

1 **From Spiritual Practice to Economic Asset:**
2 **The Developmental Economics of Sacred Travel in**
3 **Emerging Tourism Regions – The Case of Limpopo**
4 **Province, South Africa**

5
6 *Sacred travel has historically functioned as an important form of human*
7 *mobility shaping cultural exchange, trade networks, and regional spatial*
8 *development. Despite its growing recognition within global tourism systems,*
9 *limited scholarship has examined sacred travel as a regional economic*
10 *development mechanism, particularly within rural African contexts. This*
11 *study investigates the economic significance of sacred travel in Limpopo*
12 *Province, South Africa, with specific reference to the Zion Christian Church*
13 *(ZCC) Easter pilgrimage to Moria and other spiritually significant*
14 *destinations such as Mapungubwe. Using a qualitative narrative review*
15 *methodology, the study synthesises interdisciplinary literature, tourism*
16 *policy documents, institutional reports, and regional statistics to examine*
17 *how pilgrimage mobility contributes to local and regional economic*
18 *development. The study integrates tourism multiplier theory, the Sustainable*
19 *Livelihoods Framework (SLF), and Butler’s Tourism Area Life Cycle*
20 *(TALC) model to construct a multidimensional analytical framework for*
21 *understanding sacred travel. Findings reveal that pilgrimage tourism*
22 *generates direct, indirect, induced, and spatial economic effects through*
23 *visitor expenditure on transport, accommodation, food, religious*
24 *merchandise, and informal trading activities. Sacred travel further supports*
25 *micro-enterprise development, livelihood diversification, informal-sector*
26 *participation, and temporary employment creation within economically*
27 *marginalised communities. In addition, recurring pilgrimage flows stimulate*
28 *infrastructure utilisation, regional mobility networks, and destination*
29 *management systems. However, the study also identifies key constraints,*
30 *including inadequate infrastructure, fragmented governance, weak policy*
31 *integration, and limited economic data relating to faith-based tourism. The*
32 *study concludes that sacred travel should be recognised as a strategic*
33 *tourism and regional development asset capable of promoting inclusive*
34 *growth, cultural sustainability, and rural economic resilience. Integrating*
35 *sacred travel into tourism planning and regional development frameworks*
36 *could enhance provincial competitiveness and support sustainable local*
37 *economic development in Limpopo Province and similar rural contexts.*

38
39 **Keywords:** *Sacred travel; faith-based tourism; regional economic*
40 *development; sustainable livelihoods; Limpopo Province; informal*
41 *economy; rural tourism.*

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43
44 **Introduction**

45
46 Sacred travel remains one of the oldest and most enduring forms of human
47 mobility, historically rooted in religious obligation, spiritual devotion, and
48 socio-cultural exchange. Long before the emergence of modern leisure tourism,

1 pilgrimage routes facilitated interactions among distant communities,
2 stimulated trade, and shaped spatial development patterns across regions
3 (Timothy & Olsen, 2006). In contemporary tourism systems, faith-based
4 tourism continues to influence destination competitiveness, cultural
5 preservation, heritage management, and place-branding strategies (Kladou &
6 Mavragani, 2019; Raj & Griffin, 2021). Recent global tourism scholarship
7 increasingly recognises religious tourism as a rapidly expanding segment that
8 contributes significantly to local economies, social cohesion, and cultural
9 sustainability (UNWTO, 2023; Sharma & Nayak, 2024).

10 Despite this growing recognition, scholarly engagement with sacred travel
11 has remained largely concentrated on its theological, cultural, and sociological
12 dimensions, with limited attention devoted to its measurable economic and
13 regional development implications (Papadopoulos, 2018; Olsen, 2021).
14 Existing studies frequently conceptualise pilgrimage primarily as a spiritual or
15 symbolic practice rather than as a recurring economic activity capable of
16 generating local multipliers, enterprise development, and livelihood
17 opportunities within host regions (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021). Consequently,
18 the developmental role of sacred mobility remains under-theorised within
19 tourism economics and regional planning literature, particularly in developing
20 economies where culturally embedded tourism systems may contribute
21 meaningfully to endogenous growth processes (Markantonatou, 2020; Novelli,
22 2023).

