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Kaori Yanata
Wakayama University, Japan, kaori.ishibashi@live.jp

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What Makes Tourists' Experience Spiritual?: A Case Study of a Buddhist Sacred Site in Koyasan, Japan

Kaori Yanata

Wakayama University, Japan
kaori.ishibashi@live.jp

In postmodern society the importance of traditional religious organisations and practices have declined. As a result, spirituality tends to be sought outside of institutionalised religion. Tourism is seen as one avenue for such spiritual fulfilment. Tourism research commonly frames tourism as a sacred journey and has pointed out that like modern-day pilgrims, tourists seek spirituality through travel. Of course, not all tourist travel is motivated by a search for spirituality, and yet many tourists still describe their travel experiences as spiritual. Therefore, in addition to understanding motivations of travel, the tourist experience is also an important element of making tourism a sacred journey. Is spiritual motivation a necessary prerequisite for a tourist to have a spiritual experience? What other site-specific elements might enable spiritual experiences of tourists, even if they are not motivated by a search for spirituality? Such questions have not been sufficiently explored. The aim of this paper is to investigate the relationship between visitor motivation and spiritual experience at an influential religious sacred site in rural Japan; the Shingon Esoteric Buddhism headquarters in the town of Koyasan in Wakayama Prefecture. Since becoming registered as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2004, Koyasan has rapidly become an internationally renowned spiritual tourism destination. This paper presents the result of a questionnaire survey of both religious tourists and tourists to Koyasan. The findings indicate spiritual motivation is not a prerequisite for spiritual experience and shows how tourists' spiritual experiences are affected by the atmosphere of place, people and activities that comprise the temple stay setting in Koyasan.

Key Words: tourism, religion, spirituality, experience, place, Koyasan, Japan

Introduction

The relationship between tourism and spirituality has a long history. Consider the fact that the practice of pilgrimage is acknowledged as one of the oldest forms of tourism (Digance, 2006; Kaelber, 2006). 'Resulting from religious causes,' Barber (1993:1) suggests this is a multilayered journey traveling both 'externally to a holy site, and internally for spiritual purposes and internal understanding' (Barber, 1993:1). Similarly, religious tourism is recognised as a type of tourism 'whose participants are motivated either in part or exclusively for religious reasons' (Rinschede, 1992:52). The difference between these two practices is that for the former the primary reason to travel is for religious purposes, while the religious element of the travel in the latter is simply one motivation among several (Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005). However, both pilgrimage and religious tourism can be categorised under the broader framing of spirituality or spiritual experience.

Tourism can be seen as a 'secular substitute for organised religion' (Allcock, 1988:37; Sharpley, 2009; Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005). In industrialised society, free time provides people with an opportunity to develop their spiritual life, because it can offer 'a space for the contemplative and the creative, a unity of thought and action' away from the obligations of organised work and duties of everyday life (Vukonic, 1996:8). Therefore, tourism, which requires free time, 'is functionally and symbolically equivalent to other institutions that humans use to embellish and add meaning to their lives' (Graburn, 1989:22). This position argues that tourism may be seen as a substitute for organised religion and spiritual practice, but also indicates that perhaps tourists may have a spiritual experience even though they do not necessarily seek religious spirituality. Consequently, pilgrimage and tourism overlap.

Motivational studies classify pilgrimage and religious tourism as sub-categories of tourism (Chun *et al.*, 2017; Chun *et al.*, 2018; Nyaupane *et al.*, 2015), while the

tourism as religion argument is framed within the function of tourism itself (Graburn, 1989). These concepts seem to focus on different scales of analysis, but both share the same feature of fulfilling spirituality. Consequently, Smith (1992) develops a model of the relationship between tourism and spirituality. Pilgrimage for a religious quest and tourism for a personal fulfillment are positioned on the opposite ends of a spectrum, with countless sacred-secular combinations called 'religious tourism' or 'knowledge-based tourism' possible in-between. Likewise, Cheer *et al.* (2017) conceptualise spiritual tourism as a continuum of initial drivers ranging from self-focused spirituality on the one end to institutionalised religiosity on the other. These motivational studies examine the differences between religious pilgrimage and tourism, showing clearly that the two practices exist along a continuum and are not a clear dichotomy. By highlighting the gradation, such studies also reveal how the two practices share the fundamental idea of a spiritual quest; they are as similar as they are distinct. In contemporary society the two are become entangled.

The connection between tourism and spirituality is commonly conceptualised by motivation to travel, but recent literature also shows that not all tourist travel is motivated by spiritual needs, as tourist travel is often comprised of various and overlapping motivations to travel (Nyaupane *et al.*, 2015; Sharpley, 2008; Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005). According to these studies, motivations to travel to spiritual sites may comprise a combination of religious, historic, cultural, learning, social, and pleasure seeking elements (Choe *et al.*, 2015; Drule *et al.*, 2012; Nyaupane *et al.*, 2015; Sharpley, 2008; Song, Lee, Park, Hwang & Reisinger, 2015; Wang *et al.*, 2016). This indicates that not only motivation of travel but also the *experience* of and in place is an important factor for understanding tourism in sacred sites (Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005).

Recent studies have examined how the spiritual experience is deeply associated with place (Jepson & Sharpley, 2014; Sharpley & Jepson, 2011). These studies have largely focused on the context of rural tourism, not spiritual tourism environments. In the context of Buddhist sites, research mentions the physical environment and spiritual experiences, for example the spirituality experienced in quiet temple spaces, but this is not the central focus (Bae *et al.*, 2019; Brich & Sinclair, 2013; Choe *et al.*, 2015; Chun *et al.*, 2018). Such studies commonly examine why visitors chose to visit a Buddhist site and the experience

of spirituality in those environments. However, the relationship between motivation and spiritual experience, between the temple environment and tourist's spiritual experience, as well as between experience and place have not yet been fully examined within the Buddhist tourism context. Consequently, the purpose of this research is twofold:

- (1) to examine if spiritual motivation is an essential requirement for spiritual experience; and
- (2) to explore how the physical environment shapes tourist's spiritual experience in temple settings.

