



Religion and Spirituality in the Travel and Tourism Sector: A Study of Lonely Planet's Indonesia and Thailand Guidebooks

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Abstract

The distinction between religion and spirituality can be observed in the travel and tourism industry. The term “religion” is associated with institution, uniformity, and group. Spirituality, on the contrary, is individual, subjective, and experience-based. This opposition overlaps with the disparity between travelling and tourism. The content analysis was inspired by an article by Siv Ellen Kraft. My aim was to verify her statement in the contexts of Lonely Planet's guidebooks to Indonesia and Thailand, Eastern countries popular among foreigners charmed by their religious and spiritual otherness. I examined the images of religions delivered by Lonely Planet and studied the context and the frequency of application of the following terms: “religion,” “spirituality,” “belief.”

Keywords: religion, spirituality, tourism, travelling, guidebooks, Indonesia, Thailand

Słowa kluczowe: religia, duchowość, turystyka, podróżowanie, przewodniki, Indonezja, Tajlandia

Introduction

The aim of this text is to discuss the position of religion and spirituality in the travel and tourism sector¹. In order to achieve this objective, I examined the content of Lonely Planet's Indonesia and Thailand guidebooks, because the Lonely Planet (LP) publishing company has been influencing countless travellers for decades. It is a scholarly truism to mention the complexity of conceptualisation of religion and spirituality. Therefore, I will not define these terms here; the academic tradition of

¹ The preparation of the article was facilitated by the research grant 2016/21/N/HS3/00869 financed from the funds of the National Science Centre.

their interpretation has been broadly discussed by B.J. Zinnbauer and K.I. Pargament.² Nowadays, spirituality is placed within and beyond the domain of religion.³ The adjectives “religious” and “spiritual” denote similar objects. Moreover, the differentiation between them mainly concerns the attitudes of language users.⁴ Some people resist being characterised in traditional religious terms, and prefer to be called “spiritual” instead.

This article is inspired by the academic works of Michael Stausberg, Alex Norman, and Siv Ellen Kraft. Stausberg proved that the interrelations between religion and tourism are close and significant: “[...] Tourism, far from being the other of religion, is a major area, context and medium for religion in the contemporary global world.”⁵ Norman studied the phenomenon of spiritual tourism in the context of Rishikesh and the route to Santiago de Compostela.⁶ Spiritual tourists undertake foreign religious practices and seek spiritual fulfilment during their trips. They are different from religious tourists or pilgrimages, because “these tourists typically travel to destinations at which they participate in religious practices or traditions without necessary affiliation, and [...] in many cases, have little or no everyday connection with the practices or traditions in which they are taking part.”⁷ Finally, Kraft delivered a characterisation of the ideal spiritual traveller, who is not interested in permanent membership in any religious organisation, and explores, or checks out, various religious options. Preferably non-Western options, because “non-Western religions generally score higher on the scale of tourist attractions.”⁸ Moreover, Kraft analysed references to religion and spirituality in Lonely Planet’s guidebook to India. According to her, religious terms are omnipresent in the guidebook, appearing in two different variants: religion pertains to locals, and spirituality to foreign visitors. On the one hand, religion is associated with institution, statics, uniformity, and group. On the other hand, spirituality is individual, subjective, and experience-based. This opposition overlaps with the disparity between travelling and tourism:

Much like the “true traveller,” the spiritual person is credited with depth, tolerance and open-mindedness. By contrast to the passive and organised conformity of religion (and tourism), spirituality (and travelling) connote independence, creativity and transformation. Like tourism, religion is based on package-deals. Like spirituality, travelling is unique and personal.⁹

² B.J. Zinnbauer, K.I. Pargament, *Religiousness and Spirituality* [in:] *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, R.F. Paloutzian, C.L. Park (eds.), New York 2005, pp. 21–42.

³ M. Stausberg, *Religion and Spirituality in Tourism* [in:] *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Tourism*, A.A. Lew, M. Hall, A.M. Williams (eds.), Hoboken, NJ 2014, p. 355.

⁴ P. Socha, *Psychologia rozwoju duchowego – zarys zagadnienia* [in:] *Duchowy rozwój człowieka. Fazy życia, osobowość, wiara, religijność*, P. Socha (ed.), Kraków 2000, p. 15; D. Wulff, *Psychology of Religion: Classic and Contemporary*, 2nd edition, New York 1997, pp. 5–6.

⁵ M. Stausberg, *Religion and Tourism: Crossroads, Destinations and Encounters*, Abingdon–New York 2011, p. 8.