23 The problem is particularly pronounced in South Africa, where tourism
24 plays a strategic role in economic growth, employment creation, and local
25 economic development (World Travel and Tourism Council [WTTC], 2024).
26 Although Limpopo Province has demonstrated strong domestic tourism growth
27 in recent years, provincial tourism development strategies continue to prioritise
28 wildlife, heritage, and eco-tourism markets while largely marginalising sacred
29 travel and pilgrimage dynamics (Limpopo Tourism Agency [LTA], 2024). This
30 policy omission persists despite the province hosting some of the largest
31 religious gatherings in Southern Africa, including the Zion Christian Church
32 (ZCC) Easter pilgrimage to Moria, which annually attracts millions of pilgrims
33 and generates substantial economic activity across accommodation, transport,
34 retail, food services, and informal trading sectors (Kgatla, 2016; Rogerson,
35 2022).

36 Simultaneously, Limpopo continues to face persistent socio-economic
37 challenges, including high unemployment, poverty, and limited rural economic
38 diversification (Statistics South Africa, 2024). Within this context, sacred
39 travel represents a potentially significant yet insufficiently recognised
40 mechanism for stimulating local economic circulation and supporting
41 livelihood diversification. From a regional development perspective, recurring
42 pilgrimage flows create demand for goods and services, support informal-
43 sector participation, and strengthen local enterprise systems through direct,
44 indirect, and induced economic effects (Markantonatou, 2020; Novelli, 2023).
45 However, the economic significance of sacred travel remains inadequately

1 incorporated into provincial tourism planning frameworks and insufficiently
2 examined within South African tourism scholarship.

3 Although international studies increasingly acknowledge the
4 developmental potential of faith-based tourism, the literature remains
5 fragmented across tourism studies, religious studies, cultural geography, and
6 development economics (Raj & Griffin, 2021; Olsen, 2021). Few studies have
7 systematically integrated tourism multiplier theory, livelihood analysis,
8 destination evolution, and sustainability perspectives to examine sacred travel
9 as a regional development mechanism. Moreover, there is limited empirical
10 and conceptual research focusing specifically on the southern African context,
11 where sacred mobility intersects with indigenous cultural systems, informal
12 economies, and rural underdevelopment challenges (Rogerson & Rogerson,
13 2021). This represents a significant gap in both academic scholarship and
14 tourism policy discourse.

15 To address these gaps, this study reconceptualises sacred travel as a
16 multidimensional regional economic development mechanism rather than
17 merely a religious or cultural phenomenon. The study integrates tourism
18 multiplier theory, the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, and Butler's
19 Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model to provide a comprehensive analytical
20 framework for understanding how pilgrimage mobility contributes to local
21 economic circulation, infrastructure utilisation, enterprise development, and
22 household livelihood resilience. By doing so, the study extends existing
23 scholarship beyond conventional cultural interpretations of pilgrimage and
24 situates sacred travel within broader debates on sustainable tourism
25 development, rural transformation, and inclusive regional growth (Scoones,
26 1998; Butler, 1980; Rogerson, 2022).

27 The novelty of this study lies in its interdisciplinary integration of tourism
28 economics, livelihood theory, and destination development models within the
29 context of sacred travel in rural South Africa. Unlike previous studies that
30 focus predominantly on spiritual motivations or socio-cultural meanings, this
31 research foregrounds the economic functionality of pilgrimage systems and
32 their potential contribution to sustainable regional development. Furthermore,
33 the study positions sacred mobility as an endogenous development asset
34 capable of generating recurring economic value while simultaneously
35 preserving cultural identity and social cohesion (Throsby, 2010; UNEP, 2011).
36 The study contributes to both theory and policy in several ways. Theoretically,
37 it advances tourism scholarship by bridging the divide between pilgrimage
38 studies and regional economic development analysis through a
39 multidimensional conceptual framework. Empirically, it highlights the
40 economic significance of sacred travel within Limpopo Province, thereby
41 expanding limited African scholarship on faith-based tourism and
42 development. From a policy perspective, the study provides evidence
43 supporting the integration of sacred travel into provincial tourism
44 diversification strategies, infrastructure planning, and community-based
45 development initiatives. Ultimately, the research contributes to emerging
46 debates on culturally grounded and sustainability-oriented tourism pathways

1 capable of promoting inclusive economic development in marginalised rural
2 regions (UNWTO, 2023; Novelli, 2023).