The article asks, is the presence or absence of spiritual motivation a prerequisite for spiritual experiences? And if not, what elements of place affect spiritual experiences for non-spiritually motivated tourists to sacred sites? To address this question, research was conducted in the sacred Buddhist town of Koyasan in Wakayama Prefecture, Japan. Koyasan is well known as a living sacred site as well as an international tourist destination after it was registered as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2004. The site consists of some visitors who are religiously motivated and others who are not. However, when tourists expose themselves to a religious environment like Koyasan, and take part in religious activities such as meditation, temple stays, and pilgrimage trail walks, the experience of place may play an influential role in enabling a spiritual experience even when one is not actively sought out.

The outline of the article is as follows. This paper outlines the literature on motivations to spiritual sites and spiritual experience on site. Next, I describe the context Koyasan in Wakayama, Japan. Then, I discuss the relationship between spiritual motivation and experience, and between spiritual experience and place, to show how spiritual motivation is not a pre-requisite of the spiritual experience and to emphasise the important of place in the production of spirituality within tourist sacred sites.

Tourism and Spirituality

Tourism and spiritual motivation

Spirituality is a personal quest searching for the meaning of life, fulfilment, and questioning 'Who am I?'; 'What is the meaning of my very being?' (Olsen, 2015; Webster, 2004). Therefore, spirituality can be located both within and beyond religion (Giordan, 2007; Stausberg, 2014). In pre-modern societies, institutionalised religions had

significant influence on the society and even defined people's personal lives (Berger, 1973; Okamoto, 2015). Institutional religions have provided people with transcendent meaning and ideas of universal truth such as religious belief in a higher being external to the self (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005). These religious teachings and practices are manifestations of religious spirituality (Sharpley, 2016). They play external roles in peoples' lives, but at the same time, they offer order, meaning, and security for them (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005). However, through the modernisation process, the power of religions gradually declined and spiritual practice became secularised (Olsen & Timothy, 2006). Okamoto (2015) points out that secularisation caused what he termed the 'privatization of religion', which brings two different consequences. First, the position of religion shifted from the centre of public society to the private sphere, which lead to a second effect that people could now select some religious elements and combine them as they desired. People began to seek out the meaning of life away from the external and obligatory roles associated with conforming to a transcendent authority; this is called a 'subjective turn' (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005). As a result, secular spiritual practices such as yoga, Tai Chi, and astrology became popularised from as early as the 1970s (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005).

While technology and scientific rationality have been the cornerstones of modern society and development, some argue this has also disturbed the unity of life and work, led to a postmodern, fractured reality, and increased uncertainty of life (Berger, 1973; Timothy & Conover, 2006). Emerging from this critique, the existentialist framework of spirituality emphasises the importance of how individuals relate to other existences and ways of being in the world, and in turn are left with the responsibility to establish personal meanings of life (Webster, 2004). Likewise, individuals can develop subjective spirituality by making relations and connections between 'the self' and 'this world' (Sharpley, 2016). Today, this discourse of subjective spirituality has spread into fields as diverse as education and health care, and in both religious and non-religious senses (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005; Holmes, 2007). The meaning of 'spirituality' has broadened from religious spirituality to subjective spirituality, and is now commonly defined as personal meanings of life and connectivity between the self and the world.

In industrialised society, tourism is understood to be a popular avenue for such personal, subjective, inner spiritual fulfilment as people seek recovery and spirituality during their free time. Graburn (1989) explains that tourism functions as ritual by shifting time from ordinary / profane to non-ordinary / sacred. Tourism, as a user of free time, can offer 'a space for the contemplative and the creative, a unity of thought and action' (Vukonic, 1996:8). Turner and Turner (1978) also maintain that tourism and ritual / pilgrimage have a similar structure; the separation stage, the liminal stage at destination and the reintegration stage. After leaving their home, people can cross the boundary of ordinary structured society and enter an anti-structured state. At this stage, people are free from obligations of ordinary life and can enjoy *communitas*, the experience of sharing in the spirit of community. In the last stage, they return home with higher status because they are refreshed and renewed through the tourism (Turner & Turner, 1978). Therefore, tourism is considered as a secular counterpart of institutional religion (Sharpley, 2016). In other words, tourism is structured as a sacred journey (Graburn, 1989).

Although tourism may be metaphorically structured as a 'sacred journey', in reality not all people who travel are spiritually motivated (Olsen & Timothy, 2006; Palmer, Begley & Coe, 2012). Researchers have described a wide range tourist motivation. One of the earliest models coming from Cohen (1979), who categorises tourists into five modes based on the difference of direction seeking otherness or centrality in the tourism, but only two of them: experimental mode and existential mode can be understood as a spiritual quest. Moreover, research dedicated to tourism to sacred sites shows there are primarily four or five motivations. Sharpley (2008) purposes four primary motivations for visiting a sacred site: spiritual / religious purposes, heritage or cultural purposes, special interests, and planned or impulse visit. Similarly, Nyaupane, Timothy and Poudel (2015) identify four motivations for visitors with various faiths to visit a Buddhist site: learning, religious, recreational, and social. Choe, Blazey and Mitas' (2015) motivational study of non-Buddhist tourists who visited Buddhist temples in Los Angeles, identified intellectual enrichment and a tranquil, serene environment, as being significant motivators. In the case of tourists travelling to religious Buddhism sites within the Chinese context, Wang, Chen and Huang (2016) show that visitors are as just as much motivated by cultural enjoyment and mental relaxation as they are by religious belief. Tourists are motivated

by a complex combination of push and pull motivations (Wang *et al.*, 2016), and thereby motivation alone cannot account for a tourists' spiritual experience. So, while the sacred journey is used as a metaphor for the structure of tourist travel, the motivation may not be spiritual at all. It may be worthwhile examining how the liminal space—which is also a place or destination—makes the experience of spirituality at sacred sites possible.

Spiritual experience, sacred sites (place) and interaction

To explore other factors that make tourism a sacred journey, this research will focus on spiritual experience rather than motivation. Previous research shows that tourist travel to sacred sites can have spiritual experience without spiritual motivation (Lois-González & Santos, 2015; Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005). As mentioned, the tourist experience has been described as a temporal and spatial shift, characterised as a movement through a liminal and sacred space before returning home (Turner & Turner, 1978). In order to ground this spiritual-tourist metaphor, the relationship between spiritual experience and place needs to be further examined.