⁶ A. Norman, *Spiritual Tourism: Travel and Religious Practice in Western Society*, London–New York 2011.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 1.

⁸ S.E. Kraft, *Religion and Spirituality in Lonely Planet’s India*, “Religion” 2007, no. 37 (3), p. 235.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 238.

Methodology

Siv Ellen Kraft's study of *Lonely Planet India* directly inspired my paper. This article is the result of a content analysis of Lonely Planet's guidebooks to two Southeast Asian countries. Using one of the forms of textual analysis – the most popular qualitative method in the study of religions – enabled me to examine the message pertaining to religion and spirituality embedded in the selected sample.¹⁰ The analysis was focused on the following keywords: “religion,” “belief,” “spirituality,” and “philosophy.”

The academic attention given to the interrelations between religion/spirituality and tourism is limited mainly to the cultural contexts of India, Spain, and to a lesser extent Thailand.¹¹ Studying this subject matter in the framework of Indonesia and Thailand could be fruitful, because these destinations are popular among Westerners seeking spiritual experiences and authenticity in the course of their trips. Indonesia, despite being the country with the world's largest Muslim population, attracts travelers with its religious, cultural, and ethnic diversity, while Thailand charms tourists with exotic Theravada Buddhism.

I examined the messages embedded in the 14th edition of *LP Thailand*¹² from 2012 and in the 10th edition of *LP Indonesia*,¹³ released in 2013. Lonely Planet's publications shape the perspectives of numerous travellers, and are often labelled as “backpackers' bibles,” and therefore studying LP guidebooks can be meaningful. This publishing company was started almost half a century ago, after Tony and Maureen Wheeler travelled from Britain to Australia, across Europe and Asia. Today, Lonely Planet is a huge media corporation, which has published over 120 million printed books in 11 languages, alongside eBooks, website, and other digital products.¹⁴

Results

Judging books by their covers

On the cover of *Lonely Planet Thailand* is a photograph of Wat Benchamabophit, the Buddhist marble temple in Bangkok, and the cover of *Lonely Planet Indonesia*

¹⁰ C. Nelson, R.H. Woods Jr, *Content Analysis* [in:] *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, M. Stausberg, S. Engler (eds.), London–New York 2011, pp. 109–120.

¹¹ S. Burdziej, *W drodze do Santiago de Compostela. Portret socjologiczny pielgrzymki*, Kraków 2005; E. Cohen, *The Chinese Vegetarian Festival in Phuket: Religion, Ethnicity and Tourism on a Southern Thai Island*, Bangkok 2001; S.E. Kraft, *op. cit.*; A. Norman, *op. cit.*; B. Schedneck, *Constructing Religious Modernities: Hybridity, Reinterpretation, and Adaptation in Thailand's International Meditation Centers* [doctoral dissertation], Arizona State University 2012; R. Sharpley, P. Sundaram, *Tourism: a Sacred Journey? The Case of Ashram Tourism, India*, “International Journal of Tourism Research” 2005, no. 7, pp. 161–171.

¹² C. Williams, M. Beales, T. Brewer, C. Brash, A. Bush, A. Murphy, B. Preser, *Lonely Planet Thailand*, Victoria–London–Oakland 2012.

¹³ R. Ver Berkmoes, B. Atkinson, C. Brash, S. Butler, J. Noble, A. Skolnic, I. Steward, P. Stiles, *Lonely Planet Indonesia*, Victoria–London–Oakland 2013.

¹⁴ *The Lonely Planet Story*, <http://www.lonelyplanet.com/about/> [access: 14.10.2016].

depicts Borobudur, one of the world's largest Buddhist temples, situated in central Java. Kraft compared photographs from *Lonely Planet India* with those from *Lonely Planet California* and came to the conclusion that the Eastern religions rate higher as tourist attractions than Western ones; religion is omnipresent in the guidebook to India, yet almost absent from guidebooks to California.¹⁵

The cover of the latest edition of *Lonely Planet Poland* also presents a religious site – St Mary's Catholic Church in Krakow.¹⁶ Moreover, the cover photo of *LP Indonesia* has changed since 2013, with the latest edition presenting a rather natural monument – Mount Bromo.¹⁷ I used the word “rather” purposefully, because of the ambiguous nature of mountains – which are credited with holiness – in general, and of Bromo – “[...] the most worshipped volcano in Indonesia”¹⁸ – in particular. I am not sure if we can rely on quantitative analysis of photographs in a guidebook, and this part of Kraft's article may be an overinterpretation. Simply put, religious sites are the most important tourist attractions worldwide.¹⁹