3 4 5 **Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

6
7 Growing scholarly attention has increasingly recognised sacred travel as
8 an important component of global tourism systems and regional development
9 processes. Nevertheless, the literature remains fragmented across tourism
10 studies, religious studies, cultural geography, and development economics,
11 resulting in limited theoretical integration regarding the developmental
12 significance of pilgrimage mobility (Raj & Griffin, 2021; Olsen, 2021). While
13 existing scholarship has extensively explored the spiritual meanings, ritual
14 dimensions, and socio-cultural significance of pilgrimage, comparatively little
15 attention has been devoted to understanding sacred travel as a
16 multidimensional economic and regional development mechanism, particularly
17 within developing economies and rural African contexts (Rogerson &
18 Rogerson, 2021; Novelli, 2023). Consequently, there remains a significant
19 conceptual gap in linking sacred mobility to tourism economics, livelihood
20 resilience, and sustainable regional development.

21 Within tourism economics, tourism multiplier theory has long been utilised
22 to explain how visitor expenditure circulates through local economies to
23 generate broader developmental outcomes (Archer, 1982; Fletcher, 1989). The
24 theory distinguishes between direct, indirect, and induced economic effects.
25 Direct effects arise through visitor spending on accommodation, transport,
26 food, and retail services, while indirect effects emerge through supply-chain
27 linkages and local procurement systems. Induced effects occur when income
28 earned from tourism-related activities is re-spent within local economies,
29 generating additional rounds of economic circulation (Fletcher, 1989).
30 Although multiplier frameworks are widely applied within leisure and
31 destination tourism studies, their application to pilgrimage and faith-based
32 tourism remains comparatively underdeveloped (Markantonatou, 2020;
33 Rogerson, 2022). Recent scholarship increasingly acknowledges that religious
34 tourism contributes to destination competitiveness, local enterprise stimulation,
35 and regional economic diversification, yet systematic economic modelling of
36 sacred travel remains limited (Kladou & Mavragani, 2019; Sharma & Nayak,
37 2024).

38 Research on pilgrimage tourism further demonstrates that sacred sites
39 frequently operate as economic anchors within rural and peripheral regions.
40 Olsen and Timothy (2006) argue that pilgrimage destinations often stimulate
41 employment creation, local market expansion, and small-enterprise
42 development through recurrent visitor flows. Similarly, Sharpley and
43 Sundaram (2005) highlight the developmental potential of faith-based tourism
44 in catalysing infrastructure investment, community participation, and
45 destination transformation when strategically integrated into tourism planning
46 frameworks. More recent studies also emphasise the role of religious tourism in

1 promoting cultural sustainability, place identity, and community-based
2 development (Raj & Griffin, 2021; Olsen, 2021). However, these contributions
3 remain largely descriptive and are seldom synthesised within an integrated
4 regional development framework capable of explaining how sacred mobility
5 contributes to broader socio-economic transformation in emerging tourism
6 regions.

7 To address these conceptual limitations, this study adopts an
8 interdisciplinary theoretical framework integrating tourism multiplier theory,
9 the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF), and Butler's Tourism Area Life
10 Cycle (TALC) model. The integration of these theoretical perspectives enables
11 sacred travel to be analysed not only as a tourism activity, but also as a
12 dynamic development mechanism embedded within social, economic, cultural,
13 and institutional systems.

14 Tourism multiplier theory provides the primary economic lens
15 underpinning this study. Originating within regional economics and
16 subsequently adapted to tourism analysis, multiplier theory explains how initial
17 injections of visitor expenditure generate cumulative income and employment
18 effects throughout local economies (Archer, 1982). This framework is
19 particularly relevant in rural contexts where the depth of local supply chains,
20 ownership structures, and economic leakages determine the extent to which
21 tourism benefits are retained locally (Fletcher, 1989). Applying multiplier
22 theory to sacred travel allows pilgrimage flows to be conceptualised as
23 recurring economic stimuli capable of activating layered value chains across
24 accommodation, transport, retail, food services, and informal trading sectors. In
25 the context of Limpopo Province, where pilgrimage gatherings attract
26 substantial visitor volumes, multiplier effects provide a useful framework for
27 understanding how sacred mobility contributes to local economic circulation
28 and enterprise activity.

