Managing Tourism and Islam in Peninsular Malaysia

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Received 30 June 2002; accepted 23 October 2002

Abstract

This paper is concerned with international tourism and the Islamic religion, using the example of Malaysia as a case study to illustrate the problems and opportunities which arise when the two come into contact. Some general observations are made about the difficulties of the relationship, and conflicts between religious practices and tourist demands are identified. The authorities in Peninsular Malaysia, where Islam is central to everyday life for the dominant Malay Muslims, have responded differently to resolving this dilemma. Contrasting actions at state, national and international levels are discussed, alongside the presentation of Islam in official tourism marketing. The federal government is shown to place a high priority on meeting the needs of tourists while certain states give precedence to the dictates of religion, and international initiatives seek to promote intra-Islamic travel. Insights are thus offered into the management of tourism and Islam which may have a wider applicability beyond the particular circumstances of the case.

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Keywords: Islam; Peninsular Malaysia; Tourism

1. Introduction

Tourism is traditionally closely linked to religion which has acted as a powerful motive for travel from the time of early pilgrimages to contemporary journeys to sacred places. Religious buildings, rituals, festivals and ceremonial events are important tourist attractions for those with a casual interest as well as more devout followers of the particular systems of belief represented. However, there is scope for misunderstanding between believers and non-believers in every religion with the possibility of tensions when the lives of residents and tourists of different faiths intersect at destinations visited. This is especially apparent in the case of non-Muslim tourists and resident Muslims, with considerable misunderstanding and a degree of mutual mistrust between the two worlds in general compounded in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks in the USA. In view of these developments, it seems timely to address issues arising when tourism and Islam come into direct contact and consider some ways of managing the relationship. It should also be acknowledged, albeit optimistically, that tourism does have the capacity to facilitate the cultural exchange necessary to overcome the damaging stereotypes which prevail.

This paper examines circumstances in Malaysia, a South East Asian country in which Muslims are dominant, and assesses official responses to the challenges of effectively balancing the demands of a religion which is central to everyday life and those of modern international tourism. Findings are derived from a review of print and electronic media and content analysis of promotional material, supplemented by data gathered during a period of fieldwork. The information collected helps to construct a composite picture, allowing comment on the interaction between tourism and religion and conclusions about the implications of such connections. Contradictions between religious observances and visitor requirements are identified and alternative methods of resolving them at an international, national and state level are assessed. Malaysia is an interesting context within which to explore these processes given the friction in society between modernisation and Islamic revivalism which has economic and political repercussions. Divergences in positions on religion between the federal government and an opposition party which has gained control of two states have consequences for tourism, evident in the series of recent events to be outlined.
The multiracial composition of Malaysia’s population adds another layer of complexity to the debate about religion there and the study focuses on Peninsular Malaysia where Malay Muslims form a majority, although other ethnic groups are present with some concerns about fragmentation. In contrast, Malay Muslims are in a minority group on the island of Borneo where the indigenous peoples of the states of Sabah and Sarawak and their unique cultures are distinct tourist attractions, heavily promoted in the marketing of ecotourism which evokes images of native primitivism, a jungle environment and colonial adventures (Douglas, 1999). Malaysian diversity is further apparent in divisions separating urban and rural dwellers and the progress and prosperity found in the capital of Kuala Lumpur is not typical of the whole country; such heterogeneity must be taken into account in any discussion. Nevertheless, East Malaysia is still exposed to the privileging of Islam and the erection and redevelopment of state mosques in the capitals confirms the priority attached to its affirmation by the federal powers (Cleary, 1997).

2. Tourism and Islam

Research has been conducted into aspects of the interconnectedness between religion and tourism (Rinschede, 1992; VuKonic, 1996) and parallels are often drawn between the two (Allcock, 1998; MacCannell, 1992; Schmidt, 1980). Tourist sites are shown to have acquired a sacredness, travel to them exhibiting the qualities of pilgrimage (Cohen, 1992; Smith, 1992), while actual pilgrimage venues display some of the trappings of the tourism industry so that the boundaries between them are obscured. The topic thus has a place in the literature that deals with the creation and representation of tourism spaces (Britton, 1991), many of which combine secular and spiritual meanings as evidenced in Indonesia (Dahles, 2001). These centres may be visited by religious and other tourists whose motivations, expectations and experiences are at variance. For example, the Taj Mahal is an Islamic emblem for Indian Muslims and symbol of national heritage to all Indians while its fame has given rise to a sense of universal ownership amongst Westerners who also lay claim to it, each group possessing their own ‘imagined geographies’ which shape interpretation (Edensor, 1998, p. 40). The commercial potential of the religious travel market has also been highlighted (Bywater, 1994; Russell, 1999) and Shackley (2001) writes about the effective management of sacred sites.

