and are meant to work together within the period they are in the gathering.
- **Movement:** This is so because some people see this opportunity as the privilege to move out of home. There are so many people that have not gone on any vacation outside the shores of their country which may be as a result of not having where to go, but during pilgrimage they see it as a time to move out of the house for a period of time and also to refresh spiritually and physically.
- **Exchange of ideas:** Faith based tourism is a ground for exchange of ideas and thought. This is why after some meetings in pilgrimage, some people learn to do what they didn't know before and get more idea and insight into some other things which they might have learnt from others.
- **Moral reform and spiritual life transformation:** With the teachings and expositions done in the pilgrimage centres, most people are spiritually transformed which will help in the reformation of their morality. This is in line with the saying that iron sharpens iron which is so because with the mingling and exchange of thought and ideas, lives are transformed.
- **Cultural new life:** Faith based tourism exposes the people to a new manner and custom of the people. This

can be seen in their dressing, food, greeting and general life approach. A tourist that traveled to Jerusalem, India or Italy will witness their dress code, food and greeting pattern which may have taught a big lesson to the youth.

### **Challenges of religious or faith based tourism in Nigeria**

There are so many challenges facing faith based tourism in Nigeria among which the paper will examine the following:

- **Lack of infrastructural facilities:** Infrastructural facilities play very important role in advancing faith based tourism. This is because when infrastructures are sufficient and in a good shape, it makes the tourists to be at home and effectively carry out the essence of the visit. Lack of adequate infrastructure will discourage some people that would have been in attendance to drop.
- **Congestion and overcrowding:** When there is a lack in the effectiveness of infrastructure, it makes for under estimation which may lead to congestion. This can be seen when there is a church programme in a place that has small accommodation and expected to house a large number of people. This is the reason for the barges we witness while going for pilgrimage. The intention is to have a number that can be accommodated at a given time. The inability to take into consideration the number of person intended will lead to overcrowding which will serve as a challenge to the journey.
- **Security:** This is a big challenge to faith based tourism. This is because the security of most of our religious activities is porous. This makes most persons to be afraid of attending some religious programmes.
- **Expansion of non-religious businesses/ activities:** Another challenge to faith based tourism is witnessing of non-religious activities and businesses like dinking of

alcohol, prostitution and other unholy activities. In most faith based tourism, some people exhibit some behaviours that are unethical and unbiblical which are not supposed to be among them. Most people also come to religious programmes and tourism to steal and commit crimes that are unheard of.

- **Lack of planning:** Planning is very important in every human endeavour. The inability to plan well has been a challenge to some faith based tourism and has affected the involvement of the people in the journey. When the administration has failed in the planning, it affects the benefits and enjoyment the people would have got as they embark on the journey. Planning is very important and has a predominant place in preparing for tourism.
- **Lack of religious festival management:** Most of the faith based tourism are allowed in the hands of some people and in most cases suffer some weaknesses in its management. The inability of the leaders to manage the programme or activities well is a challenge to the programme. For instance, some persons that are leaders of some of the religious organizations are lacking in some religious managerial abilities and that invariably affects the responses of the people in such activities.

### **The prospects of religious or faith-based tourism in Nigeria**

Tourism has been widely agreed by scholars to constitute an activity vital to the life of a nation because it exerts a direct effect on the social, cultural, educational, and economic sectors of nation's economy and on their international relations. It contributes greatly to the country's national income in the form of payment for goods and services needed by tourists, accounting for 30% of the world's trade of services, and 6% of overall exports of goods and services. Hence, it provides opportunities for employment in the service sector of

the economy such as transportation services, consisting of airlines, cruise ships, and taxicabs; hospitality services, consisting of accommodations, including hotels and resorts; and entertainment venues, such as amusement parks, casinos, shopping malls, music venues, and theatres. The Tourism sector constitutes one sector if properly developed can impact significantly on the nations income level and generate employment among other things. Nigeria has huge tourism potentials, especially given its natural and diversified landscapes hence the emphasis on sustainable tourism. Eccles and Costa (1998) believe that tourism provides both social and economic benefits in the society. Socially, it helps to expand the world view of people and thus foster integration and unity among the nations of the world. Economically, the level of income is increased which provides fund for the development of infrastructure in the country. In line with the Nigerian Investment Promotion Commission (2000), Nigeria is connected to the rest of the world through international Airports and Hotels and other franchise chains in the country. Nigeria, with it's over 250 ethnic group is endowed with diverse culture which attracts tourism. Including historical sites, annual traditional festivals, folk art such as crafts, carvings, and sculpture. Etc. Nigeria is also a peaceful nation when compared to other nations it is important that Nigeria makes the most of these opportunities.

The economic size of Nigeria as a country, tourism export revenue, domestic and international demand for tourism are important factors that provide a great future prospects for the country's tourism. Nigeria's tourism/GDP ratio is low relative to those of major tourism destination countries, therefore, the potentials for optimal tourism development. Recent developments in the tourism sector have further brightened the prospect of the industry, especially in Europe, such as international travel for short breaks. Tourists have varieties

of budgets and tastes, variety of resorts and hotels have also risen to explore this opportunity. The improvements and developments in technology and transport infrastructure have also provided a good prospect for the tourism industry, jumbo jets, low-cost airlines; accessible airports are impacting on the development of tourism. Indeed, faith-based tourism has been of utmost benefits to Nigeria and other countries and as such it has a bright future.

## **Conclusion**

We can say that religious or faith based tourism plays a very important role in the economy of each country and most importantly for the society. It is considered to be a resource for change and innovation. The young people began to travel more often and for longer periods of time. They choose to stay longer than any other age group of global travel and spend more if they travel. Traveling is extremely important in the sense that it helps to develop the cultural point of view, helps in a better learning of a foreign language, guides in the knowledge of different cultures and new things about the place that one has chosen as the destination. Tourists choose to enrich their experience at all levels and want more than ever to enrich the cultural new experiences, meet new people, to enhance their chances for employment when they return home. For young people, travel is a form of learning, a way to meet other people, a way to have contact with other cultures, a source of career development, a means of self-development, an essential part of everyday life, a brief escape from reality and above all a refreshing in the spirit when it has to do with faith travel. Human beings by nature are adventurous and want to develop their own knowledge. They have a wide variety of forms of tourism for people from which to choose and decide on the one to embark on. Hence the faith based tourism is one of them which is based on faith journey and this work has been an attempt to examine it.

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