

An Opportunities of Local Tourism Development through Religious Tourism Events & Events Management

Mr. K. Selvam

Ph.D. Research Scholar & Assistant Professor, Department of Hotel Management, Leela Institute Of Hotel Management, Dd Road, Arapalayam, Madurai. (India)

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*Corresponding Author

Email: selvam.k.2007[at]gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Pilgrimage, whether religious or secular, is experiencing resurgence around the world. This includes the motives for pilgrimage, activities during the pilgrimage, and the influence of tourism on it. The findings show that the visitor population ranged widely from very religious orthodox pilgrims, through "traditional" pilgrim-tourists to secular tourists. The features of present-day pilgrims can be represented on a scale that may be described as secular versus spiritual, and tourism versus pilgrimage. This typology also offers a model for the development of the pilgrimage sites. The findings highlight the increasing convergence of old-fashioned pilgrimage and current tourism, which have much in common. Additionally, this research emphasizes the expanding nexus of holy sites, society, politics, ideology, and culture. Religious events represent one of the ancient forms of encounter and should play an important role in enhancing tourism in the areas in which they take place. The aim of the study is to investigate the role of religious events as a key component of local tourism development. The paper considers small and medium sized religious events, analyzing their event management process. It focuses on two case studies such as the Devotional and Cultural Tourism Exchange of them.

1. Introduction & Methodology

Religion and spirituality are common motivations for travels and experiences, with many major tourist destinations having developed largely as a result of their connections to sacred people, places and events (Raj and Morpeth, 2007). In parallel to large-scale events of international significance, there has been a marked growth in niche events, such as local and/or themed festivals. These are often initiated at community level and sometimes with the support of the public sector in an attempt to pump-prime such activity, leveraging it as a potential economic development tool (Page and Connell, 2012). With this perspective, the paper focuses on the management of small and medium sized religious events with the purpose of analysing their role and importance in tourism in the areas in which they occur. In particular, the research aims at demonstrating the necessity of a structured management approach to succeed in achieving the goals of local tourism development.

In order to attain the main objective of the study, the research methodology has been structured as follows:

- Identification of relevant studies in the chosen research field.
- Selection of significant case studies in order to test the validity of the research statement.
- Gathering of qualitative data on the management of the selected cases through interviews and meetings with organizers, local bodies and various stakeholders.
- Analysis of collected data, verifying the utilization of the practices of the Event Management Body of

Knowledge and their effective utility in the contribution to the local development of Religious tourism.

- Discussion of the results and drawing conclusions.

The paper is organized in three main parts. Firstly, a review of multidisciplinary literature which explores the current knowledge on the topics of event, religious events and event management is outlined. Secondly, the paper presents religious events as empirical case studies that occur in the province of this destination: a cultural and trade fair and a grand show on the Passion of Christ (the Passion Play of Sordevolo). Lastly, it will be shown how these religious events have contributed positively to tourism development in the local context of Biella province.

2. Typologies of Events

When it comes to events a broad overview can be traced, due to the many types of activities that may be involved and to the diversity and size of bodies which can organize an event. As regards the typologies that may fall under the umbrella of the events industry, Arcodia and Barker (2003) recognize three main categories: business event, cultural events, tourism events and religious events. Bowdin et al. (2006) include business events; festivals, fairs, cultural events; community events; outdoor events; entertainment, live music events, concerts & theatre, shows; sports events, spectator sports; charity events, fundraising, voluntary sector; party planning, wedding planning, social life-cycle events, special events. This suggests that religious events express the need for a tailored management that takes into account the specific characteristics of the religious tourism experience.

3. Size & Complexity of Events

Events have always characterized the religious and devotional sphere, constituting a major attraction both for tourists with a predominant spiritual motivation and for those more interested in the cultural aspect that underlies the religious event. Today we see that, all over the world, more and more people are travelling to sacred sites, taking part in religious festivals and events (Blackwell, 2007). Vukonić (1996) define religious events as “large-scale gatherings on the occasion of significant religious dates and anniversaries”. According to Raj et al. (2013) events, including those with a religious nature can enormously vary in terms of their scale and complexity and the numbers of stakeholders involved. The larger the event, the more objectives to achieve it will have, due to its numerous sub-events and stakeholders.