Tourism and Islam has, however, been relatively neglected which is surprising in view of the resurgence of the latter. An early study (Ritter, 1975) compares the evolution of tourism in Europe and the Middle East, revealing different patterns partly linked to religious doctrine. Din (1989) records the influence of the religion on tourism movements and policies in Islamic countries as a whole, concluding that inbound and outbound travel is relatively low in volume. Such conditions persist and these nations are now estimated to generate only about 7% of international tourism (BBC, 2001), although several such as Iran (Travel & Tourism Intelligence, 1998) are increasing their commitment to tourism development and its revenues are vital to the economies of the Maldives and the Gambia. Current leading destinations are Turkey and Malaysia, followed by Egypt, Indonesia and Morocco (World Tourism Organisation, 2002). Regional instability has had a detrimental impact on tourism growth in certain instances, one example being terrorist attacks by Muslim groups in Egypt (Aziz, 1995). Other commentators have noted this effect and the significance of Islam more generally in tourism research with a wider frame of reference (Burns and Cooper, 1997; Richter, 1999; Sharpley, 2002).

Several authors recount how Islam historically enjoined particular types of travel which have retained an important religious and social function, albeit constantly adapting to the changing world. The hirja incorporates an obligation to migrate, and the hajj (pilgrimage) is one of Islam’s five pillars alongside belief in Allah and the prophet Mohammad, prayer, fasting and the giving of charity. Kessler (1992a, p. 148) additionally lists ‘rihla (travel for the acquisition of learning or some other appropriate purpose such as commerce) and ziyara (visits to various shrines)’, these visits a form of voluntary pilgrimage which exemplifies the ‘spatially distinctive cultural traditions of Islamic populations’ (Bhardwaj, 1998, p. 71).

According to readings of the holy text of the Koran, Muslims should also travel in order to visit friends and relatives and fully appreciate the beauty of God’s world. They have a responsibility to provide hospitality to visitors who, under Islamic law, enjoy the rights of citizens. The emphasis is on purposeful movement with the objective of fostering unity among the larger Muslim community or ummah, and the long history of Muslim travel is documented by Eickleman and Piscatori (1990). In contemporary society, over a million travel annually to Saudi Arabia for the hajj (Aziz, 2001) which requires a massive organisational effort by the authorities (Travel & Tourism Intelligence, 1997). Its scale is depicted in accounts of Islamic religious circulation (Rowley, 1997), but Bhardwaj (1998) argues that the large numbers who take part in religiously inspired travel to centres besides Mecca should not be neglected. Many Muslims also appear to share the common enthusiasm for leisure travel as domestic and outbound tourism rise with growing affluence.

Gender differences in tourism involvement observed elsewhere (Kinnaird & Hall, 1994; Swain, 1995) are,
however, very striking in some patriarchal and ultra-orthodox Islamic cultures which impose severe restrictions on women. Tourism movements and industry practice are determined by conditions in society and mirror unequal gender relations where these exist. Male pre-eminence is a characteristic of many Muslim countries where women are denied a place in public life. Sonmez (2001, p. 123) claims that ‘women’s inferior status is legitimized’ in the Middle East by ‘misinterpretation’ of the religious texts, resulting in barriers to participation in tourism as well as other spheres of activity. At the same time, a number of women believe that a proper textual interpretation actually enhances and protects their rights (Afshar, 1998), veiling also seen as an assertion of cultural identity and not a symbol of female oppression (Moghadam, 1994). While recognising variations in perceptions of the position and power of Muslim women, overall they do appear to be disadvantaged as tourists, hosts and workers in the tourism industry.