29 While multiplier theory captures macro- and meso-level economic effects,
30 the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (Scoones, 1998) broadens the analysis
31 by focusing on household-level livelihood outcomes and resilience processes.
32 The SLF conceptualises livelihoods in terms of access to five forms of capital,
33 namely human, social, financial, physical, and natural capital, while
34 recognising the influence of institutional and vulnerability contexts on
35 livelihood strategies. This framework is particularly relevant to sacred travel
36 because pilgrimage economies often create low-barrier income opportunities
37 for marginalised groups operating within informal and rural economies
38 (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021). Seasonal trading, informal transport provision,
39 food vending, and religious merchandise sales associated with pilgrimage
40 gatherings can therefore contribute to income diversification, household
41 resilience, and incremental asset accumulation. Integrating the SLF enables the
42 study to move beyond aggregate economic indicators and examine how sacred
43 travel supports inclusive development outcomes within economically
44 vulnerable communities.

45 Complementing these perspectives, Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle
46 (TALC) model (1980) introduces a spatial and temporal dimension to the

1 analysis of sacred destinations. The TALC model conceptualises tourism
2 destinations as evolving through stages of exploration, involvement,
3 development, consolidation, stagnation, and either rejuvenation or decline.
4 Applying this framework to pilgrimage tourism provides insight into how
5 sacred sites evolve from locally embedded ritual spaces into larger tourism
6 destinations characterised by increasing visitor flows, infrastructural
7 development, and institutional coordination. In Limpopo Province, some
8 sacred sites remain at exploratory, or involvement stages marked by informal
9 enterprise participation and limited infrastructure, while others, such as the
10 Zion Christian Church (ZCC) pilgrimage centre at Moria, demonstrate
11 characteristics associated with consolidation and destination maturity. The
12 TALC framework therefore enables assessment of governance demands,
13 infrastructural pressures, sustainability challenges, and long-term destination
14 trajectories associated with the expansion of sacred travel.

15 The study further draws on insights from cultural economy and green
16 economy scholarship to contextualise sacred travel within broader debates on
17 sustainable development. Cultural economy theory highlights the economic
18 significance of intangible heritage, symbolic capital, and identity-based assets
19 in shaping destination competitiveness and experiential tourism markets
20 (Throsby, 2010). Sacred sites function as repositories of cultural meaning and
21 authenticity, qualities increasingly valued within contemporary tourism
22 systems (Raj & Griffin, 2021). Simultaneously, green economy perspectives
23 emphasise the importance of community-centred, low-impact development
24 pathways that promote socio-economic inclusion while minimising
25 environmental degradation (UNEP, 2011; UNWTO, 2023). In many cases,
26 sacred travel relies more heavily on cultural and social capital than on
27 infrastructure-intensive tourism models, thereby aligning with sustainability-
28 oriented regional development approaches.

29 The integration of these theoretical perspectives forms the conceptual
30 foundation of the present study. Tourism multiplier theory explains the circulation
31 of pilgrimage-related expenditure and broader economic linkages; the Sustainable
32 Livelihoods Framework captures livelihood diversification and resilience
33 outcomes; the TALC model situates sacred destinations within evolving spatial
34 and developmental trajectories; while cultural and green economy perspectives
35 position sacred travel as a sustainability-aligned endogenous development asset.
36 Collectively, these frameworks provide a multidimensional lens through which
37 sacred mobility can be understood as a culturally embedded and economically
38 significant regional development mechanism.

39 Despite the relevance of these theoretical traditions, few studies have
40 systematically integrated them to examine sacred travel within southern
41 African regional development contexts. In provinces such as Limpopo, where
42 pilgrimage mobility intersects with indigenous cultural systems, Christian
43 revival movements, informal enterprise economies, and persistent rural
44 underdevelopment, such theoretical integration becomes essential. By
45 grounding sacred travel within established tourism, livelihood, and regional
46 development frameworks, this study contributes toward bridging the divide

1 between pilgrimage studies and tourism policy analysis. In doing so, it
2 provides a coherent conceptual basis for examining the economic significance
3 of sacred mobility and its potential contribution to sustainable and inclusive
4 regional development.