This paper will focus on small-scale religious events, considered as a lever for local development that actively involves local stakeholders in the decision-making process. Bowdin et al. (2011) describe these type of events as “local or community events”, which are generally small and linked to a particular geography as well as the case studies that will be presented. Although there are much less stakeholders compared to the so called major or mega-events, this does not mean that small events do not require a meticulous approach for their management.

Over the last few decades, with the contribution of some pioneering studies (Goldblatt, 1990; Getz, 1991; Hall, 1992), the practice of event management has been rising and evolving as a formal discipline. According to Getz (2007) the rise of this new profession and academic subject reflects a fundamental need within all societies for the professional management of events in the private, public and not-for-profit sectors. In particular, since the late 1990s, a group of event management professionals that includes scholars, consultant and practitioners has recognized the need for an aggregation of fragmented theories and practices into a common event management framework known as the Event Management Body of Knowledge (EMBOK). Starting from the methodological principles provided by the Project Management discipline, this model has been conceived in order to develop and professionalize the event management practices, synthesizing its fundamentals.

The EMBOK model (Figure 4) includes a definition of the phases, processes, and core values as well as the functional areas and categories (domains) to which these are applied. In particular, the Phases illustrate the sequential nature of event management, highlighting the criticality of time in any event project; the Processes illustrate both a sequential and iterative system that promotes a comprehensive course of action as well as a dynamic approach to the changing nature of events; the Core Values specify those principles that must be infused throughout all decisions regarding every element, phase, and process of an event to ensure these decisions facilitate successful and sustainable outcomes; the Domains represent the overarching areas of activity or functions within event management. They illustrate the full scope of the responsibilities assigned to event organizers as well as categories suitable for an organizational structure or effective knowledge management (Silvers, 2012).

This model arises from a corporate organizational and managerial context which is therefore strongly marked by the development of events by private companies. However, it is also at the territorial level that events have become increasingly important, especially within the politics of local development and tourism promotion where religious tourism can have wider longer-term benefits as a local development agent (Curiel and Gil, 2008). When it comes to this local perspective, it should be considered that regional scale events not only respond to economic and business oriented objectives, but also to those concerning the territorial complexity, the cultural identity and the tourist development of a place. The research intends to provide empirical evidence of the validity of the application of the EMBOK model in the field of religious events. However, it is necessary to adopt a wider perspective that does not focus all the attention on an individual event but that inscribes it into the evolving dynamics of the tourist destination in which it takes place. In summary, this reveals that religious events require an effective and participative management that is consistent with the policies of tourism development and territorial planning brought forward by local contexts. The Devotional and Cultural Itineraries Tourism Exchange makes use of three main instruments:

- Fairs for Institutional Exhibitors, which actively promote the creation of a regional network;
- Workshops, that aim to bring together Italian sellers and operators with international buyers, and: Conferences.

In particular, the first occurrence of the event (2005) emphasized the link between devotional sites and their landscape through the setting up of educational tours reserved for international buyers to the Sacred Mount of Oropa and other Piedmontese Sacred Mounts (Varallo and Orta). For the second edition, held from 21 to 24 June 2007, in the wake of the success of “Olympic Turin”, which confirmed the inclusion of Turin and Piedmont in the international cultural tourism circuit, the emphasis was laid on the theme of raising awareness of devotional sites by linking them with other regional sites of historic, cultural and artistic excellence. At the third edition, (18th-21st June 2009) the event asserted its reputation for quality and credibility in the regional and national panorama of events in the religious field. Among the 2009 edition novelties were the presence of buyers from Turkey, Russia, Australia and Taiwan, while attendance from the United States, China and Eastern Europe continued to be relevant. With the fourth edition, held from 23 to 26 June 2011, the Devotional and Cultural Itineraries Tourism Exchange confirmed its role as an opportunity to highlight and promote at an international level the tourist potential, the quality and the unique nature of the sites, together with the cultural and leisure attractions available when visiting and staying at places of worship in Piedmont and Italy. However, the 2013 edition was not carried out mainly due to economic issues that led to the postponement of the fifth edition to June 2014. This most recent edition includes the presence of 15 operators specializing in religious tourism from European markets (France, Germany, Switzerland, Lithuania, Malta), Eastern Europe (especially Poland) and South America (Argentina, Mexico Brazil), while the virtual workshop had as its

protagonists the longhaul markets, including Japan, China, India, Korea, and USA.

