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Pilgrimage and Community: Slow Tourism Development along the Kumano Pilgrimage Trail, Japan

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Abstract:

Spiritually motivated travel, and specifically pilgrimage, has been an important part of tourism closely associated with religions, yet spirituality today carries a wider range of meaning, including health, wellness, and self-improvement. Further, today's pilgrims, especially those travelling on foot, tend to be interested in sustainability-oriented philosophy, ways of life, and travel modes, thus bringing a 'slow quality' to tourism, which involves making real and meaningful connections with people, places, culture, food, heritage, and the environment (Caffyn, 2009). Enjoying the process of journey itself; taking an interest in local authenticity and engagement; and reducing ecological, social, and cultural impacts are some of these qualities. This style of tourism shapes the kind of services provided by surrounding communities, including accommodation, food, and activities, and overall destination planning and development. Travellers and the local community co-create the destination, directed by the spirituality of place expressed in various contemporary terms.

This paper first explores the evolving meaning of spirituality and tourism both in Japan and globally; it then examines the specific case of the world heritage nominated pilgrimage trail, Kumano-kodo, or Kumano ancient trail, in Wakayama, Japan. The Kumano journey, originating in the 11th century as a pilgrimage from ancient capitals to Kumano sacred sites, was regarded as a 'rebirth' experience, going into the other world and back. Today the experience is interpreted as a process of 'healing' mind and body. The main focus here is on local community perspectives—how they may respond to contemporary visitor interests, and how it may shape the overall direction of tourism development. The local community here includes those who have moved into the region, attracted by the aspects of regional lifestyle: a safe and clean environment, community ties, and time and space allowed for personal and family. Such 'lifestyle migrants' often bring new ideas, networks, and skills, which generate global connections and a means to promote places (e.g., via SNS). This can also provide much needed solutions to economic and social declines in rural areas due to an ageing and decreasing population.

As part of an ongoing study using perspectives of critical and hopeful tourism as a platform, the research attempts to situate contemporary spirituality as a guiding approach for sustainability, and the spirituality-focused (walking) journey as a means to slow tourism development. Slow tourism enables those who participate to express their conscious choice, demanding, even indirectly, a sustainability orientation in tourism. This allows tourism to be "one of the mechanisms through which people are able to present their identity to others" (Dickinson, et al., 2011, p. 295) and advance their "life politic" (Butcher, 2008). Tourism here is seen as a counter movement to fast-paced mass mobility, a way of advocating a slow engagement with local places and people, letting the walking set the pace and content of development.