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Reformulating Religious Tourism after COVID-19: Reflections on Area Studies from the Perspective of Mobility



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On the 21st of June 2020, while I was checking the news on my PC screen, I was surprised to see the Saudi government's announcement that Masjid Haram in Makkah would be reopened for visitors after the three months of closure. This announcement indicated the temporal end of the turmoil of COVID-19 in the MENA region and the Islamic world.

Due to the spread of the COVID-19 epidemic, the religious landscape in the Islamic world was completely transformed. During my research of religious tourism in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region, I have observed that religious journeys such as pilgrimages and religious visits to holy places have a strong linkage with the tourism industry and the market economy. In this environment, utilizing religious tours and tour operators has gained popularity among religious followers, and religious travel has been popularized. In this situation, overcrowded scenes in Makkah and other religious places have become quite familiar to me and to others watching the unfolding events.

However, as most of the OIC (Organization for Islamic Cooperation) countries have enforced border closures and strictly restricted human mobility, the livestreaming of a religious landscape devoid of people has become common. As this unusual situation in the religious places has become the norm, I really got bewildered by what I was seeing on my PC screen. Moreover, as the closure of mosques and religious facilities has become a regular occurrence in every country, Muslim societies are now recommending prayer at home or virtual prayer as the ‘new normal’. Even though some mosques are going to reopen, most of them are introducing social distancing or the “new normal” protocol at Friday prayers, which I still feel is rather strange. As I continue to see these radical changes in the social scenes in the Islamic world, I remain perplexed about how to understand this emerging world after the COVID-19 epidemic.

Needless to say, the ongoing situation of COVID-19 is strongly influencing religious mobility in the MENA region. As religious visitors who have visited religious sites in Saudi

Arabia, Iraq, and Iran have caused the spread of COVID-19 in various countries in the world, it has become clear that religious mobility and epidemics are strongly connected. In the recent epidemics of SARS in 2002 and 2003, or H1N1 influenza in 2009, the Saudi government and other OIC countries requested every religious visitor to carry a health certificate and enforced quarantine regulations. This situation shows the relationship between religious mobility and epidemics is like two sides of a coin.

The emerging situation is not only limited to religious mobility, as our social lives have also been deeply influenced by the COVID-19 epidemic. As I have been experiencing life during the State of Emergency in Japan, I have keenly sensed that our social lives have become dependent on physical mobilities like tourism, leisure, communication, and commuting to our workplaces. No matter how much our contemporary society has developed information technology and communication devices to alter physical contact into digital spaces, and how much our social life has become less dependent on physical interactions, we are still dependent on physical encounters and interplays in every aspect of our social lives. In this sense, we will face questions on reconsidering our contemporary situation from the perspective of our accumulated knowledge. How can we explain the premature lifting of borders and the suspension of human mobilities in MENA region countries like Egypt, Dubai and Turkey, despite the ongoing spread of COVID-19 in those countries? Or how is it that we are suffering from severe difficulties in the tourism industry today, when various environmental figures were complaining about over-tourism in the world last year?

Whenever suspension of human mobility is going to be systematically relaxed, social anxiety and uncertainty still remains. Even though epidemic prevention measures are put in place, our underlying social anxiety and uncertainty about whether somebody nearby has COVID-19 or not flags any stranger as a “potential risk”. This potentially threatening social environment drives us to construct new social barriers and boundaries to avoid or diminish this ‘potential risk’. In fact, with this in mind, Japan and other parts of the world are presently discussing the avoidance of long-distance journeys, and instead promoting short-distance travel or what are known as “travel bubbles” or “micro tourism” in the field of tourism. This kind of discussion shows that social barriers and boundaries to prevent mobility have already been constructed in our societies, in order to avoid and diminish “potential risk”.

The effects from the emergence of this new “potential risk” will remain with us in the post-COVID-19 era. No matter how far vaccine and quarantine systems develop, and how much people are able to enjoy their vacations anywhere in the world, these social barriers and boundaries will not be diminished. In our ongoing arguments, we tend not to discuss the proper ways of coexisting with this “potential risk” in the coming future, but are rather avoiding or diminishing the risk by isolating ourselves from the surrounding environment. In this sense, the coming post-COVID-19 era is going to bring social pressures to erect severalfold social boundaries among people to avert “potential risk” in our societies. I am wondering whether this kind of discussion will lead to the abandonment of our accepted way of social life, or even our way of thinking itself, which would completely destroy human beings’ social existence.

However, I am not yet despairing about our coming future. History teaches us that we have struggled to construct various social practices to avoid this “potential risk” in our social livelihood before. Various religions and cultures have kept their social values while encompassing this potential risk and continued to develop their environments as human beings as well. In the case of Islam, hospitality, manners, and etiquette called “*diyafa*” in Arabic, have promoted the welcoming of strangers in any Muslim society, and travelers can enjoy hospitality in peace, which has strongly contributed to the enhancement of the Islamic community as a social hub in the world. These kinds of interactions and communications have contributed to the development of human societies in various areas in the world.

In the post-COVID-19 era, therefore, we should reconsider the social meaning of this hospitality which we have developed. I strongly believe that area studies, which considers the actual situation of societies based on an interdisciplinary approach, has the potential to contribute to the coming future by reconstructing new societies and new human lifestyles. As I am presently restricted to this small part of the world in Gunma Prefecture, Japan, I continue to read books and articles, thinking of future possibilities for area studies.

Note: The idea for this essay is based on the symposium “Tourism Study after COVID-19” held by the Institute of Humanities, Human and Social Science at Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto, Japan on 5th July 2020.

Postscript (Added November 30, 2020)

In the end of July, Saudi government held hajj rituals with about 1,000 pilgrims with strict health protocols. Pilgrims who lived in Saudi Arabia and submitted negative records after two weeks isolation had the right to perform the rituals. The scene of pilgrims social distancing as they circled Kaaba indicated a significant change in our coming world.

After the success of hajj rituals in July, the Saudi government has gradually resumed its restrictions for pilgrims by constructing health protocols for them. Despite the ongoing epidemic of COVID-19 in the country, the Saudi government began to accept umrah pilgrims inside Saudi Arabia from October 4, and it opened a door for international pilgrims from November 1. In the resumption of the pilgrimage to Makkah in the COVID-19 era, the Islamic world has gradually accepted a new way of religious mobilities based on public health and scientific evidence.

In the ongoing situation of COVID-19 in Japan, this author's surrounding environment has also changed, which is working as a positive reinforcement. With the development of digital interactions in our social lives, our connectedness with other people and society is also going through the digital spaces like Zoom, SNS (social networking services) and other digital applications, and the digital divide between our society and other societies has been radically eliminated. In this changing environment, through the worldwide development of the digital sphere, we can easily connect with fellow researchers in our academic fields, check research data and enjoy various kinds of academic communication.

However, I am also reacknowledging the importance of "local sensibility" which is strongly embedded in physical interactions and communication in a certain social environment.

As one of the significances of area study is to clarify the “local sensibility” in a certain society, I am still struggling to clarify this “local sensibility” in the Islamic world through the digital sphere. In this situation, we are now considering our “new sense of area study” with physical disconnectedness in the era of COVID-19.

Author's Profile

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