There are mainly two positions to define sacred sites; one is an existential approach and the other is based on social constructionism. In the existential approach, the sacred reveals itself and human beings cannot manipulate or change it. This concept positions the sacred as the center of the world (*axis mundi*) and forms a purified and organised space with absolute power (Eliade, 1959). We find many examples of the existential understanding in various religions sites around the world, such as the Kaaba in Mecca for Muslims and Jerusalem for Christians. However, in contrast, others maintain that 'the sacred' is socially constructed, meaning no place, even a spiritual one, is intrinsically sacred in and of itself (Eade & Sallnow, 1991; Nakagawa, 2003). Place is constituted by giving cultural and societal value to what would otherwise be a meaningless space (Bremer, 2006). This suggests that place is continuously changing its meaning, as different and conflicting economic, political and religious interests at any given sacred site negotiate control and reinvent its meanings and interpretations in the process (Chidester & Linenthal, 1995). Which perspective is applied to interpretations and analyses of a sacred site depends on the perspective and discipline of the researcher. Neither approach is inherently better than the other, both approaches remain important to the study of religious sacred sites. However, as the aim of

this article is to examine the different experiences of spirituality by religious believers and non-religious tourists, a social constructionist approach is considered more appropriate to identify the shifting meanings of spirituality in Koyasan, especially with respect to how this new category of international tourist experiences spirituality there.

Tourists select their destination based on both a socially constructed image and their personal motivation (Manzo, 2003). However, this does not always mean individual tourists expect the experience to be meaningful. Tuan (1977) suggests the meaning of the place can be influenced by individual experience in the environment. This means that the social construction of place and individual experience are dynamically and mutually co-constitutive (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2004; Tuan, 1977). In addition, how the physical environment impacts on individual experience and meaning of these experiences also needs to be considered (Stedman 2003). Birch and Sinclair (2013) suggest that connecting individuals to places designed around the environment (sustainability), social / cultural world (humanity), and the intimate self (sensuality) promotes spiritual experience of individuals. Specifically, they mention that the physical architecture and space built on Buddhist values may evoke a feeling of self-actualisation and self-transcendence. Considering all these complex relationships between the place and individual experience, Belhassen, Caton and Stewart (2008) conceptualise the authentic spiritual experience as an ongoing negotiation between action, belief and the toured place. Sharpley and Jepson (2011) also conclude that spiritual experience is influenced by socially constructed meaning, personal place attachment (topophilia), and physical environment.

Others have attempted to categorise different combinations of spiritual tourists motivations and experiences. Drawing on research within a Buddhist temple tourism context, we see four motivational-experiential categories emerge:

- (1) self-growth and reflection;
- (2) relaxation and meditation;
- (3) being with nature, and;
- (4) educational and cultural learning (Choe *et al.*, 2015; Chun, Roh & Spralls, 2017; Chun, Roh, Spralls & Kim, 2018; Wang *et al.*, 2016).

These motivations and experiences are often associated with the socially constructed meaning of temple settings for tourists, which are considered environments

commonly described in contrast to tourists' everyday life. For example, Choe *et al.* (2015) explain how non-Buddhist tourists in Los Angeles seek the tranquil environment of Buddhist temples to escape from daily obligations and stress. In the context of Korea, temple stays are also said to offer a unique experience away from the fast-paced urban life and towards a space of serenity (Bae, Lee & Chick, 2019).

In addition to nature and a tranquil environment, the social construction of a simple and meditative 'Buddhist lifestyle' is also suggested to be a necessary element for transformative experiences at Korean temple stays (Chun *et al.*, 2018; Hwang *et al.*, 2017; Ross, Hur & Hoffman, 2019). One study drawing on a personal account by a Korean-American scholar of hospitality management confirms that engaging with the everyday lives of monks within a Buddhist monastery—attending traditional ceremonies and meditation practice—was a key element in the notion of transformative travel and concludes that in this way temple stay was a form spiritual transformative travel (Ross *et al.*, 2019). Also in the context of Korean temple stays, Hwang *et al.* (2018) found that a four day Buddhist meditation program including meditation, conversation with monks, chanting, and traditional Buddhist meals, adds lasting transformational benefits on mindfulness and resilience for participants, with these positive effects lasting up to three months after the visit. The research done in Korean temple stays shows us the emphasis temple stay tourists place on experiencing the Buddhist lifestyle as an integral component of the socially constructed serene atmosphere, the beauty of nature, and tranquility (Chun *et al.*, 2018).

The idea of tourism as a sacred journey has been conceptualised by literature on tourist motivation. However, considering that socially constructed meanings of the place, place attachment, and the physical atmosphere of place can affect spiritual experiences, it is not sufficient to conceptualise tourism as a transformative sacred journey by use of tourist motivation alone. With this in mind, the aim of this study is to reveal how tourists' spiritual experience relates to the experience of place when tourism becomes a means for seeking spirituality. The article will address two fundamental questions;

- 1) What is the interrelationship between visitors' self-identification as a religious believer, both believer and tourist, or tourist, and their spiritual motivation/experience?

- 2) What is the relationship between spiritual experience and place, and specifically how these two elements co-constitute one another?

To unpack these questions, we will examine the spiritual experiences of tourists at the home of Buddhism in Japan, Koyasan sacred site in Wakayama Prefecture.

Koyasan Sacred Site: The Home of Japan's Shingon Buddhism and Religious Pilgrimage

Koyasan is a living sacred site of Shingon Esoteric Buddhism founded in 816. Located on a mountain top 800 meters above sea level in Wakayama prefecture, Japan, the sacred site is surrounded by a vast mountain range with some peaks reaching 1000 meters above sea level. According to religious mythology, Koyasan is considered the Pure Land in this world because it is surrounded by the summits whose shape resembles a lotus flower (Matsunaga, 2014). It is the home of Shingon Esoteric Buddhism, which is a form of Buddhism dedicated to teaching how to redeem all people from suffering, while also sharing some practices of Shintoism by praying for ancestors and showing appreciation to the blessings of nature. These teachings continue to characterise present-day Koyasan. The sacred site is vast comprising Kongobuji head temple, 117 temples, 52 temple lodgings and two sacred places; Danjo-Garan, where monks train themselves, and Okunoin, where the founder monk, Kukai (also referred to as Kobo Daishi) is said to be eternally meditating. One important shrine is Nyutsumehime-Ohmikami (a Shinto deity) who acts as a guardian of Koyasan in Danjo-Garan (Nyutsumehime Shrine, no date). Koyasan is also well known as the final destination of Shikoku Pilgrimage. The Shikoku pilgrimage is a pilgrimage to the 88 temples on Shikoku Island dedicated to Koyasan's founder monk, Kukai (Mori, 2014). It is common for pilgrims to visit Koyasan to show their gratitude for a safe completion of the Shikoku pilgrimage.