Indonesia's rich religious diversity

The first subsection of the first page of *Lonely Planet Indonesia* indicates that the archipelago's most important tourist attraction is its rich religious, ethnic, linguistic, and environmental diversity.²⁰ Indonesia – a country with the world's largest Muslim population – charms travellers with its religious heterogeneity. Therefore, it is advertised by Lonely Planet as a place where a foreigner can observe “[...] the mysteries of spiritual Balinese [...]” and “[...] the utterly non-western belief system of the Asmat people of Papua.”²¹

The authors of LP Indonesia devoted particular attention to the exotic and syncretic religious beliefs and practices of the archipelago, primarily: Balinese, Javanese, and Toraja. The religion of Bali is presented as a vital force that influences the islanders' everyday life; their version of Hinduism seems to be unique and far from its Indian origin.²² The beliefs and practices of Javanese Muslims are depicted as highly syncretic, “[...] as an exotic and incredibly rich mix of customs that dates back to animist beliefs and Hindu times. Ancient practices are fused with endemic Muslim traditions, which retain mystical Sufi elements beneath a more obvious orthodox and conservative Islamic culture.”²³ The description of the religious life of the Toraja

¹⁵ S.E. Kraft, *op. cit.*, pp. 235–236.

¹⁶ *Poland Travel Guide*, <http://shop.lonelyplanet.com/poland/poland-travel-guide-8/> [access: 14.10.2016].

¹⁷ *Indonesia Travel Guide*, <http://shop.lonelyplanet.com/indonesia/indonesia-travel-guide-11/> [access: 14.10.2016].

¹⁸ H. Sigurdsson, R. Lopes-Gautier, *Volcanoes and Tourism* [in:] *Encyclopedia of Volcanoes*, H. Sigurdsson, B.F. Houghton, S.R. McNutt, H. Rymer, J. Stix (eds.), San Diego–San Francisco–New York–Boston–London–Sydney–Toronto 1999, p. 1296.

¹⁹ Cf. M. Stausberg, *Religion and Spirituality...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 351–352.

²⁰ R. Ver Berkmoes *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 201.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 47.

people from Sulawesi written by Celeste Brash stands out – it is not emotional, not like an advertisement, and accurate.²⁴ She portrayed contemporary Torajans as the members of predominately Christian communities that still practise vivid traditional funeral ceremonies, while travel agents tend to stress their commitment to local beliefs, discounting their non-exotic religious affiliation.²⁵

Meditation and religious festivals in Thailand

The religion of Thailand – Theravada Buddhism – which is practised by over 90% of the country's inhabitants²⁶ is depicted as a vibrant force that influences the daily lives of Thais. Two aspects of local spiritual life are offered to travellers – vipassana meditation courses and religious festivals.

Temples in Bangkok, “although at times Bangkok may seem like the most un-Buddhist place on earth [...],”²⁷ and temples in the province of Chiang Mai, which is Thailand's centre of spirituality, offer vipassana meditation courses and retreats in English. International Buddhist meditation centres contact travellers through their websites and encourage them to escape from everyday life for a two-hour introductory class (Wat Sisuphan)²⁸ to a 26-day or even longer intensive course (Northern Insight Meditation Centre).²⁹ The authors of LP Thailand have no doubts concerning the authenticity and purity of these religious practices offered for foreigners. However, Brooke Schedneck, who studied the emerging popularity of international meditation centres throughout Thailand, proved that Buddhist traditions have become merged with tourism, therapy, and elements derived from other religions in these spiritual sites.³⁰

Numerous religious festivals in Thailand are advertised by LP as colourful, vital, noisy, and entertaining museums of local culture.³¹ Among them, the Songkran is probably the most recognisable. This Lanna (northern Thailand) New Year, celebrated in April, is about purification.³² Firecrackers and fireworks drive away bad luck, evil spirits, and diseases. Processions with images of the Buddha became an essential part of the celebration in the 1950s. Another element of the Songkran, the

²⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 654–655.

²⁵ For example: *Toraja Funeral Ceremony Rambu solo*, <http://www.sulawesi-experience.com/news/toraja-funeral-ceremony.html> [access: 14.10.2016]; *Tana Toraja Tour, South Sulawesi*, <http://www.adventureindonesia.com/toraja-welcome.htm?gclid=C13rz9vE0rkCFc7C3godqCkAKA> [access: 14.10.2016].

²⁶ *Religious Diversity in Southeast Asia and the Pacific: National Case Studies*, G.D. Bouma, R. Ling, D. Pratt (eds.), London–New York 2010, p. 119; C. Williams *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

²⁷ C. Williams *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 255.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ B. Schedneck, *op. cit.*

³¹ C. Williams *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 713–720; J. Bainbridge, A. Bain, M. McAdam, *A Year of Festivals: A Guide to Having the Time of Your Life*, Melbourne 2008.