The numbers attending the four previous editions of the event are testament to its success: B2B workshops were attended by a total of over 160 international tour operators - with an average of 20 represented countries in each edition - and about 600 organizations and operators from all the provinces of Piedmont and from many other Italian regions and provinces. Fairs for Institutional Exhibitors recorded an average of 50 exhibition stands assigned at each edition and a total of 9500 attendances.

A co-marketing agreement was confirmed and consolidated in an ever more cooperative way in each instance of the Exchange with the development of the 100 Italian Cities Tourism Exchange. A fruitful collaboration has also been established with the European Association of Vie Francigene. The 2009 edition saw the intervention of the International Transromania Association while synergies have developed with other national and regional networks -SentieroFrassati, Italian Alpine Club, Europassion Italy and since 2011 the Italian Environment Fund. Since the first edition, the event has benefited from the "High Patronage" of the President of the Italian Republic together with patronage of the Ministry for Cultural Activities, ENIT (Italian Government Tourist Board) and TCI (Italian Touring Club) and since 2011 also the prestigious patronage of the Italian Representative of the European Commission.

The central role in the management of this event belongs to the ATL (AgenziaTuristica Locale - Local Tourist Agency) of Biella which has developed over the years an ad hoc expertise in structuring the Exchange, articulating the management process according to the practice of Event Management. Alongside the ATL of Biella are other public authorities, including the Department of Tourism and Environment of Piedmont Region, the Managing Body of the Sacred Mountains, the various Piedmontese ATLs, diverse local educational institutes and other local bodies. Through the collaboration of these agencies, the organizational process that made the Devotional and Cultural Itineraries Tourism Exchange possible has been developed.

This Initiation phase consists of a series of activities that have been accomplished under the guidance of the ATL of Biella:

- the analysis of the primary objectives of the event;
- the individuation of the possible strategies and resources needed;
- the definition of the main activities and their location;
- the submission of a preliminary project proposal by ATL of Biella to the Department of Tourism and Environment of the Piedmont Region.

It is, therefore, a process of ex ante assessment that involves the EMBOK domains of Administration, Design and risk. After the first stage, the event has been gradually implemented, through different actions:

- creation of a marketing & communication plan;
- budget preparation;

- establishment of a steering committee handled by ATL of Biella;
- establishment of an organizing secretary at the Department of Tourism and Environment of Piedmont;
- collaboration with other Piedmontese ATLs and Departments of Tourism of other Italian regions;
- Organization of training courses for different operators.

The EMBOK processes of Selection and Communication enabled the organizers to reach the phase of the event in which the scheduled activities were carried out: fair exhibitions; Workshops; conferences and seminars; educational tours dedicated to international buyers; cultural events for visitors and attendees. The management of the event closes with the documentation process which involves the ex post evaluation through the use of assessment forms given to international and Italian buyers, post-event meetings with local educational institutes and management of post exchange contacts with all the international buyers.

4. Devotional and Cultural Itineraries in Religious Tourism :

The case of the Devotional and Cultural Itineraries Tourism Exchange of Oropa constitutes a well-structured and valuable event for the Religious Tourism Product of Biella province and for the entire Piedmont Region. However, it doesn't represent the core element of the destination of Oropa, focused instead on the Sanctuary and the Sacred Mount. The Devotional and Cultural Itineraries Tourism Exchange was conceived as a point of reference for national and international tourist operators active in the religious field and as an instrument that helps to enhance and promote the Piedmontese devotional sites.

5. The Passion Play of Religious Tourism Site - Sordevolo (Biella, Italy)

The Passion Play of Sordevolo is an event of ancient origin which involves the entire community in the staging of the sacred representation of the Passion of Christ. Since 1850, (this is the date of the first document in the archives but the tradition goes much further back) the whole village, normally every ten years, has developed and represented the Passion of Christ with organizational and artistic autonomy. The three hour performance consists of a prologue and 29 scenes, with an overall participation of about 400 actors and walk-on characters: □ 400 actors (40 spoken roles and 360 extras) between the ages of 5 and 80; □ 300 people "behind the scenes"; □ 31 shows in 97 days, of which 3 performed by children; □ each show last more than 2 hours and has 29 scenes; □ an amphitheatre of more than 4000 square metres. The play is performed in an open air amphitheatre with a covered seating area for 3000 spectators. As already mentioned, in an area of 4000 square meters a piece of Palestine is recreated (The last supper, Sanhedrin, Gethsemane, Herod's Royal Palace, Pilate's Palace, Calvary) where 400 characters, including Sanhedrin's guards and Roman soldiers on horseback, bring to life the Sacred Drama. The scenery is meticulously constructed and the great music and special effects are exceptionally powerful. The text of the

play dates back to the late 15th century, and was written by the Florentine Giuliano Dati, a chaplain of the Church "dei Santi Martiri" in Rome.