Koyasan has attracted many visitors over its 1000 year history. Along the 2 kilometers approach to Okunoin, there are about 200,000 gravestones of warriors and feudal lords, cultured men of high society as well as ordinary citizens. Koyasan was registered as a world heritage site of UNESCO in 2004 and since then has rapidly increased in popularity, not only with Japanese tourists but also international visitors. There were 1.48 million visitors to Koyasan in 2018 (Wakayama

Prefecture, 2018). Domestic visitors to Koyasan come to pray for their ancestors and the founder monk Kukai, as well as to enjoy the cultural history of the place (Kaga, 2001). In addition, each temple holds a daily morning ceremony as a living religious sacred site. Currently, there are 52 temple lodgings in Koyasan and most of them are open for tourists. Hence, temple lodgings offer not only a place to stay but also opportunities to experience Buddhist life, such as having vegetarian food called Shoujin-ryouri, practicing sutra copy writing and meditation, and attending morning religious ceremonies. Temple stay has become an interesting attraction for guests who want to learn Buddhism, seek spirituality, and have cultural experience.

As the home of Esoteric Buddhism, Koyasan is a sacred site whose primary purpose is to develop and encourage Buddhist values. It was first sacralised by the story of eternal meditation of the Buddhist monk, Kukai, and is today reinforced by annual and daily rituals that maintains its sanctity. As a result, Koyasan is attractive to both believers and spiritual seekers. However, in addition to traditional Buddhist values, Koyasan has cultural, historical, and aesthetic values that also draw tourists to the sacred site. Therefore, it is unclear as to whether the various visitors are motivated by religious / spiritual transformation or are more interested in the aesthetics of place, nature and the site's unique culture. If the latter, can or do tourists still describe their experiences at the sacred site as religious and/or spiritual? Koyasan is attractive to various visitors, therefore it is considered an appropriate context to explore the relationship between motivation and experience, and between experience and place.

Methodology

This study design comprises a questionnaire survey including a quantitative component (a structured survey) and a qualitative component (open-ended questions). Both components were necessary to understand the relationship between spiritual motivation and spiritual experience. The quantitative component examines the extent to which the presence of spiritual motivation determines spiritual experience - the dependent variables being categorised based on previous research. The qualitative component investigates how environmental conditions evoke spiritual experience. A more open-ended qualitative approach is appropriate here as this component of the study was exploratory and seeks detailed descriptions of what comprises a tourists' spiritual experience of place.

The combination of quantitative and qualitative research offers a more holistic picture of the relationship between motivation, place, experience and spirituality.

In the quantitative section, respondents were asked to select and rank their top three motivations for visiting and experiences in Koyasan from amongst 14 choices, including an 'others' category. The 14 choices were categorised into 5 groups: religious, touristic, learning, social, and spiritual (Table.1). These were identified as main factors of motivation and experience when visiting sacred sites according to previous studies (Drule, Chiş, Băcilă, & Ciornea, 2012; Nyaupane *et al.*, 2015; Oie, 2015; Oie, 2016; Olsen, 2015; Sharpley, 2008). Of the five groups, the 'spiritual' group is the most relevant for this study because the first research objective is to understand whether or not spiritual motivation is a necessary condition for spiritual experience. Combining Japanese (Kanou, Hirono, Endo, Mitsuishi & Nigorikawa, 2014) and western literature (Olsen, 2015), four choices were deemed appropriate for identifying the spiritual motivations for both Japanese and visitors from other backgrounds:

Table 1: Motivations and Experiences Groups

Groups	Choices
Religious	To pray for the ancestors and worship based on faith
Touristic	To enjoy sightseeing in Koyasan
	To visit a world heritage site
Learning	To learn history and culture in Koyasan
	To learn Buddhism and Esoteric Buddhism
	To experience Buddhist training such as meditation and writing sutra
Social	To experience temple stay
	To meet new and different people
Spiritual	To visit a place recommended by an acquaintance
	To look for a sense and meaning of existence
	To experience becoming one with nature and beauty
	To look beyond the self
	To achieve personal fulfillment in an ethical way

- to look for a sense and meaning of existence;
- to experience becoming one with nature and beauty;
- to look beyond the self;
- to achieve personal fulfilment in an ethical way.

Olsen (2015) notes that in the western spiritual context 'an ethical path to personal fulfillment' is an important consideration for the western tourist's spiritual experience and consequently was added to the survey. For the purposes of this research, the spirituality group is therefore defined as people on a personal quest of spiritual transformation outside of institutionalised religion, while the 'religious' group is defined functionally, as those who engage and identify with established religious ideologies, practices and traditions. In other words, even if tourists perform religious rituals such prayers and pilgrimage, those experiences are not interpreted under the category 'religious' unless they mention their devotion to the religion, and also because the act of extracting selective parts of religious systems and combining them at will into

one's own subjective 'religious' practice is understood as a part of subjective spirituality (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005; Okamoto, 2015).

This study will analyse the relationship between motivations / experiences and visitors' self-identification according to pre-defined categories. Respondents were asked to select their category from three options: believer, believer and tourist, and tourist. In the qualitative section of the survey, respondents were asked to describe detailed motivations and experiences in free writing spaces. These open-ended data were used to analyse the relationship between spiritual experience and place.

Data collection for the research proceeded as follows. The subjects of the research were all visitors to Koyasan. Convenience sampling was employed for this research. As the research planned to ask about motivations and experiences, it was desirable to ask the same respondents to answer the questionnaire before and after the visit.