Islam is not intrinsically opposed to tourism despite these gender-based inequalities of opportunity, yet international tourism is adversely affected by poor relations between Islamic and Western nations. Islam has been associated with conservatism, oppression, terrorism and anti-Western sentiment (Armstrong, 1994) while the West is criticised as an imperialist aggressor pursuing economic, social and political domination (Al Ahmad, 1984; Said, 1979) whose people are infidels of lax morals. Attitudes of tourists and their hosts are likely to be coloured by such conceptions, and cultures in which religion plays a fundamentally different role may clash at destinations. The arrival of non-Muslim inbound tourists is perhaps more disruptive for local Muslim communities than the situation reversed due to the religious codes which inform and protect their rights (Afshar, 1998), veiling also seen as an assertion of cultural identity and not a symbol of female oppression (Moghadam, 1994). While recognising variations in perceptions of the position and power of Muslim women, overall they do appear to be disadvantaged as tourists, hosts and workers in the tourism industry.

3. Race and Religion in Malaysia

Malaysia secured independence in 1957 and the new nation formally adopted the Malay language, religion and monarchy. Constitutionally, a Malay is a person who speaks Malay and follows Malay customs and the Islamic religion. Islam has become a metaphor for Malayness and a means to ‘preserve the integrity of its boundaries’ (Kessler, 1992b, p. 139), religion fixing the ‘tone of life’ and ‘one of the principal sources of identity’
Malay Muslims are predominant, but national identity is not so easily determined and other groups make up 39.6% of the population with large minorities of Chinese and Indians (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2001). Many religions are therefore worshipped and while there are Chinese and Indian Muslims, they do not enjoy the same status as Malays of that faith (Nagata, 1993). Even amongst the latter, there are variations indicated by the degree of support for Islamic revivalism and differences between urban residents and those living in rural areas who combine belief in Islam with adherence to adat or traditional Malay custom (Nagata, 1987). Thus ‘Malayness is unimaginable without Islam’, but the ‘relationship has constantly been redefined’ (Nagata, 1994, p. 84) and is also highly politicised.

Race and religion are the traditional foundation of Malaysian politics, recurring themes of which are the ‘maintenance of racial harmony, positive discrimination in favour of the bumiputera and friction between the Islamic parties and the government’ (EIU, 2001, p. 5). Bumiputera is usually translated as sons of the soil and an official term to denote a ‘quality of indigenousness’ (Nagata, 1981, p. 109) which covers Muslim Malays and the small number of non-Muslim aborigines in the Peninsula and tribal peoples of the east. UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) is the major Malay party and has come to dominate the government as part of the Barisan Nasional coalition, traditionally supported by Chinese and Indian parties in return for guarantees of citizenship and freedom of religion. Its leader, Dr Mahatir Mohamad, has been Prime Minister since 1981 and a major and sometimes controversial influence in shaping modern Malaysia (Khoo, 1995).

Underlying all government policy has been the contentious and divisive issue of the protection and promotion of bumiputera, in effect Muslim Malay, interests which was embodied in the New Economic Policy of the 1980s (Harper, 1998). This was replaced in the early 1990s by the National Development Policy designed to stimulate industrialisation (Shamsul, 1996) and rapid economic growth occurred under the later Vision 2020 programme, creating an urban middle class drawn from all races (Worden, 2001). Nevertheless, Malay Muslims still benefit from affirmative action and the minorities have been subject to cultural marginalisation (Milne & Mauzy, 1998). There is disagreement about how well ethnic diversity has been handled (Crouch, 2001; Jesudason, 2001), with some expressions of discontent, but an uneasy pluralism prevails. Multiracialism has also necessitated a degree of religious toleration and is a constitutional and legal barrier to the nationwide imposition of comprehensive Islamic law.

While embracing modernity and accepting a measure of secularisation in the drive towards full development, the government espouses Islam and presents the country as a moderate Islamic nation which has avoided the dangers of extremism. Its position has been attacked by the principal opposition party, Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS), which claims for itself the role of guardian of Islam and has long-standing plans to turn Malaysia into a theocracy. The party gained from electoral disenchantment with UNMO in the 1999 elections when it captured an additional 20 seats in the lower Parliament chamber, taking control of the northern state of Terengganu and holding neighbouring Kelantan. Both states have seen increasing ‘Islamicisation’ and PAS leaders are taking steps to replace the existing civil and criminal legal system with the Huddud, or full Islamic law which would introduce punishments of amputation of limbs for theft, stoning to death for adultery and flogging for theft (The Straits Times, 2000a). Such ambitions are a matter of political and religious dispute and there are also consequences for the tourism industry as explained in the next sections where federal policy makers and those in Terengganu are shown to be divided over tourism.