At present, the community of Sordevolo, with an ever new team spirit, is undertaking the setting up of the 2015 edition of the Passion: a popular work which will revive in gestures, songs and words the historical event. The Passion Play of Sordevolo is a very significant event that has become a tourist attraction not only for the Biella district, but also for the region of Piedmont as well as other domestic and foreign markets. There are only two other places in which the Passion of Christ is represented: in Oberammergau, Germany and Kuopio, Finland.

Initially, the organization and the management of this event were entrusted to the ancient Popular Theatre Committee of Sordevolo Passion, founded in 1816. Afterwards it was replaced (in 1991) by Sordevolo Popular Theatre Association, an independent nonprofit organization, aiming to preserve, to perpetuate and to hand down this traditional expression of an olden-day sub-alpine culture - which dates back to the origins of this small community. Special focus has to be placed on the deeply free and independent spirit of this genuine local culture and on the great involvement of the modern heirs of this tradition, who approach the various aspects of the staging utilising local human resources and techniques: overall organization, costumes and set-making, scenery planning, direction, drama school, stage setting, etc. The Passion of Sordevolo is certainly the greatest choral play performed in Italy by amateur actors who work and prepare themselves for this big event with devotion. Its importance is evident by the creation of a museum dedicated solely to it. The Museum of the Passion, set in the sacristy of the Church of St. Martha, was inaugurated in August 2005 with the intent of exhibiting the objects as witnesses to time, and above all to tell stories about people. Visitors can admire documents about the history of the Passion of Sordevolo, a collection of films, photographs, texts and objects that illustrate the glorious past of this sacred representation of popular theater. The story of the Passion, as presented in this museum, is at the heart of the village of Sordevolo. This is not an occasional event in the life of Sordevoles; instead, it represents an event in the strongest sense of the word, a moment of life that involves the inhabitants of an entire town and a profound experience for tourists.

The passion play is part of a territorial dynamic that also involves public institutions, among which the most important is the ATL of Biella. Thanks to the ATL, the Passion of Sordevolo is now promoted at an international level and inserted in the circuits of tourist offering of some major tour operators. In particular, the event has been presented in New York by The Italian National Tourist Board, the highest governmental

tourism body promoting Italy to the world. They bring together hundreds of people, including journalists and travel agents who have been presented the programme of the Passion 2015, and the possibilities offered to tourists. An important partner in the initiative is represented by Central Holidays, who included the Passion of Sordevolo into the most important catalog of travel in North America, distributed in more than 6000 travel agencies overseas. The process to achieve this goal was quite complex: after forming the Passion Tours and organizing seminars, meetings with European travel agents were set up during which the Passion was presented with the related packages

6. Key Findings and Conclusions

The case studies represent two examples of small/medium religious events that have been developed in accordance with the objectives and practices of the event management discipline, following its EMBOK framework. Indeed, the leading subject, i.e. the ATL of Biella, has managed these events in a suitable manner. In particular, the EMBOK model has been used as a useful "lens" through which to read the events' elements, enabling us to understand more clearly the structure and organization of the events, to assign specific roles and responsibilities to the various stakeholders, to monitor the activities and to assess impacts. However, while these religious events can easily carry out phases and processes, it is more difficult to enclose the activities within specific domains. This is due to the fact that these events are part of a pattern of territorial development and do not respond only to specific functional areas as is the case of events organized by private companies. For the same reason, the core values are also not easily identifiable, since there is no management that defines the guiding principles of vision and mission.

These events, despite constituting two separate instruments with different specific objectives, are both aimed at achieving the general objectives of tourism development prefigured by local actors. They have become two driving events, on which the network of local stakeholders has decided to focus in order to develop its religious and cultural tourism offer.

The importance of religious tourism in this area, also attested by the data from the Observatory on Tourism in this destination province, revealed that for the majority of the local accommodation facilities the motivation "pleasure / holiday" is the main reason for their customers to travel. Of these visitors, almost 60% are motivated by religious tourism and religious events.

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