Table 2: Sample Description Data

Variable		Religious tourists N (%)	Tourists N (%)
Gender	Male	19 (48.7)	39 (41.9)
	Female	20 (51.3)	54 (58.1)
Age	10s~20s	3 (7.7)	13 (14.0)
	30s~40s	8 (20.5)	28 (30.1)
	50s~60s	22 (56.4)	41 (44.1)
	Over 70s	6 (15.4)	11 (11.8)
Nationality	Japan	28 (71.8)	59 (63.4)
	Others	11 (28.2)	34 (36.6)
Religion	Buddhism	32 (82.1)	31 (33.3)
	Christianity	2 (5.1)	13 (14.0)
	Others	2 (5.1)	3 (3.2)
	No belief	3 (7.7)	46 (49.5)
Visiting experience	First time	13 (33.3)	66 (71.0)
	2 or 3 times	13 (33.3)	12 (12.9)
	More than 4 times	13 (33.3)	15 (16.1)
Length of the visit	One day	19 (48.7)	42 (45.2)
	2 days	16 (41.0)	45 (48.4)
	More than 3 days	4 (10.3)	6 (6.5)

However, considering the difficulty in contacting the same respondents twice on their busy visit, visitors who were leaving were targeted as respondents who could address both motivations and experiences. Questionnaires were distributed in person by the author at Nakanohashi, a gathering point for tourists, in front of a tourist information office near the large parking space from November 6 to 8, 2017. The author set up a small writing table and asked volunteers to fill out the questionnaire at the location. To collect more samples, questionnaires were also distributed at four tourist information centres, a tour guide office, and a temple lodging from November 5 to 17, 2017. The author was allowed to leave the questionnaires at the reception desks, and volunteers filled out the questionnaire. To encourage participants to fully complete the survey, stamped envelopes were provided. Self-completed questionnaires were sent to the researcher by post or were kept at the reception. The questionnaire was prepared in Japanese and English.

A total of 161 questionnaires were collected and 132 of them contained valid responses. Respondents were originally classified into three self-identified categories: 'Believers', 'Believers and Tourists', and 'Tourists'. However, 'Believers' were only 11 (8.3%) out of 132 respondents and the sample was not large enough for analysis. Hence, 'Believer' and 'Believer and Tourists' were combined into one category, named 'Religious tourists'. The sample description data is shown in Table.2.

In both religious tourists and tourists, there were slightly more female respondents than males (religious tourists 51.3%, tourists 58.1%). The majority of the respondents were in their 50s to 60s in both categories (religious tourists 56.4%, tourists 44.1% respectively), but religious tourists were on average older than tourists. Japanese domestic tourists comprised the majority of respondents in both categories (religious tourists 71.8%, tourists 63.4%). Regarding religion, a large part of religious tourists were Buddhists (82.1%), while nearly half of the tourists answered no belief (49.5%) while those who identified as Buddhist were limited to 33.3% of the tourist category. Regarding visiting experience, a greater portion of religious tourists were repeat visitors (66.6%), while the majority of tourists were first time visitors (71.0%). Almost all of respondents in both categories stayed in Koyasan for either one day (religious tourists 48.7%, tourists 45.2%) or one-night stay (religious tourists 41%, tourists 48.4%).

The data were analysed in two phases. In the first phase, quantitative data were used to examine the first research question, if the presence or absence of spiritual motivation is a prerequisite for spiritual experiences. The respondents' motivations and experiences for visiting Koyasan were classified into five predetermined groups (religious, tourism, learning, social and spiritual). For example, when a respondent selected 'to pray for the ancestors and worship based on the faith', 'to learn history and culture in Koyasan' and 'to look for a sense and meaning of existence' as the top three motivations, the responses were categorised as 'religious', 'learning' and 'spiritual' motivations. In this way, the motivations and experiences of respondents in the five groups were analysed. A Pearson's chi-square test of independence was calculated to analyse the presence / absence of correlation between the five groups of motivations / experiences and two visitors' self-identified categories: religious tourists and tourists.

In the second phase, the qualitative data were analysed to examine the second research question, what elements of place affect spiritual experiences for non-spiritually motivated tourists. Free descriptive answers of the experiences by 23 religious tourists and 63 tourists were analysed. The free descriptions were coded into themes based on the tourists' descriptions of their spiritual experiences and the places where respondents reported to have had the spiritual experiences. Three sites were repeatedly mentioned in the qualitative responses:

- (1) Okunoin and graveyard,
- (2) The overall, general, atmosphere of Koyasan, and
- (3) temple stay (Shukubo).

Respondents reported three predominate categories of spiritual experiences respectively:

- (1) connecting with death,
- (2) healing and tension, and
- (3) transformative experiences.

The descriptions of place and spiritual experience combined into three thematic discussions that examined the role of the environment in shaping tourists' spiritual experience. These three thematic discussions are explored further in the next section.

Table 3: Cross Tabulation of Religious Motivation / Experience and Visitors' Category

Visitor's self-identified category	Religious Motivation N (%)			Religious Experience N (%)		
	Yes	No	χ^2	Yes	No	χ^2
Religious tourists	21 (53.9)	18 (46.2)	Pearson 43.93**	22 (56.4)	17 (43.6)	Pearson 47.17**
Tourists	4 (4.3)	89 (95.7)		4 (4.3)	89 (95.7)	

Note: df = 1, ** p < .001

Findings

Interrelationship between motivation and experience

A Pearson's chi-square test of independence was calculated to analyse the presence / absence of correlation between religious motivation / experience and two visitors' self-identified categories. Regarding religious motivation, a significant interaction was found with visitors' self-identified categories ($X^2 = 43.93$ df = 1 p < .001). Religious tourists were more likely to have religious motivation (53.9%) than tourists (4.3%) (Table.3). A similar tendency was found in religious experience ($X^2 = 47.17$ df = 1 p < .001). Table 3 indicates that religious tourists tend to have more religious experiences (56.4%) than tourists (4.3%).

Applying the same test to touristic motivation, the presence of touristic motivation had a correlation with visitors' self-identified categories ($X^2 = 10.65$ df = 1 p < .001). Table 4 demonstrates that tourists were inclined to have more touristic motivation (66.7%) than religious tourists (35.9%). Likewise, it turned out that touristic experience was associated with visitors' self-identified categories ($X^2 = 14.23$ df = 1 p < .001). Tourists had a tendency to describe their visit to the sacred site as a touristic experience (68.8%) than religious tourists (33.3%). It was revealed that both religious and touristic motivations/ experiences were strongly correlated with visitors' self-identified categories.

