The spiritual seekers and the 'tourist bubble': the Aminè experience

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Biographies

Monica Gilli is a sociologist of the University of Torino. Her research interests are: tourism as a factor of urban regeneration and local development, heritage tourism, religious and spiritual tourism, tourism and identity, food consumption. Among her publications there are: 2009: Autenticità e interpretazione nell’esperienza turistica, FrancoAngeli, Milano; 2012: The Voyage Out. Studi sociologici, Scriptaweb, Napoli and 2015: Turismo e identità, Liguori Editori, Napoli.

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Abstract

Our case study is the Federation of Damanhur. Damanhur, one of the most important spiritual communities in Europe, is located in ValChiusella, fifty kilometres north of Torino, Piedmont, Italy. At present, according to the community’s estimates, about 600 members live there permanently. Damanhur every year hosts thousands of visitors who experience the spiritual community thanks to daily tours, weekly stays and seminars. Since some years some scholars of the University of Torino are studying the community of Damanhur, with particular attention to the relationship between the spiritual dimension and the economy, including tourism. In this paper we present some results of the tourist stay in Damanhur of one of us (Stefania Palmisano). This stay was used by Stefania as a quick ethnography allowing her to begin to understand the major aspects of spiritual vision and the characteristics of this spiritual tourist experience.

Introduction

It is well known that the process of secularization of society has meant not only a reduction of individual adherence to historical religions, but also an equally significant internal renewal of these religions. Another novelty of contemporary society is the birth of new religious movements (NRMs), religious communities or spiritual groups of modern origins, which occupy a peripheral position in society’s dominant religious culture. The rise of NRMs may be considered both a product of, and an answer to, modern processes of secularization, globalization, reflexivity and individualization. Some NRMs deal with the challenges of the modernizing world by embracing individualism, whereas others seek tightly-knit collective means. Many have their own unique scriptures, while others reinterpret existing texts.

Our case study is the Federation of Damanhur. Damanhur is a spiritual community located in the foothills of the Piedmontese Alps, 50 km North of Turin, and near Ivrea, the city headquarters of the Olivetti Company. Damanhur is named after the city of Damanhur which was the site of a temple dedicated to Horus in North Egypt. Although the Federation of Damanhur has centers
both within and outside Europe, the Damanhur community in Piedmont is one of the few neo-pagan communities in Italy in the wake of Findhorn (Scotland). The community was founded in 1975 by Oberto Airaudi with around 11 followers, and the number has now grown to more than 600. Damanhur holds a mixture of New Age and neo-pagan beliefs and has its own constitution, flag and currency (the *Credits*).

According to local narratives, the history of the community’s foundation is embedded in myth and symbolism: the place where Damanhur was built is supposed to be located at the centre of meaningful ‘energetic’ and ‘spiritual’ networks (so-called ‘synchronic lines’). Moreover, the original owner of the land started having dreams about the foundation of Damanhur years before Airaudi and his disciples physically came to buy the land. The central site of Damanhur is that of Damjl where buildings (the “Open Temple” and some houses) were constructed, and where the original community of Airaudi and 11 of his followers first settled. By this point Airaudi was recognized as the spiritual guide and he chose to be called Falco (Hawk) as an esoteric name (to which, later, he will add that of Dandelion – a strong flower which survives in harsh climates). Similarly, community members abandoned their birth names in favour of names combining elements of flora and fauna, such as “Ant-Coriander,” “Swan-Reed,” “Steinbock-Peach,” and ‘Shark-Hemp’ to characterize their spiritual identity. Airaudi passed away in 2013, but his spiritual, material and political heritage is still considerably in the air and, according to believers, his ‘energetic’ presence as well.

Staying true to Airaudi’s original vision of a community based upon ethical and spiritual values, Damanhur has captivated attention around the world as a laboratory for experimenting sustainable ways of living in harmony with nature and its elements and forces. The community has attracted interest from scholars, educators and researchers in the fields of art, social sciences, spirituality, medicine and alternative health, economics and environmental sustainability. In 2005, Damanhur received recognition from the United Nations Global Forum on Human Settlements as a model for a sustainable society.

Every year Damanhur hosts about 10,000 visitors who experience the spiritual community thanks to daily tours, weekly stays, seminars, retreats and courses. For two years scholars of the University of Turin (partly thanks to the research center CRAFT, Contemporary Religions and
Faiths in Transition - Department of Cultures, Politics and Society, Turin University) have been studying the community, paying particular attention to the relationship between its spiritual dimension and its economy, including tourism.

The Damanhur offer consists in short visits (half-day visit, one day visit, Sunday and Holidays special visit), in stays of a few days (3 or 5 days visit) and, finally, in the extended stays (the 10 days Aminè experience, the New Life Program (3 months) and the WWOOFing in cooperation with WWOOF Italia (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms).

In this paper we analyze Stefania Palmisano’s “10-Day Adventure in Damanhur”, a program called Aminé, experienced last summer. Like the other guests (called “pilgrims”), she was hosted in a family nucleus and she participated in research, group projects and daily tasks. This ethnographic experience helped her, as a temporary Damanhur citizen, to understand major aspects of the complex community’s life, mythology and spiritual vision. The pilgrim group, who can be mainly considered composed by “spirituality seekers”, displayed heterogeneity in their past spiritual experiences, motivations and behaviors. This participant observation, in addition to some interviews with Damanhurians, permitted the collation of some general considerations of the experience.

**Methodology**

This paper is part of wider research on Damanhur initiated in 2015. In addition to a lot of information collected in two years of research using participant observation, questionnaires and in-depth interviews, the paper will be based on Palmisano’s ethnography and on in-depth interviews with the pilgrims and with the heads of the Damanhur Welcome office.

**Results**

The Damanhur tourist experience appears to be situated between two opposite poles, the tourist and the spiritual; on the one hand we find the pilgrims’ attempt, as “spirituality seekers”, to understand and deepen the Damanhurian spirituality; and on the other the necessary, inevitable tourist frame in which time and experience modes are rationally scheduled, which make pilgrims sometimes frustrated, making it more difficult to satisfy their desire for spirituality.
Conclusion and Discussion

This dynamic, which recalls the traditional tourist dialectics of hosts/guests and front/back regions, is even more accentuated by the fact that Damanhur is an esoteric community whose sacred knowledge (on which Horusian doctrine is based) is reserved only to members and is not divulged to pilgrims.

Bibliography


