RELIGIOUS TOURISM AND ETHNIC VALUES IN TEPEXPAN, MEXICO

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INTRODUCTION

The present paper has the goal of examine religious tourism in the sanctuary of Tepexpan Hill as an instrument for conservation of cultural values in the ethnicity context. The studied destination has been a sacred place since the Colonial age for two ethnic groups: Mazahuas and Otomíes. Their rituals and celebrations are closely related with the way they conceive the world and represent important activities of the “sacred time”, being representative examples of the Mexican Catholicism syncretism.

To elaborate this research, a search of documental information in different sources was held, mainly in books and scientific articles of Latin-American and Anglo-Saxon production; which was selected and classified. In a second moment, field work in the studied sanctuary was done, mainly through participative observation and semi-structured interviews to community residents. Finally, the field information was analyzed on the light of the concepts identified in documental search.

The work is structured in four sections. In the first part, some important concepts are shown for the comprehension of religious tourism, particularly in what refers to tourism and pilgrimage. Moreover, it is pointed the way that religious tourism could contribute to the conservation of ethnic cultural values. In the second section, social dynamic of religious tourism in the Tepexpan Hill is contextualized, describing some pilgrimage practices and the insertion of tourism from the view of heritage as an attraction.

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The third part addresses some characteristics of interpretative paradigm and ethnographic method for the study of religious tourism, particularly in what refers to the subjectivities presented in religious practices. In the fourth section, it is explained the reality of religious tourism in the Tepexpan Hill in light of concepts shown before, specifying aspects in which the activity could foster the conservation of religious manifestations of ethnic groups. It is concluded pointing the challenge that future researches have to influence in the conservation of heritage variety linked to religious tourism in Mexican sanctuaries.

RELIGIOUS TOURISM, ETHNIC VALUES AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

From its beginnings, studies about religious tourism had been linked with theoretical approaches of pilgrimage, because this latter is recognized as a precedent of touristic travels. Because many sanctuaries are no longer places of worship but also places to visit, it becomes complicated to separate visitors motivations, where the real pilgrims, who visit the place moved by faith; the tourists, that take advantage of the visit to approach the religious site; and the tourists that visit the place with a cultural or patrimonial motive, regardless of religion; are mixed (Cánoves & Blanco 2011). In this sense, it is necessary to clarify some aspects of two forms of travel that originates religious tourism: pilgrimage and tourism.

Pilgrimage is a travel based in the spiritual or religious inspiration, performed by individuals or groups to a place that is consider sacred or healthy in the everyday environment, to look a transcendental encounter with a specific objet of worship with the purpose of acquiring spiritual, emotional or physic healing benefits (Margry 2008). It has its origins in the spiritual magnetism understanding it as a common factor that transforms an ordinary place into a sacred space from a religious point of view, setting a special interest so it is visited by pilgrims. In this way, pilgrimage is configured as a “sacred travel”, which entails a rupture with the everyday, that is to say, with the profane (Preston in Romo 2000).
The sacred on pilgrimage implies a search of true, illumination or authentic experiences with the divine in sacrosanct places that have been ritually separated from the profane space of everyday life (Timothy & Olsen 2006). This search underlies in the belief of help from some supernatural form (superior to the common of nature laws, as god, spirits, magic, among others); so pilgrimages are frequently viewed as trips committed to anticipate a better future (Smith 1992). The trip implies an act of worship linked to prayer and penance, in which the amenities of lodging are not primordial.

However, tourism involves the pursuit of experiences in unfamiliar places leaving behind the familiarity of home, either because there is an educative interest in learning more about the history of a place or to understand a particular religious faith. The secular has to do with pleasure, curiosity, relaxation and authenticity as that which is more aesthetically pleasing (Timothy & Olsen 2006). The specific practices that generally constitute modern tourism include specialized forms of travel practices, including activities as sightseeing, taking pictures and buying souvenirs (Bremer 2006).

In recent decades, some researchers (Eade 1992, Badone & Roseman 2004) have corroborated the impossibility of making a categorical distinction between the pilgrim and the tourist, interpreting this types of travelers not as concepts neither as opposite extremes of a continuum, but as two referents to understand theoretically pilgrimage and tourism (Monterrubio 2013). Recently the dedifferentiation tendency in religious tourism has got strength thanks to the theoretical proposal of Collins-Kreiner (2010). The author conceives religious tourism as a “third space” that allows the interdependence between the religious traveler and the vacationer, being a social construction simultaneous from the sacred and the secular. She notes that within the trends in religious tourism research is found its approach from diverse disciplines and the disappearance of differences between
pilgrimage and touristic travel, in face of a better coexistence between these types of visitors.