4. National accommodation

Critics of tourism in Malaysia and elsewhere in the Muslim world have dismissed certain forms of tourist behaviour as offensive and unacceptable; these include physical displays of affection and even making love in public places, drinking alcohol, wearing scanty clothing and sun bathing naked. Gambling and prostitution, often features of tourism, are also forbidden by Islam and expatriate hotel management may overlook religious rules regarding prayers and handling of pork and other non-halal food by staff (Hong, 1985). Discord is aggravated by exclusive and expensive enclaves which alienate residents and provoke a xenophobic reaction, especially where the gap in living standards between them and tourists is wide. Mass tourism defined by its ‘hedonism, permisiveness, lavishness, servitude and foreignness’ is thus on a collision course with Moslem devoutness and its ‘stress on ascetic abstinence and humility’ (Din, 1989, pp. 551, 552), yet there is a broader spectrum of feeling and actions exhibited by both parties than this statement implies with occasions of Muslim hypocrisy. This, and the preference accorded to men remarked on earlier, are illustrated by the numerous brothels across parts of the Malay-Thai border whose customers are mainly Malays (Horn, 2000).

However, the prevailing national stance on the management of tourism and Islam, although mindful of local sensibilities, is to satisfy international visitors and not insist on compliance with Islamic strictures (The Straits Times, 2002b). Commercial objectives to maximise revenue through providing the leisure environments demanded by the tourism industry may
therefore take precedence over religious considerations. Proponents of accommodation and compromise point to the economic rewards of tourism which accounts for approximately 3.7% of GDP (Travel and Tourism Intelligence, 2001). The Seventh National Plan (1996–2000) boosted tourism and the National Economic Recovery Plan, to help cope with the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s, identified it as a key sector in earning foreign exchange. Government invested an estimated US$505 million in the industry in 1999 when there were 7.9 million international arrivals (Musa, 1999), rising to over 10 million in 2000 with forecasts of 12 million in 2001 (The Business Times, 2001). Most of these are from East Asia, notably Singapore and Thailand; Europe, Australia and the USA are relatively small, but lucrative, markets (Travel & Tourism Intelligence, 2001).

Pragmatism also dictates the manner in which the country is sold as a destination by Tourism Malaysia, the National Tourism Organisation which reports to the Minister for Culture, Arts and Tourism. Content analysis of the Board’s printed and online information affords an insight into those aspects of the country’s people, including religion, which are deemed most marketable. Social scientists employ this tool, associated with semiotics and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1989), to assist in evaluating the meanings of written text and visual images (Slater, 1998). It has been found useful by tourism researchers exploring issues of place marketing (Pritchard & Morgan, 2001) and was adopted for this exercise. Keywords related to Islam were selected and the frequency of their use and the contexts recorded, with additional qualitative assessment of the material. The main travel guide for the country as a whole, others devoted to two states and the opening introduction to the destination on the official website were all evaluated (Tourism Malaysia 2002a–c; Tourism Malaysia website).

Tourism Malaysia’s latest campaign is entitled Malaysia Truly Asia and showcases the country’s multicultural heritage and natural attractions as well as more contemporary attributes of sporting events and a modern capital city; the Islamic religion is placed very firmly on the periphery in this representation. While Islam is recognised in the promotional material as the official religion and advice is given on three points of ‘common courtesies and customs’ which arise from Muslim observances, this connection is not made explicit. The sovereign is described as a Malay-Muslim and the traditional Malay State as an ‘interesting combination of Muslim autocracy and feudal decentralisation’. Moorish-style buildings, some a legacy of the colonial era, are on display in the capital and certain mosques and a few Islamic Museums are presented as sites of interest. The religious influence is most marked in the account of Putrajaya, the modern centre of government administration; this integrates ‘Islamic and local themes’ and was built according to ‘Islamic principles which emphasise the inextricable link between God, man and environment.’