5 6 7 **Methodology**

8
9 This study adopts a qualitative narrative review methodology to examine
10 the role of sacred travel as a regional economic development mechanism
11 within Limpopo Province, South Africa. A qualitative approach was
12 considered appropriate because the study seeks to synthesise interdisciplinary
13 knowledge, critically engage with theoretical perspectives, and explore the
14 complex socio-economic dimensions of pilgrimage tourism within a contextual
15 and interpretive framework (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Narrative reviews are
16 particularly suitable for emerging or under-researched fields where conceptual
17 fragmentation exists and where theoretical integration across multiple
18 disciplines is required (Green, Johnson & Adams, 2006; Snyder, 2019). Given
19 the limited empirical scholarship linking sacred travel, tourism economics, and
20 regional development in the southern African context, the methodology
21 provides the flexibility necessary to integrate diverse strands of literature while
22 preserving contextual depth and analytical nuance.

23 The study utilised secondary data obtained from peer-reviewed academic
24 literature, tourism policy documents, institutional reports, and statistical
25 publications. Academic sources were systematically identified through
26 established electronic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science,
27 ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, and JSTOR. Search terms included
28 combinations of keywords such as sacred travel, pilgrimage tourism, faith-
29 based tourism, religious tourism, tourism multiplier effects, regional
30 development, sustainable livelihoods, rural tourism, tourism economics, and
31 Limpopo tourism. These keywords were selected to ensure broad
32 interdisciplinary coverage across tourism studies, development studies,
33 religious studies, and regional economics.

34 To strengthen the contemporary relevance of the analysis, emphasis was
35 placed on recent scholarly contributions published between 2018 and 2025,
36 while seminal and foundational works were included where theoretically
37 necessary. Key institutional and policy documents were also consulted,
38 including reports from the United Nations World Tourism Organization
39 (UNWTO), the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), the Limpopo
40 Tourism Agency (LTA), Statistics South Africa, and the South African
41 Department of Tourism. These sources provided contextual data relating to
42 tourism performance, employment trends, visitor flows, and regional socio-
43 economic conditions within Limpopo Province.

44 Inclusion criteria were applied to ensure the relevance, quality, and
45 credibility of the selected sources. Literature was included if it: (a) examined
46 pilgrimage, sacred travel, or faith-based tourism; (b) addressed tourism-related

1 economic, livelihood, or regional development outcomes; (c) focused on rural
2 or regional development contexts; and/or (d) provided conceptual or empirical
3 insights applicable to the South African or broader developing-country context.
4 Sources that focused exclusively on theological or purely spiritual dimensions
5 without engaging socio-economic implications were excluded unless they
6 provided important contextual understanding of pilgrimage systems.

7 The collected data were analysed using thematic content analysis. This
8 process involved purposive coding and categorisation of recurring themes
9 relating to economic multiplier effects, livelihood diversification, informal-
10 sector participation, infrastructure development, destination evolution,
11 sustainability, and governance dynamics associated with sacred travel (Braun
12 & Clarke, 2021). Thematic synthesis enabled the identification of patterns and
13 conceptual relationships across the literature, thereby facilitating the
14 development of an integrated analytical narrative linking sacred mobility to
15 regional development processes.

16 The study is further underpinned by an interdisciplinary conceptual
17 framework integrating tourism multiplier theory, the Sustainable Livelihoods
18 Framework (SLF), and Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model.
19 Tourism multiplier theory provided the economic foundation for analysing the
20 circulation of pilgrimage-related expenditure within local economies (Archer,
21 1982; Fletcher, 1989). The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (Scoones,
22 1998) was utilised to examine household-level livelihood implications,
23 resilience-building processes, and informal-sector participation associated with
24 sacred travel economies. Butler's TALC model (1980) provided a spatial and
25 developmental lens through which pilgrimage destinations could be understood
26 as evolving tourism systems shaped by infrastructure development,
27 institutional coordination, and destination maturity. The integration of these
28 frameworks enabled the study to analyse sacred travel as a multidimensional
29 development phenomenon embedded within economic, cultural, institutional,
30 and spatial systems.