In some religious destinations the dedifferentiation can manifest itself in an enriching coexistence between these categories of visitors, so that they share spaces and learn from their own cultural manifestations. This way of conceiving religious tourism is a critique to the traditional models, in which there is a tendency to separate the practices and spaces of pilgrims and tourists because they are not considered related. This possibility of coexistence is of special interest for the diffusion and conservation of the ethnic values, as the practices of pilgrimage and tourism, in the Mexican context, involves an important cultural value because of its syncretic origin, which combines pre-Hispanic and Colonial traditions.

Therefore, is pertinent to stress that tourism is closely related with ethnic values and intangible cultural heritage, to the extent that the practice of pilgrimage and tourism are important in the conformation of identity of some social groups. The sense of ethnic identity develops from culture, religion, geography and language shared among individuals, who often find themselves linked by a strong sense of loyalty (Torres 1996). Some aspects linked with this sense of identity include rituals, symbols and behaviors where values, believes and underlying assumptions are shown (Ott 1989, Bravo & Fortanelli 2004); issues that are part of their own expressions of religious tourism. It also considers furthermore that social uses, rituals and festive acts are cataloged as elements of immaterial cultural heritage, as indicated by the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO 2003). Its safeguard implies a series of measures to ensure its viability, among which are its preservation, protection, promotion, valorization and transmission. To the extent that ethnic values are safeguarded, as are part of intangible cultural heritage of populations, it contributes to the development of ethnic
identity, in other words, to a more conscious identification with beliefs and traditions to the interior of social groups (Chavez & Guido-DiBrito 1999).

Intangible cultural heritage has significant characteristics that without any doubt affect the way in which they should be managed. A first distinctive is that it is transmitted from generation to generation, so its reproduction is in function to dynamics lived to the interior of societies. Consequently, it is constantly recreated by the communities and groups in function to its environment, its interaction with nature and its history; therefore, its management has to take into consideration diverse characteristics from the environment where it is developed. In the same way, it is recognized that intangible cultural heritage is a sign of human diversity and creativity, which makes it an enrichment sensible element to promote respect and better understanding among human beings (UNESCO 2003).

Keeping alive the intangible cultural heritage implies that it keeps being pertinent for the culture and is practiced-learnt regularly in the communities and by the successive generations. Hence that in the safekeeping activities should participate communities, groups and individuals custodians of heritage (UNESCO n.d.). This premise has led some to think that tourism, by promoting the practice of cultural manifestations in front of outsiders (tourists), could be a tool that allow the valorization, conservation and diffusion of such manifestations.

THE TEPEXPAN HILL: VENUE OF TWO CULTURES

Santa Cruz Tepexpan, a community that belongs to the municipality of Jiquipilco, shelters the Tepexpan Hill Sanctuary and other constructions that date back to different time periods. From pre-Hispanic times, the sanctuary constitutes a place of worship linked to the nature and is considered “the sacred mountain of mazahua people”. The construction of the Tepexpan Hill Sanctuary took place between the sixteenth and eighteenth century
under the order of Franciscans, so it presents baroque architecture elements in the interior and neoclassic in the front (Hernandez 2008).

The two festivities that are celebrated in the sanctuary during the year are the Lord of the Hill’s Festival, which is carried out on May 3rd; and the Teresa de Jesus’ Festival, on October 15th. According to Barrientos (2004), the celebration of Lord of the Hill on May 3rd is related with the rain petition and the end of dry season; the Ascension of the Virgin celebration on August 15th, with the crop growth cycle; and the celebration of Saint Teresa de Jesus on October 15th, with the end of the rain season.

Pilgrimages are common in both religious celebrations. Traditionally pilgrimages come from places as diverse as Almoloya de Juárez, Temascalcingo, Almoloya del Rio, Ixtlahuaca, Ocoyoacac, Huixquilucan, Lerma and Santiago Tianguistenco, all towns located in the State of Mexico. Most pilgrimages are headed by a religious leader of the community, include traditional dances and holy images that are representative of the group’s place of origin (Hernández, 2013).

According to some residents, the climbing to the sanctuary could be done from five routes; the ways by Santa Cruz Tepexpan, San Miguel Yuxtepec, Ejido de Mañí, Tierra Blanca and the access by Purísima. The most used one is the Santa Cruz Tepexpan path, being the most known and the one that represent a bigger effort for pilgrims. Among pilgrim’s motivations we can mention favors that people ask to the image, which are related with good health for the family, to obtain a productive harvest, and so on.