A similar picture is drawn in leaflets for each state and those for Kelantan and Terengganu were chosen for examination as the locations are the heartland of PAS support where Islamic feeling is very strong. However, the only reminder of Islam in the Terengganu publication is to the visually appealing qualities of a mosque which ‘creates an illusion of itself as floating on water’. The Islamic factor is more obvious in Kelantan where the Islamic Museum depicts ‘not only the importance of Islam in Kelantan but also the position of the state as a centre of Islamic learning’ and the state mosque is a ‘centre for Islam missionary activities’. Nevertheless, images of fishing villages, nature and crafts take precedence and religion rarely features in any of the advertising. Where it does, the stress is on the cultural, historical and architectural dimensions of Islam and any contentious contemporary realities are overlooked.

Religious neutrality and colourful multiculturalism seem more appealing to international tourist markets than strident Malay Muslim ascendancy and King (1993, p. 113) terms this effect as one whereby Islam is ‘distanced’.

Wood’s (1984, p. 365) observation about the ‘unmarketability’ of Islam in Malaysia still appears to have validity and removing the Islamic religion from the forefront of Malaysian life may be seen as part of the effort to reduce any sense of tourist unease and insecurity. This orientation is not confined to the tourism industry and UMNO faces the general economic challenge of maximising ‘investment without offending local religious sensitivities’ and achieving ‘industrialisation without excessive Westernization or moral decadence’, establishing a ‘style of capitalism acceptable to most Muslims without sacrificing Malaysia’s credibility overseas’ (Nagata, 1997, pp. 92, 100). At the same time, the government has to match the religious rhetoric and protestations of devotion of PAS in communications with Muslims at home and abroad if it is to retain power. Achieving these ends is a daunting task, but there have been successes in tourism if measured by the steady growth in arrivals already noted, largely from non-Muslim markets. Success in terms of popular accord is harder to assess and there is political resistance in the PAS controlled states as outlined below with regard to Terengganu.

5. State confrontation

The state government in Terengganu has dedicated itself to a programme of ‘Islamicisation’ since taking office, criticising the Western secularism of the Mahatir
government and its exploitation of Islam for political ends (Kazi, 2001). A series of reforms to combat what are judged activities contrary to Islam have already impinged on the tourism industry. Karaoke outlets, pubs, gaming establishments and unisex hair salons were officially closed in 2000 (The Straits Times, 2002b) and the awarding of licences to sell alcohol at liquor shops is extremely restricted. Hotels and resorts do sell beer, but spirits are not easily available, and the government has said that it desires to earn revenue only from halal sources and not to depend on the sale of alcohol (The Sunday Times, 2002). Local Muslim women are being urged to wear the tudung or headscarf to maintain their modesty and attempts have been made since 2001 to enforce separate supermarket queues for men and women. Many roadside signs of verses from the Koran have been erected and those in parks warn against irreligious behaviour (The Straits Times, 2002b). As in other Malaysian states, local councils have Islamic enforcement units whose officers are responsible for ensuring compliance with regulations.

Plans to amend the state constitution to impose Shariah law were proclaimed in 2002, followed by news that female images would no longer be featured in tourism promotion because the ‘use of women and sex as well as other hedonistic influences are against Islamic guidelines’ (Ramli, 2002). Newspaper articles construed this as the introduction of an ‘Islamic concept of tourism’ (The Star, 2002). The State Tourism Committee Chairman spoke in the same week about devising a new dress code to discourage tourists from wearing revealing outfits such as bikinis. The construction of separate hotel swimming pools and staff hostels for men and women was also mooted. In addition, there was a warning about stricter alcohol prohibition, particularly in island resorts. According to officials, this was ‘part of an educational programme to ensure tourists respected the local culture and tradition ... necessary in the interests of Muslims’ and ‘required of Islam’ (The Straits Times, 2002c).

