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Emerging Scholar Profile

My interest in Asian cultural heritage and anthropology began quite early during high school when I started to casually read different authors such as Mircea Eliade and René Guénon about Hinduism, Buddhism and Daoism and other Asian religions. My father's book collection was a great start for these readings. At the same time, I decided to learn a new language as a pastime, and being already interested in Japanese culture, I chose to take a dive into Japanese language. While at that time learning such a complicated language appeared to be no more than a curious hobby, over the years it became a valuable tool for not only academic research, but for forging meaningful relationships during my lifetime. Having a great interest in these subjects, I decided to carry out my undergraduate degree at the School of Oriental Studies of Del Salvador University in Buenos Aires, Argentina. This School is one of the few academic institutions in Latin America to offer a bachelor degree in Oriental Studies, or Asian Studies as it is called in other countries, so having such an institution in my hometown was certainly a happy coincidence or good luck. During my undergraduate at Del Salvador University, I could learn about the literature, history and anthropology of different Asian cultures, but still my main area of interest remained East Asia, particularly Japan. Having graduated from Asian Studies, I had a longing to jump from books to the actual fieldwork in order to conduct research in Japan regarding the contemporary meaning and utilization of its cultural aspects. For this purpose, tourism proved to be both an unexpected and suitable academic field. Having decided to venture into this new academic field, I applied for the Research Student scholarship offered by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) and arrived in 2013 to study at the Faculty of Tourism of Wakayama University. In this institution, I met many supportive professors and students who helped me complete my Master and PhD degrees.

After arriving to Wakayama, I began to travel around the prefecture for study and leisure, as well as reading different materials about its locations. While there was a wide range of interesting places, the Kumano Kodo pilgrimage in particular caught my attention, as there was little academic material on it at the time, especially written in non-Japanese sources. The pilgrimage was also experiencing a rapid development in inbound tourism, particularly after its registration as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2004. Because of this context, different nationalities, particularly those from Western nations, were visiting the area. This sparked a great interest in me. Why would Western visitors come all the way down to the Kii peninsula, relatively far from the main tourism destinations, and undertake the pilgrimage? What was attractive to them about a place that had little to no cultural ties with them? These questions

were the start for the PhD thesis objective, which was carried out during the course of three years: examine visitor diversification in pilgrimage sites through domestic and international visitors through means-end methodology, developed by Gutman (1982). Means-end proved to be a very valuable qualitative method for this type of research, as it allowed a multi-level comparison of destination's attributes and their linkage to the participants' personal valuables. Still, carrying out qualitative research in outdoor locations, such as mountainous pilgrimage trails, is a challenge due to time constraints, weather and participants' busy schedules. Therefore, I stayed in a popular guesthouse as a temporary worker, which allowed me access to the tourists, as well as a suitable location for conducting fieldwork. After interviewing Australian and Japanese visitors, analysis showed a variety of similarities and differences between the two nationalities, demonstrating a growing diversification in sacred sites which incorporates a complex range of elements related to leisure, sports, intercultural exchange, nostalgia, escapism and relaxation, beyond a continuum of contemporary spirituality and traditional religion. In this sense, it was observed that nationality is a fundamental but overlooked factor for studying contemporary pilgrimage tourism. While conducting this study, I also carried out other research projects on themes related to my thesis such as DMO development, tourism impacts and sustainable destinations, which were later published. Some of these works include "Spiritual (walking) tourism as a foundation for sustainable destination development: Kumanokodo pilgrimage, Wakayama, Japan" (Kato & Prozano, 2017), "Spirituality and tourism in Japanese pilgrimage sites: Exploring the intersection through the case of Kumano Kodo" (Prozano & Kato, 2018), and "Residents' perceptions of socio-economic impacts on pilgrimage trails: How does the community perceive pilgrimage tourism?" (Prozano, 2018). Finally, I also had the chance to participate in academic conferences both in Japan and abroad which helped to expand my networking, as well as to acquaintance myself with different research perspectives.

After completing my PhD in 2019, I continued my academic research as a lecturer at the Center for Tourism Research of Wakayama University with study themes centered on pilgrimage, tourism in Asia, cultural heritage, anthropology and cultural geography. Expanding my academic horizons, I am currently tackling spiritual and pilgrimage tourism in different locations in Japan from new approaches such as transformative experience and guiding. Also, I have started to build research cooperation with both Japanese and overseas universities in order to carry out multi-disciplinary research projects in which all the members can bring their own expertise and networking to help create innovative approaches to tourism studies. Finally, I started to diversify my research interests to different themes related to cultural anthropology and geography, as the current rapid tourism development in Asia and the rich diversity of its cultures constantly provide new study opportunities. In the following years, while continuing with studies on pilgrimage-related tourism, I will explore areas of research such as colonial heritage and communities, as well as tourism-related urban gentrification. These new studies are expected to not only bring forward understudied aspects of their related fields, but also to have practical contributions for their local communities. Particularly, the study of urban gentrification in Asian contexts is expected to bring attention to poverty issues related to tourism development, such as the role of tourism in poverty alleviation.