³² P. Porananond, M. Robinson, *Modernity and Evolution of a Festive Tourism Tradition: The Songkran Festival in Chiang Mai* [in:] *Asian Tourism: Growth and Change*, J. Cochrane (ed.), Oxford–Amsterdam 2008, pp. 311–322.

reciprocal exchange of water, has recently been transformed into continual water fights accompanied by loud music, dancing, and alcohol consumption. The tradition of Songkran underwent an evolution in the course of the 20th and at the beginning of the 21st century, “[...] the festival has been deliberately transformed from a relatively low-key but meaningful event to an occasion of spectacle.”³³ Tourism was one of the key drivers of this process. The transformation of this festival has been noted by the authors of *Lonely Planet Thailand*: “Thailand’s most famous festival didn’t start out as a water war. Once upon a time it was a quiet festival of house cleaning, resolutions and temple festivities. [...] It isn’t hard to imagine how the splashing water custom would eventually evolve into a throwing, launching and soaking wet party.”³⁴

Descriptions of religious landscapes

LP Thailand and *LP Indonesia* deliver brief and simple, albeit also correct and quite objective descriptions of the countries’ religious landscapes. In the former, we can find a characterisation of Buddhism and Islam. “Muslims make up Thailand’s largest religious minority, living side by side with the Buddhist majority,”³⁵ except they do not coexist in peace and harmony in the southern provinces of the country. Religious and linguistic discrimination of Malay Muslims from the south is mentioned later in the subsection. These cultural differences and discrimination “have led to a feeling of disconnection from the Buddhist majority in some parts of the Muslim-dominated south.”³⁶ Indeed, they had more severe consequences, resulting in armed separatism and religious violence.³⁷

The description of Indonesian religions from the *Lonely Planet* guidebook is brief, though accurate and objective. It portrays the contradictory character of religious freedom guaranteed by the Constitution of the Republic: “Indonesia’s constitution affirms that the state is based on a belief in ‘the One and Only God’; yet it also, rather contradictorily, guarantees ‘freedom of worship, each according to his/her own religion or belief.’”³⁸ Moreover, building a state on the belief in the One God may be perceived as contradictory with the national motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, or “unity in diversity,” preached by Indonesian politicians and diplomats. The *LP* guidebook informs that Indonesian freedom of religion pertains only to six state-recognised belief systems (Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism). And therefore, this description does not follow the usual narrative of the tourism and travel sector.³⁹ It does not deliver pro-government sermons about perfect

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 319.

³⁴ C. Williams *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 716.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 731.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

³⁷ *Religious Diversity in Southeast Asia and the Pacific*, *op. cit.*, pp. 120–122.

³⁸ R. Ver Berkmoes *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 723.

³⁹ For example: K. Solomon, *Festival of Indonesia: Unity in Diversity*, <http://asiatrend.org/arts/festival-indonesia-unity-diversity/> [access: 14.10.2016]; *Indonesia at a Glance*, <http://www.buffalotours.com/Indonesia-tours.html> [access: 14.10.2016].

management of religious diversity, or about, as Barack Obama called it, “that spirit of tolerance that is written into your Constitution; symbolized in mosques and churches and temples standing alongside each other, [...] embodied in your people [...]”⁴⁰

Religious and spiritual terminology

Siv Ellen Kraft argued that religion in *Lonely Planet India* comes in versions: “Religion is based on tradition, faith and historical institutions, whose members, rituals and sacred sites are of interest to travellers. Spirituality has to do with the personal development of travellers and is exclusively referred to as philosophy.”⁴¹ This disparity is present neither in *Lonely Planet Thailand* nor in *Lonely Planet Indonesia*.

The noun “spirituality” does not appear in *LP Thailand* at all, while the adjective “spiritual” is rare, and usually refers to a sacred place or object.⁴² In only one case does this adjective pertain to meditation practices offered for locals and “serious” foreigners: Wat Noen Phra Nao “[...] serves as a spiritual retreat for those facing personal crises, Westerners included, if they’re serious about meditation.”⁴³ On the contrary, in *LP Indonesia* we can find “spirituality,” “spiritual,” and “spiritually” frequently. These words recur in the context of Javanese and Balinese religious beliefs and practices. In the former, they usually pertain to holy mountains and the feeling of spiritual enlightenment.⁴⁴ In the latter, they are used primarily for describing Hindu temples or *puras*.⁴⁵ The adjective “spiritual” in *LP Indonesia* refers to indigenous beliefs of peripheries.⁴⁶ Furthermore, it is used in the context of Islam: “One of the most important months of the Muslim calendar is the fasting month of Ramadan. As a profession of faith and spiritual discipline, Muslims abstain from food, drink, cigarettes and other worldly desires (including sex) from sunrise to sunset.”⁴⁷