These pronouncements were condemned by hoteliers worried about having to explain them to tourists. Others maintained that denying them licences for even an in-house karaoke or one-man band were forcing guests to cross state borders in search of entertainment and food. Local politicians complained about the alienation of tourists, arguing PAS had to be realistic and accept that foreign tourists expected enlightened policies, not rules which would damage the industry and the state (The Straits Times, 2002d, e). Similar views were expressed by the Federal Minister for Culture, Arts and Tourism who asserted that the image of the country was being harmed, leading to cancellations by European tourists. The economic importance of tourism to Malaysia and the dangers of losing its substantial revenues were stressed (The Straits Times, 2002f). The Minister stated that the moves were ‘Taleban-like’ and ‘constitutionally incorrect’ and ‘true Islamic teaching did not impose the religion on others’ (The Straits Times, 2002b).

The hostile reaction amongst some interested parties and international media coverage of a ‘bikini ban’ (news.com.au) led to public ‘clarification’. The State Tourism Chairman was reported by the Federal Minister as having been misquoted in the press with no official statement ever made about banning bikinis. Less controversially, the state assembly had merely been informed by the Chairman that a working committee was to be set up to ‘study tourism in the state including the behaviour of tourists and their attire when they visit religious places like a mosque’. The new message, delivered by the Federal Minister, was that ‘we want tourists to know that they are welcome here, at our beaches, hotels and resorts’ (The New Straits Times, 2002).

Whether the Minister’s enthusiasm was shared by his state counterpart is unclear, but it would be misleading to label the Terengganu government as anti-tourism. It has declared its commitment to general development on a path of ‘progressing with Islam’, tourism listed as a specific investment opportunity founded on nature products. The state’s own advertising closely resembles that of Tourism Malaysia with themes of adventure and recreation, islands and beaches, local delicacies, places of interest and arts and culture. The only reminder of religion is in a note at the end of an account of traditional dances which ‘no longer have a spiritual element’, old animist forms of worship being ‘discarded with Islam’ (Terengganu State Government website).

How far the state authorities are prepared, or allowed, to go in ‘Islamicisation’ and its impact on international tourism are debatable. They confront obstacles of practical execution and obstruction from the central government over legal and constitutional questions, and distorted media coverage at home and overseas is an additional factor to contend with. Arrivals have expanded from 1.33 million in 2000 to 1.4 million in 2001 (The Sunday Times, 2002) when the tourism industry contributed 543.5 million ringgits to the economy (Terengganu State Government website). These are mainly domestic tourists and overseas visitors numbered only 142,041 in 2001, a fall of about 11% from 2000. There is no information about main purpose of travel, but religion as the primary motivation appears unlikely and a further decline in international arrivals might precipitate a re-evaluation of tourism policy. Despite these uncertainties, actions to date and intentions for the future demonstrate one way of tackling the problems facing more conservative Islamic regimes exposed to modern tourism, and hint at the significance of the Muslim domestic market.

Plans for a dress code might be confused, but the outcry from some quarters about the idea itself is also
inhabitants (SESRTCIC website), forecasted to rise to over 30% by 2025 (Maynes, 1998). The Muslim population is thus a sizeable market, the exploitation of which is a partial solution to the predicament of adjustment to tourists from a more alien culture and the figures for Terengganu reveal how important domestic activity can be.

The OIC has held two Tourism Ministers Meetings and a conference since 2000 which have discussed expanding tourism through improved research and training, marketing and upgraded infrastructure. Non-Muslim visitors are acceptable and there is a recognition of the value of working with the World Tourism Organisation and other international agencies, but much of the emphasis is on tourism as a vehicle for reinforcing the solidarity of the Islamic community. Greater travel by Muslims within the Islamic world could lead to better understanding, stimulate collaboration and serve the common good. At the latest meeting, a delegate advised creating more Islamic tour packages devoted to a Muslim heritage which has been largely ignored (Sayed, 2001). The Islamic Development Bank (IDB), the purpose of which is to stimulate economic growth and social progress amongst its 53 Muslim member countries as well as Muslims elsewhere in accordance with the Shariah, also expressed support for tourism. While the effectiveness of both the OIC and IDB have been questioned (Choudhury, 1997), their acknowledgement of the value of Muslim tourism does mark a departure and suggests it is acquiring a higher priority; this includes in Malaysia which hosted the second conference in 2002.