When the same test was applied to learning, no correlation was found between learning motivation and visitors' self-identified categories ($X^2 = 0.41$ df = 1 p = n.s.) (see

Table 4: Cross Tabulation of Touristic Motivation / Experience and Visitors' Category

Visitor's self-identified category	Touristic Motivation N (%)			Touristic Experience N (%)		
	Yes	No	χ^2	Yes	No	χ^2
Religious tourists	14 (35.9)	25 (64.1)	Pearson 10.65**	13 (33.3)	26 (66.7)	Pearson 14.23**
Tourists	62 (66.7)	31 (33.3)		64 (68.8)	29 (31.2)	

Note: df = 1, ** p < .001

Table 5: Cross Tabulation of Learning Motivation / Experience and Visitors' Category

Visitor's self-identified category	Learning Motivation N (%)			Learning Experience N (%)		
	Yes	No	χ^2	Yes	No	χ^2
Religious tourists	22 (56.4)	17 (43.6)	Pearson 0.41	24 (61.5)	15 (38.5)	Pearson 0.36
Tourists	58 (62.4)	35 (37.6)		52 (55.9)	41 (44.1)	

Note: df = 1, p = n.s.

Visitor's self-identified category	Social Motivation N (%)			Social Experience N (%)		
	Yes	No	χ^2	Yes	No	χ^2
Religious tourists	4 (10.3)	35 (89.7)	Pearson 0.09	4 (10.3)	35 (89.7)	Pearson 0.07
Tourists	8 (8.6)	85 (91.4)	Yate 0.00	11 (11.8)	82 (88.2)	Yate 0.00

Note: df = 1, ** p = n.s.

Table 5). Similarly, learning experience did not have any interrelation with visitors' self-identified categories ($X^2 = 0.36$ df = 1 p = n.s.).

Regarding correlation between social motivation / experience and visitors' self-identified categories, both Pearson's chi-square test of independence and Yates's correction for continuity test were calculated, because some expected values were smaller than 5 (Taromaru, 2005). The result of the tests revealed that social motivation did not have any interrelationship with visitors' self-identified categories (Persons' $X^2 = 0.09$ df = 1 p = n.s., Fishers' $X^2 = 0.00$ df = 1 p = n.s.) (see Table 6). Similar findings were found in the category of social experience (Persons' $X^2 = 0.07$ df = 1 p = n.s., Fishers' $X^2 = 0.00$ df = 1 p = n.s.). It was found that both learning and social motivation / experience were not interrelated with visitors' self-identified categories.

However, different results were obtained from the interrelationship between spiritual motivations / experiences and visitors' self-identified categories. Spiritual motivation was correlated with visitors' self-identified categories ($X^2 = 8.82$ df = 1 p < .005). Table 7 shows that religious tourists were more apt to have spiritual motivation (51.3%) than tourists (24.7%). On the other hand, there was no relevance between spiritual experience and visitors' self-identified categories (X^2

= 1.47 df = 1 p = n.s.). This outcome shows that the interrelationship between spiritual motivation and visitor's self-identified category did not fully reflect the spiritual experience.

The visitors' self-identified categories correlated with both religious and touristic motivation / experience. On the contrary, there were no interrelations found between visitors' self-identified categories and learning and social motivation / experience. However, these two results may support the idea that the relationship between motivation and visitors' self-identified categories was maintained in the relationship between experience and visitors' self-identified categories. On the other hand, the visitors' self-identified category interrelated with spiritual motivation, while the self-identified category had no relation to spiritual experience. This result indicates the possibility that motivation cannot fully explain the spiritual experience at the Koyasan sacred site. To help understand why this may be the case, the next section examines the impact of place on spiritual experience.

Visitors Experience and Place Spirituality

Japanese tourists experience of connecting with death

Japanese tourists in both categories describe connectedness with the death at Okunoin. Through prayer and pilgrimage, connections with death were described

Visitor's self-identified category	Spiritual Motivation N (%)			Spiritual Experience N (%)		
	Yes	No	χ^2	Yes	No	χ^2
Religious tourists	20 (51.3)	19 (48.7)	Pearson 8.82*	16 (41.0)	23 (59.0)	Pearson 1.47
Tourists	23 (24.7)	70 (75.3)		28 (30.1)	65 (69.9)	

Note: df=1, * p<.005

Figure 1: Just before Kukai's mausoleum at Okuno-in and graveyard in Koyasan



Author's Photo

with respect to visits to the founder monk Kukai's mausoleum and the vast cemetery area that tourists and believers alike walk through as part of the experience of the site (Figure 1). Generally, these activities are regarded as a religious experience for believers because the Kongobuji head temple describes the practice of prayer for ancestors as part of the daily work of believers (Kongobuji, N.D.a). However, interestingly, the research reveals that even the self-identified category of tourists report similar experiences as religious believers. In this case, these experiences can be understood as spiritual rather than religious, because they selectively adopt religious rituals such as prayer and pilgrimage (Okamoto, 2015). Sakurai (2003) argues that ancestor worship is considered a way to interact with ancestors and deceased, and that Japanese people do not always interpret this practice as religious. Commenting on the connection of pilgrimage and visiting Koyasan, one Japanese tourist in his 60s commented:

Today, I visited Koyasan to find a subject and inspiration for a poem. I'm also in the middle of Shikoku Pilgrimage, so I intentionally selected here. I am not religious, but I have walked a

pilgrimage route for personal redemption since my son passed away. I do not think pilgrimage makes my son happy or relieves him from suffering, but I am so sorry for our ancestors and my son because of his death. Pilgrimage means sparing my precious time for him. That is my redemption and self-satisfaction¹ (Tourist, No.53).

Shikoku pilgrims visit Koyasan as a celebration and in honor of their completion of pilgrimage. Therefore, the Shikoku pilgrimage and visiting Koyasan as a 'tourist' can be part of an ongoing series of experiences. The man was motivated to visit Koyasan as inspiration for a poem and indirectly to connect with his deceased son. He also described himself as being in the middle of the Shikoku pilgrimage during his visit to Koyasan. For him, Koyasan as a place is not only the final destination of the pilgrimage, but also a place for connecting with the ancestors and his deceased son. Although his experiences

¹ Original comments were transcribed in Japanese. The translation is made by the author. This applies in this paper to the transcripts of Tourist, No.53, Religious Tourist, No.42, Tourist, No.10, Tourist, No.78).

are similar to those of religious tourists, he clearly stated that he was not religious, and his experience of visiting Koyasan and pilgrimage can be interpreted as spiritual rather than religious.