31 The Zion Christian Church (ZCC) Easter pilgrimage to Moria was utilised
32 as an illustrative case example within the broader narrative review. The case
33 was selected due to its scale, regional significance, and economic prominence
34 within Limpopo Province. As one of the largest religious gatherings in
35 Southern Africa, the pilgrimage provides a useful context through which the
36 developmental implications of sacred mobility can be examined in relation to
37 tourism expenditure, informal enterprise participation, infrastructure utilisation,
38 and regional economic circulation.

39 Although the study relies predominantly on secondary data and conceptual
40 synthesis rather than primary empirical investigation, the methodology remains
41 appropriate for addressing the study's objectives. The narrative review
42 approach enables a comprehensive synthesis of fragmented scholarship while
43 providing a strong conceptual foundation for future empirical research on
44 sacred travel and regional development in South Africa and other developing
45 contexts.

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Sacred Travel in Limpopo Province: Context and Statistics

Tourism Performance in Limpopo Province

Limpopo Province occupies a unique position within South Africa's tourism landscape. Historically overshadowed by wildlife and coastal destinations, Limpopo has demonstrated significant growth in domestic tourism, particularly in the post-COVID-19 recovery period. According to the Limpopo Tourism Agency's 2023/24 Annual Report, the province recorded an estimated 8.59 million domestic tourism trips, generating approximately ZAR 20.1 billion in overnight tourism expenditure and contributing 26.8 million bed nights to the domestic tourism economy (LTA, 2024). These figures highlight not only the scale of demand but also the economic importance of tourism activity in underpinning local enterprise and employment.

Table 1. *Limpopo Tourism Performance Indicators (2023/24)*

| Indicator | Value |
|-------------------------------|------------------|
| Domestic tourist trips | 8.59 million |
| Overnight tourism expenditure | ZAR 20.1 billion |
| Total bed nights | 26.8 million |
| Provincial unemployment rate | ~34–35% |

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Source: Limpopo Tourism Agency Annual Report (2024); Statistics South Africa (2024).

These performance indicators illustrate the economic scale of tourism in Limpopo, reinforcing the need to understand various demand segments—including sacred travel—that contribute to overall visitation and expenditure patterns.

Case Example: Zion Christian Church (ZCC) Easter Pilgrimage, Moria

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The annual Easter pilgrimage of the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) to its headquarters at Moria, near Polokwane, represents one of the largest and most economically significant religious gatherings in Southern Africa. As one of the most influential African Independent Churches in the region, the ZCC attracts millions of congregants annually, transforming Moria into a temporary spiritual, social, and economic hub (Anderson, 2000; Kgatla, 2016).



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Although fundamentally a religious observance, the pilgrimage generates substantial economic activity that extends beyond the sacred site into broader regional and interprovincial economies. From a tourism economics perspective, the pilgrimage constitutes a major injection of visitor expenditure into Limpopo's economy. Pilgrims spend on transport, accommodation, food, religious regalia, and commemorative merchandise, thereby stimulating both formal and informal sectors. In line with tourism multiplier theory, this expenditure produces direct, indirect, and induced economic effects (Archer, 1982; Fletcher, 1989). Direct effects are reflected in increased demand for accommodation facilities, supermarkets, fuel stations, transport services, and informal trading activities in Polokwane and surrounding municipalities. Indirect effects emerge through supply-chain linkages involving wholesalers, agricultural suppliers, textile manufacturers, printers, and distributors associated with the production of church uniforms and religious merchandise. Induced effects occur when income generated during the pilgrimage circulates within local communities through household consumption and micro-enterprise activity.

Transport services form one of the most visible dimensions of the pilgrimage economy. Large numbers of buses, taxis, and private vehicles transport pilgrims from across South Africa and neighbouring countries to

1 Moria, creating intense mobility flows during the Easter period. Taxi operators,
2 bus companies, fuel stations, tyre suppliers, mechanics, and vehicle repair
3 services all experience heightened economic activity. The image below
4 illustrates the scale of this transport mobilisation, where more than 550 buses
5 assembled in Moria reflect the magnitude of sacred mobility associated with
6 the pilgrimage.
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9 Source: eNCA, DSTV Channel 403 Podcasts, Friday 18 April 2025, 10:20am.