The terrorist attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001 and subsequent events have also enhanced awareness of Islam as a selling point in some markets. Appreciating the fears amongst many Muslims about visiting the West, Tourism Malaysia has sold the country as a safe destination with a familiar culture which is able to cater to Islamic travellers. For example, a new shopping centre in Kuala Lumpur designed to appeal to Middle Eastern tourists was publicised in early 2002 (The Straits Times, 2002g). Advertising themes highlighting religion may therefore become more noticeable when Malaysia is marketed in parts of the Middle East and Asia.

While a focus on Islamic travel, both international and domestic, is a possible future direction for Muslim destinations, there are economic constraints as well as ideological barriers to be overcome. Notwithstanding the affluence of some Muslim groups, others in densely populated states such as Bangladesh, Indonesia and Pakistan have very low incomes (UNDP, 2001) which will exclude participation in tourism. There may also be a lack of funding for investment in infrastructure. The evolution of a pan-Muslim market to its full potential is a long-term process and a country like Malaysia, with an already comparatively advanced international tourism industry, cannot rely on such visitors. Greater inclusive Muslim tourism achieved through cooperation thus is only a viable option commercially in combination with other strategies, at least from a national perspective.

6. International cooperation

The decision about whether Islamic destinations should seek to meet the demands of international tourists and, by doing so, risk upsetting Muslim tenets obviously is not so contentious when visitors are fellow Muslims from within or outside national boundaries. Although Muslim identities are not uniform (el Zein, 1977), conflicts over food, dress, conduct and religious and social observances are less likely. While intra-Islamic travel has been limited to date, apart from pilgrimages to Saudi Arabia, there is growing interest in this area. It is the subject of an initiative by the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), an inter-governmental organisation of 56 Islamic nations dedicated to the well-being of Muslims worldwide; these total approximately 1.4 billion or 20% of the world’s inhabitants (SESRTCIC website), forecasted to rise to over 30% by 2025 (Maynes, 1998). The Muslim population is thus a sizeable market, the exploitation of which is a partial solution to the predicament of adjustment to tourists from a more alien culture and the figures for Terengganu reveal how important domestic activity can be.

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7. Conclusion

Selected critical aspects of the often troubled relationship between Islam and tourism have been discussed in this paper, using recent developments in Malaysia as illustrations. Religion allied to race is a defining feature of Malaysian society where Islam is central to public and private life, but not the only religion worshipped, with potential for conflict between Muslim residents and non-Muslim international tourists. The central and state authorities have addressed this issue in different ways linked to religious, political and economic imperatives with strains between centre and state orientations which are part of a wider political struggle. The accommodation practised by the federal government compares with the more confrontational stance of the state while international cooperative ventures are being undertaken to stimulate the larger Muslim market.
Policy making in all three arenas has implications for visitor arrival flows, affecting how Malaysia is perceived as a destination and facilities and services on offer. While national authorities extend an enthusiastic welcome to tourists irrespective of their religion and origin, state decisions could inhibit Western-style tourism. Those at work in the tourism industry within Malaysia and its principal markets need to be aware of the changing conditions and have an appreciation of religious sensitivities, helping to educate tourists about appropriate behaviour. There is scope for consultation with religious figures, as well as local communities, regarding the formulation of codes of conduct and presentation of sites such as mosques and shrines as tourist attractions. The difficulties of establishing a consensus cannot be ignored, however, and the struggle to enforce Shariah law is another source of unease, although PAS has stated that only Muslims would be subject to its regulations. Further studies are necessary to fully evaluate outcomes and the effects of media reporting as well as attitudes amongst official decision makers and residents. The limitations of observations made in this review must also be acknowledged, including their greater applicability to Peninsular Malaysia compared to East Malaysia where different conditions generate other tourism management challenges (Mayer, 1999).

Circumstances in Malaysia are unique, yet the case does offer insights into the dilemmas confronting Muslim nations as they attempt to come to terms with modern mass tourism. Some might choose outright rejection or seek to isolate tourists, but others face the task of striking a balance between pleasing visitors and achieving possibly much needed economic gains whilst ensuring that religious demands are respected. Although there are particular political dynamics at work in shaping policy and a range in Islamic orthodoxy, it may be that other destinations could learn something from the Malaysian experience. Its efforts to resolve the problems and those made elsewhere in the Muslim world should provide a worthwhile topic for future research, the results of interest to tourism practitioners in both generating and host countries as well as academics.

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