Once they reach the top, pilgrims offer fruits, seeds or candles to thank the Lord of the Hill or the other saints having come well to the sanctuary. In the pilgrimages, dances are performed in the esplanade, which can be the Horsemen -Arrieros- (by men only) Concheros (traditional Aztec dance), Santiagueros or Pastoras –Shepherd- (by women
only). This last one is only formed by Mazahua women dressed with hats with colored ribbons; whom are accompanied by a group of musicians and a “Teacher”, woman that transmits the tradition to the younger ones by teaching the steps and rules of the group (Barrientos 2004).

According to Hernández (2013), the Tepexpan Hill Sanctuary is the second most visited in the region of Toluca’s Valley, after the Sanctuary of the Lord of Chalma. With the purpose of making less uncomfortable pilgrim stay, it has being procure the improvement of place infrastructure, putting bathrooms, lights, and stores that open almost the whole year. Hernandez (2008) points that if well, visitors’ assistance is constant throughout the year, the number of visitors rises considerably during the festivities, reaching an average of twenty five thousand people per celebration.

From a wider diffusion of this religious tradition in different massive media, in the last years the flow of visitors to the hill has increase (Hernandez 2008). According to the first approaches that have taken place with the communities, it could be told that in celebration days it is possible to encounter indigenous visitors as well as foreign people. This situation is perceived as positive by the residents and municipality authorities, who show themselves enthusiastic in front of the arrival of visitors that want to know the sanctuary or participate in celebrations.

ETHNOGRAPHIC METHOD AND INTERPRETATION OF VALUES ETHNIC-RELIGIOUS

In this section, it is attempted to show how the qualitative methodology can lead to a better understanding of cultural values in the context of religious tourism. The interpretive paradigm implies the comprehension of human senses and meanings, something that is overlooked in structural-functionalist theories. A critical approach of religious tourism
necessarily have to take into consideration social orientations of what is performed by pilgrims or tourist, especially if important cultural manifestations are involved.

Generally, two paradigms have oriented the analysis of social life: the positivist paradigm and the interpretative paradigm or phenomenology. Under the logic of positivism, a unidirectional relation is sustained between subject and object, in which the researcher distances herself from the studied object. On the other hand, the interpretative paradigm prioritizes an interdependent relation between subject and object, disclosing the influence that the researcher has on the object (Cubides, 2004). For the positivist paradigm, the research process is said to be value-free and no influence from the researcher is recognized on the results of the object of study, whereas in the interpretive paradigm researcher knowledge is developed through a set of interactions (Rincón, 2008).

The knowledge of religious tourism can be enriched if we place human beings at the center of research as opposed to treating them as an object of study. The interpretative paradigm tries to understand reality, social processes and social phenomena from the stakeholders’ perspective. Its aim is to understand the sense plots, meanings and significances that social actors give to their lives (Guerrero, 2002). Since religious tourism is a social phenomenon whose practices imply meanings interlinked with the worldview of social actors, an interpretive approach seems to be adequate to uncover the senses given to different activities.

Ethnography, of anthropological origin, is a qualitative method that facilitates a closer approximation to social complex phenomena that develops in micro environments. It is defined as the description and analysis of daily activities to understand the universes of sense and the logics of social actions, revaluing the need to understand "the other one". The knowledge of human diversity, gathered directly from the fieldwork, allows to construct heuristic generalizations of social reality (Guerrero, 2002).
According to Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), the importance of ethnographic method underlies in the existence of diverse cultural patterns within societies and their meanings to understand the social processes. Even if the researchers study realities that are familiar to them, they must attempt to make explicit any assumptions they formulate as members of the culture they study. For ethnographic studies to be valuable, they should not only involve the comprehension of social reality, but also the implementation of their findings to induce changes.

As suggested by Rosaldo (2000) the ethnographic method is the way of social analysis that opens possibilities to the comprehension of the richness of diversity, the variability and the difference of cultural views, not from an exotic view, but from a denatured view of culture. This interdisciplinary phenomenon that allow us to approach dimensions of human action as varied as the ritual or the new mythic constructions, is important to describe and analyze the new sceneries of culture in everyday life (Geertz 1993).

Applying an ethnographic method in the study of religious tourism seems appropriate. Firstly, because the social dynamics of religious tourism generally develop in micro environments, which respond to very specific contexts and characteristics. As an example, we can mention the Mexican pilgrimage context, where elements of pre-Hispanic worship and traditional Catholic practices coexist. Such a setting is unique to Mexican culture and cannot be found in religious pilgrimage carried out in Europe or even in other parts of Latin America.