According to Kraft, spirituality in the version offered for travellers is also referred to as philosophy.⁴⁸ This pattern cannot be observed in the case of the content analysis of *LP Thailand*. In *LP Indonesia*, meanwhile there is only one example where the term “philosophy” is used as a synonym of religion: “Buddhism, more a philosophy than a religion, shunned the Hindu pantheon of gods in its goal of escaping from suffering by overcoming desire.”⁴⁹

The term “religion” recurs much more frequently than any other of the discussed notions. Moreover, in *Lonely Planet Thailand* we can observe a distinction between

⁴⁰ B. Obama [quoted in:] D. Sharma, *Barack Obama in Hawai’i and Indonesia: The Making of a Global President*, Santa Barbara 2011, p. 86.

⁴¹ S.E. Kraft, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

⁴² C. Williams *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 64, 188, 239, 357.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 464.

⁴⁴ R. Ver Berkmoes *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 40, 142, 185, 259, 723.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 2, 202, 229, 282, 286.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 2, 326, 389, 483, 586.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 724.

⁴⁸ S.E. Kraft, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

⁴⁹ R. Ver Berkmoes *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 725.

the notions of “religion” and “belief.” The former refers primarily to the religion of the monarchy and of the great majority of Thais – Theravada Buddhism,⁵⁰ and also to two other large religious systems – Islam and Sikhism.⁵¹ The latter is usually accompanied by one of the following adjectives: “traditional,” “folk,” “spiritual,” or “animistic.”⁵² This differentiation between religions and beliefs is hardly present in *Lonely Planet Indonesia*, where these terms seem to be fully replaceable. The lack of such disparity is surprising, because it is omnipresent in Indonesian language, law, and politics. On the one hand, six *agama* – “religions” are recognised by the state, and the rights of their adherences protected. On the other hand, there are *kepercayaan* – local, traditional, often non-monotheistic “beliefs.”⁵³ Their followers have been considered second-class citizens by the Indonesian government.⁵⁴ Nonetheless, they are not discriminated against by the authors of *LP Indonesia*.

Conclusions

The rich religious diversity of Indonesia, vipassana meditation courses and entertaining religious festivals of Thailand are presented as important tourist attractions in the *Lonely Planet* guides. Both books deliver brief but reliable portrayals of the countries’ religious landscapes. Furthermore, the authors of *LP Indonesia* were objective in this respect. Their attitude contradicts the popular and biased belief in a perfect embodiment of the *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* – “unity in diversity” – motto throughout the archipelago, which is characteristic of the travel and tourism industry.

The terms “religion,” “spirituality,” and “belief” used by the authors pertain rather to local hosts than to foreign visitors. Even though travellers are encouraged to dip into meditation, take part in religious festivals, and witness indigenous beliefs and practices, the religions of Indonesia and Thailand do not come in the two versions (“religion” versus “spirituality” or “philosophy”) described by Kraft. Nevertheless, another distinction was observed: that between global religions and local, folk, animistic beliefs. This is evident in *Lonely Planet Thailand*, though not in *Lonely Planet Indonesia*. This disparity surprisingly does not occur in the guidebook to Indonesia, despite the fact that it has dominated the country’s public discourse.

⁵⁰ C. Williams *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 34, 44, 65, 66, 68, 73, 157, 200, 699, 702, 726, 729, 730, 733.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 86, 731.

⁵² *Ibidem*, pp. 36, 50, 68, 85, 721, 722, 723, 731.

⁵³ Cf. M. Ramstedt, *Introduction: Negotiating Identities – Indonesian ‘Hindus’ between Local, National, and Global Interests* [in:] *Hinduism in Modern Indonesia: A Minority Religion between Local, National, and Global Interests*, M. Ramstedt (ed.), London–New York 2004, pp. 8–10.

⁵⁴ S. Abdi, *Islam, Religious Minorities, and the Blasphemy Laws: A Close Look at the Current Liberal Muslim Discourse* [in:] *Religious Diversity in Muslim-majority States in Southeast Asia Areas of Toleration and Conflict*, B. Plattdasch, J. Saravanamuttu (eds.), Singapore 2014, pp. 51–74.

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