Like Tourist No.53, one Japanese religious tourist in his 60s who has visited Koyasan more than six times wrote:

I feel refreshed and could renew my attitude towards life after visiting my ancestors' grave. This is a special place for me. It is such a fine day that I could pray with a pleasant feeling (Religious tourist, No.42).

Free responses from self-identified tourists, as well as religious tourists, demonstrate that they experienced a connection with death. Japanese respondents described how both the physical landscape of graveyards and the socially constructed meaning of Koyasan enabled such a connection. However, whether the connection is interpreted as spiritual or religious depends on their self-identified category. Hence, this is a border area for religious and spiritual experience particular for domestic Japanese tourists and it seems deeply associated with their initial motivation and place attachment to visit Koyasan.

Healing and tension: A place of calm and solemnity

Visitors in both categories explained experiencing both sensual healing and tension when describing the interaction with the physical environment of Koyasan, but tourists were more likely to write about this spiritual experience. Some expressed the beauty of the townscape, the air, and nature as quiet, peaceful and calm, but at the same time, others interpreted the atmosphere as tense and solemn. These explanations tend to connect with their feelings and emotions directly; some feeling distressed and healed, and others described being inspired to reflect on their life. For instance, one Buddhist female who stopped in Koyasan in the middle of driving wrote:

It is my second time to visit Koyasan. I came to see the coloured leaves. Getting out of the car, I found the air clean and clear, I noticed myself mysteriously becoming calmer and calmer. Koyasan has a spiritual healing power (Tourist, No.10).

Another tourist in his 20s who was a repeat visitor of Koyasan said:

I got some inspiration from art works and nature at Koyasan Reihoukan museum and Kongobuji temple. [But I also] became tense, I

felt a different air from the secular area at the foot of mountain (Tourist, No.78).

Koyasan is a small rural town surrounded by forest and is a religious centre dedicated to helping and saving people in need. As a socially constructed sacred site, both religious organisations and tourism agencies promote Koyasan as a calm place in contrast to busy daily life. For example, the head temple of Kongobuji writes on their website homepage:

Surrounded by pure aura of Koyasan, why not meditate calmly and spend time away from your busy daily life? (Kongobuji, N.D.b)

At the same time, Koyasan is historically a training center for monks and the founder monk, Kukai is believed to meditate eternally, so the place has a sense of strictness and being well-organised. Therefore, it is understandable some visitors feel calm and peaceful, and others solemn and serious. The atmosphere of calmness is contrasted with a sense of tension emerging from the strict monastic environment of the sacred site, producing a spiritual experience of place based on these contrasting atmospheric elements.

Transformative experiences through interaction

Thirdly, international tourists described having transformative experiences with newly acquired knowledge gained through interaction with monks or other people, religious practices, and temple life. This was described as a type of spiritual experience mainly associated with the temple stay (Shukubo). At Shukubo in Koyasan, guests generally stay in a Japanese style room with tatami mats (traditional Japanese flooring), eat vegetarian food called Shoujin-ryouri, optionally practice sutra transcribing and meditation, and join in the morning Buddhist ceremonies. Guests can experience Buddhist monks' lives in Koyasan and understand the meanings through interaction with monks. For example, a Danish female religious tourist who visited Koyasan for the first time commented,

It was amazing to observe the kindness and discipline of the Buddhists at the temple. We appreciated the beauty of the architecture and simplicity of our room. It has also been very insightful to observe the morning prayer (Religious tourist, No. 142).

A Christian female from Mexico who wanted to experience the life away from the city said,

I woke up to the sound of the bell. We went to hear the heart sutra downstairs and heard the explanation before it began. It is wonderful experience even if I am not a Buddhist. After that, the monk explained about life in the temple and answered all out questions. I'm really happy we came here and experienced a night in a temple, we will do this again in the future (Tourist, No. 133).

People described experiencing Buddhist values or Buddhist ways of living through temple stay. Respondents specifically commented on the simplicity of temple room and simple way of living such as waking up early. This kind of spirituality comes from not only their five senses but also through new knowledge gained by interacting with monks at temple settings. Once they accept these new values, they become potential repeat visitors and may come back Koyasan with spiritual motivation. At least this is what the temples hope that engaging in this type of tourism will help to achieve.

Summary of Findings

The quantitative survey clarifies that visitors' self-identified categories are closely associated with motivations / experiences with respect to the religious and touristic categories, while there is no correlation between visitors' self-identified categories and motivations / experiences of learning and social. The research also reveals a correlation between visitors' self-identified categories and spiritual motivation, while no correlation is found between visitors' self-identified category and spiritual experience. This outcome suggests the possibility that factors other than motivation influence the making of tourism as a sacred journey for individuals.

Considering tourism is a spatial shift, the relationship between spiritual experience and place is explored as another factor. As a result of the qualitative analysis, three types of spiritual experience in relation to place are identified: First, Japanese tourists experience connection with dead spirits at Okunoin. This experience is shown to be associated with socially constructed place meaning of Okunoin, the physical settings of graveyard and mausoleum, and motivations to visit Koyasan; Secondly, both categories of visitors (religious tourists / tourists) mention an atmosphere of healing but also a sense of

tension emanating from the emerging tourist-centered environment and socially constructed meanings of the place encouraged by tourism promotions; Lastly, foreign tourists report having a self-transformative experience through their interactions with monks and the Buddhist lifestyle/training experience at Shukubo.

Overall, when we take into consideration the quantitative and qualitative elements of the research, the results indicate that spiritual motivation is not a prerequisite for a spiritual experience. Many visitors to the site experience spirituality in one form or another, regardless of motivation. The place—its physical environment in combination with its socially constructed meanings—creates an atmosphere where the conditions of possibility for a spiritual experience become possible. Even if visitors do not have spiritual motivation or do not understand the spiritual value of the site at first, they may have a spiritual experience by exposing themselves to the place, people, and activity at sacred sites.