Secondly, ethnography acknowledges the researcher inclusion as a subject that contributes to the construction of religious tourism reality. In the fieldwork, the social scientist can be considered a pilgrim/tourist, participate in rituals and use the tourist services to the extent that it is possible to explain the senses that orientate religious
actions inscribed in religious tourism practices. Such an approach may induce a major application of the findings derived from research.

Finally, the use of the ethnographic method stimulates the comprehension of cultural diversity evident in rituality and mythical constructions. It is a question of generating knowledge about the context where these kinds of cultural manifestations are carried out and emphasize the importance of such manifestations for the construction of group and individual identity. This is particularly important in the case of religious manifestations in indigenous communities, where it is necessary to break the paradigm of the exotic and to propitiate an intercultural dialog that fosters a more open conservation on indigenous values.

Within the scientific production about religious tourism it is possible to find researches that takes elements from the ethnographic method, mainly regarding the usage of participant observation and in-depth interview as techniques. Among them it is possible to mention the research of Eade (1992), Holmes-Rodman (2004), Frey (2004), Collins-Kreiner and Gatrell (2006) and Shackley (2006), which analyze American’s as well as European’s and Asian’s religious destinations. Specifically in Mexican context, the studies of Garma (1994), Shadow and Rodriguez (1994) and Garduño (2007) are remarkable.

The application of the ethnographic method for analyzing religious tourism, as it is understood in this paper, should take into account some considerations. It is suggested that the study of religious tourism in a specific destination should be holistic and desirably include the tracing of pilgrimage routes, the activities of pilgrims/tourists in the religious sanctuary/destination and the role and perception of host community (if any). This would provide enriched information of phenomenon’s nature, relevant for a better management of the activities in sanctuaries.
In addition, it is important to be an active researcher that participates in religious tourism practice without exceeding the limits that define the same social actors. It would be particularly interesting to obtain through this method a report, both spatial and chronological in which it could be appreciated the different activities done by social actors, according to how the phenomenon dynamic advance. For this reason, it is suggested that research could be conducted by people that belong to the social groups analyzed or at least have previously participated in activities of this type.

For the specific case of the Tepexpan Hill Sanctuary, it is proposed to carry the ethnographic work during the Lord of the Hill's celebration. In a first stage, the researcher should participate in a traditional pilgrimage as "pilgrim", documenting all rituals and traditions that implies the journey to the sanctuary. In a second stage, the researcher should describe the social dynamic of the sanctuary during the fest, paying special attention in the moments when tourism and pilgrims share time and space. Through participant observation and semi-structured interviews would be possible comprehend the meanings that both pilgrims and tourists have towards manifestations of ethnic values.

RELIGIOUS TOURISM AS PROMOTER OF VALUES IN THE TEPEXPAN HILL

In a previous section where the dynamic of religious tourism in the Tepexpan Hill Sanctuary is described, it is evidenced the religious connotation that some practices have to the traditional indigenous pilgrimages. It is possible to assert that such trips represent to pilgrims manifestations of a sacred time, outside of the everyday profane, linked with the cycles of nature, as it is shown in knowledge about harvest and planting times. The strong believe of the worship to the hills since pre-Hispanic times (Barrientos 2004) has converted this sanctuary in the “center of the world” (Eliade 1998) to the Mazahuas and Otomies from different regions.
To the extent in which pilgrimages and the stays in the Tepexpan Hill Sanctuary (considering all ritual activities that this entails over time and space) form an important part in the life of indigenous communities, it is possible to consider this practices as ethnic values that contribute to the construction of these social group’s identity. Pilgrimages that arrive to the sanctuary, understood as the sacred and collective travels, tend to be associated mostly with ethnicity, so it is difficult that outsiders of ethnic groups could participate in them internally.

However, this does not mean that such practices cannot be appreciated as objects of cultural interest. Due this manifestations that underlie in social actions of some communities, which meaning is relevant for its way of conceiving reality, should be consider as elements of the intangible cultural heritage. To the extent that a cultural manifestation is visualized as heritage, it opens the possibility that it becomes an object of knowledge and appreciation for outsider of the social groups that created it. This interest may even be more recurrent in intangible issues, because its durability is not given in a physically way and its perpetuity is not granted.

Cultural elements with similar characteristics are likely to be converted in attention focuses to diverse types of visitors, becoming touristic attractions. Separate issue would be to discuss if the displacements to the Tepexpan Hill Sanctuary could be included more appropriately in cultural tourism or in religious tourism. What is evident is the more increasingly frequent presence of visitors that arrive to the sanctuary by many ways, namely that they do not perform the pilgrimage as they traditionally have done. This indicates the existence of other visitor’s motivations, activities and ethnic origins.

Most of the “new” visitors to the sanctuary could be differenced from the traditional pilgrims in some issues however they share others. Among the main differences are the ethnic origin, which is evident in the places that they come from and the way they dress. The
main coincidence lies in the shared Catholic religion, although the Mazahuas and Otomíes believes imply a greater number of pre-Hispanic elements. The majority of visitors usually are residents of nearby towns that come for religious reasons to appreciate the landscape and customs of the celebrations.

To the extent that visitor characteristics are not perceived as significantly disturbing by the pilgrims to this moment, exists a co-existential cordiality among them. In this sense, the religious tourism could be an extremely powerful tool to promote the conservation and diffusion of the ethnic values of the Mazahuas and Otomíes pilgrims. This because tourism is an activity that promotes the practice of cultural manifestations (rituals) in front outsiders of the context where they are develop, in this case, the visitors.

According to Levi and Kocher (2009) the preservation of religious heritage and its continued use is an important component of sustainability in the cultural values. To preserve the intangible cultural heritage in the Tepexpan Hill Sanctuary, it is required that pilgrims continue making use of the space as in ancient times. While some inappropriate touristic activities and the commercial development around the religious space could lead to its trivialization, it is recognized that a relation of mutual understanding among tourists and pilgrims could encourage the last ones to take pride of their culture and religion and to wish to share their enthusiasm with visitors, whereby the cultural identity is strengthened.

From this perspective, it is intended that the tourist consider the visits to the sanctuary as opportunities to obtain educative experiences, valorizing the cultural expressions owned by the site. In this sense, the interpretation could be used to provide this experiences at the same time that some negative impacts of tourism over cultural heritage are reduced (Levi & Kocher 2009). Just in this point is where the ethnographic method takes more relevance, as through this way of knowledge it is possible to obtain the full range of meanings that involve religious tourism practices in the Tepexpan Hill Sanctuary.
Research of this type will provide the researcher not only with a holistic comprehension of phenomena, but also with experiences that facilitate the transmission of meanings in the management of religious destinations.

Knowledge derived from the ethnographic research must permeate in each one of the activities that are planned in religious sites. In the case of the Tepexpan Hill Sanctuary, the residents of Santa Cruz community are who safeguard and manage the place, hence the knowledge derived from future researches has to be addressed to them. All activities that are planned should contribute to a better understanding between tourists and pilgrims through respect and valorization of the practices of latest ones and the enrichment of travel experience of the firsts.

CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this paper we have tried to demonstrate the potential of religious tourism as an instrument for the conservation of ethnic values and cultural heritage in the sanctuaries. Particularly, we take the case of the Tepexpan Hill Sanctuary to exemplify the cultural richness of Mexican sanctuaries and to sustain the urgent need to conserve this resources, at the same time that they could be taken advantage of and promote them. This taking advantage of them, goes in two ways, since the respect and recognition of pilgrimage practices not only benefits the indigenous groups, but also the tourist, who enjoy the experiences that contribute to the personal growth and even spiritual.

In is important to stand out that the issues raised here about the research in religious tourism should have its counterpart in the reality of the studied object, namely should influence in an improvement of the management of sanctuaries/destinations. In this sense, the ethnographic method provides pertinent information to achieve this goal. Also it is essential that all the interpretative richness of the sacred achieve to transmit to the visitor
through the different activities, the way that they could value the cultural manifestations and encourage their conservation.

Finally, it is necessary to emphasize the great challenge in Mexican research to incorporate a critical approach addressing the religious tourism, questioning the characteristics that are assumed as specific to certain travel categories. The dedifferentiation of religious tourism falls within this perspective, since the reality of this phenomenon does not adhere to the theoretical assumptions of yesteryears. Another priority is the development of new methodologies and approaches aimed to the comprehension of religious and secular phenomena in different sanctuaries, mainly those with indigenous group presence. The cultural acquis of traditions and ritual in Mexico is enormous, and his vision as potentially touristic resource should not lose sight of its sustainable management. Only from the meaning interpretation of ethnic and cultural values it will be possible to design strategies that lead to a sustainable management of such resources.

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