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this article was to explore the relationship between visitor motivation and spiritual experience at an influential religious sacred site in rural Japan. To address this objective, two questions guided the study. The first question addressed the interrelationship between visitors' self-category (religious tourist and tourist) and their motivation / experience. In previous studies, pilgrimage is commonly differentiated from tourism based on motivation, and motivation has been conceived as a precondition for a sacred journey (Cheer, Belhassen & Kujawa, 2017; Smith, 1992). However, the findings of this study demonstrate that spiritual motivation does not explain how it is that both visitors (religious tourist and tourist) have spiritual experiences. Previous qualitative research supports this result (Lois-González & Santos, 2015; Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005). This study therefore adds to this emerging literature by offering quantitative evidence that spiritual motivation is not a prerequisite for spiritual experiences at sacred sites. The concept of tourism as a sacred journey needs to be developed by taking into account spiritual experience.

The second guiding question asked, when spiritual motivation does not account spiritual experience, what elements can evoke spiritual experience? The qualitative component of the study revealed three spiritual experiences which visitors reported regarding their visit to Koyasan. First, Japanese tourists in both categories

mention feeling a connection with the deceased and death at Okunoin. While worshipping and connecting to ancestors is a common practice of spirituality in Japanese culture (Kanou *et al.*, 2014; Sakurai, 2003; Takeda & Futoyu, 2006), such spiritual experience has not been reported in previous studies of religious and touristic travel to Buddhist sites (Bae *et al.*, 2019; Chun *et al.*, 2017; Chun *et al.*, 2018). The research suggests that connecting with the deceased can be a unique experience and can be interpreted as both spiritual and religious. The research also reveals that specifically Okunoin in Koyasan—a cemetery environment—was associated with this spiritual experience, where the deceased have been worshipped for centuries. This study shows that a place can be associated with specific spiritual experiences.

The results further suggest that the rural townscape, the air, and nature produced two opposite feelings at the sacred site: peaceful / calm and tension / solemnity. The former spiritual experience of calmness at sacred site environments is a common theme found in a variety of settings and contexts, including the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela (Lois-González & Santos, 2015), temple stay in Korea (Bae *et al.*, 2019; Chun *et al.*, 2017; Chun *et al.*, 2018), Shikoku pilgrimage (Mori, 2014) and even non-religious rural areas like the English Lake District (Jepson & Sharpley, 2014; Sharpley & Jepson, 2011). However, the latter experience of feeling tension or solemnity is interesting, because it reflects a local knowledge-based interpretation of sacred environment. This demonstrates how similar spiritual environments can be interpreted differently, which in turn induces different spiritual experiences. This finding emphasises the idea that the interpretation of the place is socially constructed (Sharpley & Jepson, 2011) and also highlights the importance of understanding how local constructions of sacred sites play out in globalising contexts like the UNESCO World Heritage site of Koyasan.

It was also found that visitors can have transformative experiences by interacting and engaging with monks, religious practices, and temple life. Compared with Korean temple stay experiences, the temple stay experience in Koyasan is remarkably similar. Both Koyasan and Korean temple stays welcome various tourists to the monks' residence and to experience the monk's daily life of morning prayers and meditation. Therefore, it is understandable that in both the Korean and Japanese temple stay contexts, tourists are exposed to a simpler way of living and have time for self-reflection when

compared with the environments of people's everyday lives, leading to an opportunity of self-reflection and potential transformation (Bae *et al.*, 2019; Ross *et al.*, 2019). While research on Korean temple stays is rapidly increasing (Bae *et al.*, 2019; Chun *et al.*, 2017; Chun *et al.*, 2018; Hwang *et al.*, 2017; Kaplan, 2010; Ross *et al.*, 2019; Song *et al.*, 2015), studies on temple stays for tourism in the Japanese context, and available in English, are sparse, although there is some research written in Japanese (Akiyama, 2018; Oie, 2015; Oie, 2016). This current study is a first step towards understanding the temple stay experience at sacred sites in Japan.

There are a few methodological constraints to this study. First, the research design may have created a bias concerning the respondents' motivations. The study aimed to investigate both motivations and experiences at the same time, so visitors who had finished their stay were targeted. However, respondents may adjust their motivations to fit their experiences because of the design. Second, free descriptions for qualitative research tend to be written in such simple words that it is difficult to analyse the relationship between spiritual experiences and place deeply. To further understand the importance of the environment on spiritual experiences, future research could offer more longitudinal, ethnographic and participant observational insights into how tourists experience sacred sites and temple stays within the Japanese context.

Practical implications of the study pertain to destination management in Koyasan. The spiritual experiences at the site are induced by the physical environment and social meanings associated with a sense of calm and awe invoked by the Buddhist practices and environment. Although maintaining such an environment may contradict the monetary desire to increase the number of visitors for economic gain, it is important to preserve this environment to maintain its current uniqueness in the market; thereby protecting and ensuring the possibility of a spiritual experience. The negative impacts of over commercialising religion and sacred sites for tourist satisfaction is well documented (Hung *et al.*, 2017; Kasim, 2011).

Overall, this article points towards the ongoing difficulty of differentiating tourism from pilgrimage by either motivation or experience. In the current and ongoing debate of whether 'tourism is similar to pilgrimage' or 'tourism is different from pilgrimage' (Cheer *et al.*,

2017; Graburn, 1989; Sharpley, 2016; Smith, 1992; Turner & Turner, 1978; Vukonic, 1996), this article leans more towards the former because tourists could have spiritual experience without spiritual motivation, which is the defining characteristic differentiating tourism from pilgrimage (Cheer *et al.*, 2017; Smith, 1992). However, motivation and intention alone cannot tell the whole story. The mutual interaction of experience and place needs to be considered to develop the concept of 'tourism as a sacred journey' (Belhassen *et al.*, 2008; Sharpley & Jepson, 2011). This study in the Japanese context shows there is, at times, no clear distinction between a tourist and pilgrim. Experience, interaction, and an unfolding dynamic relationship between people and place—as well as between religion and tourism—can bring about moments of spirituality even when it is not explicitly being sought after. These are the kinds of complex and ambiguous 'experiences of spirituality' at sacred sites that religious, pilgrimage and spiritual tourism scholarship could engage with more fully in future research.

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