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11 Economically, these buses represent far more than a transportation system;
12 they constitute a temporary but highly significant mobility economy that
13 stimulates multiple sectors across provincial and regional markets. Revenue
14 generated through passenger transport, fuel consumption, vehicle maintenance,
15 toll fees, logistics coordination, insurance services, and roadside commerce
16 demonstrates the extensive economic networks linked to pilgrimage mobility.
17 Transport corridors connecting Limpopo with Gauteng, Mpumalanga,
18 Northwest, and neighbouring countries become active spaces of commercial
19 exchange and regional integration, illustrating how sacred travel contributes to
20 broader tourism and mobility economies (Olsen & Timothy, 2006).

21 The pilgrimage further stimulates extensive informal trading and small-
22 scale enterprise activity. Temporary markets emerge around Moria and along
23 major transport routes, where vendors sell food, beverages, clothing, household
24 goods, and religious items. Informal trading during the Easter gathering
25 provides important livelihood opportunities for unemployed youth, women,
26 and small-scale entrepreneurs operating within marginalised communities
27 (Scoones, 1998; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020). For many local traders, the
28 pilgrimage season represents one of the most profitable trading periods of the
29 year, contributing significantly to household income and local economic
30 circulation.

1 Religious merchandise and church regalia also form an important
2 component of the pilgrimage economy. Traders supply church uniforms,
3 badges, scarves, hats, shoes, and commemorative items associated with the
4 ZCC. Demand for these products increases considerably during Easter,
5 stimulating broader supply chains involving textile manufacturers, wholesalers,
6 printers, and distributors located across different provinces (Rogerson, 2022).
7 Consequently, the economic benefits of the pilgrimage extend beyond Moria
8 into interconnected regional production and distribution networks.

9 Food preparation and hospitality services similarly expand during the
10 pilgrimage period. Temporary food vendors provide meals and refreshments
11 for pilgrims, while supermarkets, wholesalers, and agricultural suppliers
12 benefit from increased demand for food products and basic commodities.
13 Accommodation establishments in and around Polokwane also experience
14 increased occupancy levels as some pilgrims require overnight lodging.
15 Although many visitors are accommodated within church-designated spaces,
16 the increased demand for hospitality services contributes to local economic
17 stimulation and temporary employment creation (Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005).

18 Retail businesses and fuel stations in surrounding municipalities also
19 experience increased commercial activity during the Easter gathering. Pilgrims
20 purchase groceries, toiletries, fuel, airtime, and other consumer goods before,
21 during, and after the pilgrimage. This heightened consumption strengthens
22 local revenue generation and reinforces tourism multiplier effects within the
23 regional economy. Income earned by traders and service providers is
24 frequently re-spent within local communities, thereby supporting household
25 livelihoods and secondary economic activities (Archer, 1982; Fletcher, 1989).

26 Beyond these immediate commercial benefits, the recurring nature of the
27 pilgrimage creates predictable seasonal opportunities that support enterprise
28 planning, temporary employment creation, and informal-sector participation.
29 The gathering also necessitates infrastructural coordination involving traffic
30 management, sanitation services, security provision, and public safety
31 operations, thereby reinforcing local governance and destination management
32 systems. Applying Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model (1980),
33 Moria may therefore be understood as a specialised religious destination in a
34 consolidation phase characterised by established institutional coordination,
35 infrastructure reinforcement, and enterprise clustering around pilgrimage
36 activities.

37 From a sustainable livelihood perspective, the pilgrimage provides important
38 income-generating opportunities for households operating in contexts marked by
39 high unemployment and limited formal economic opportunities. Activities such as
40 food vending, transport provision, accommodation services, and religious
41 merchandise sales contribute to household resilience, livelihood diversification,
42 and local economic participation (Scoones, 1998; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020).

43 Overall, the ZCC Easter pilgrimage demonstrates that sacred travel
44 functions not only as a spiritual practice but also as a recurring regional
45 economic stimulus. Through its direct, indirect, induced, and spatial economic
46 effects, the pilgrimage contributes to local enterprise development, regional

1 economic circulation, infrastructure utilisation, employment creation, and
2 livelihood support within Limpopo Province and beyond (Archer, 1982; Butler,
3 1980; Fletcher, 1989).

4
5 *Case Example: Mapungubwe Ancestral and Spiritual Pilgrimage Practices*
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7 Beyond the ZCC event, other sacred sites and ceremonial calendars in
8 Limpopo, such as ancestral worship grounds, traditional male initiation rituals,
9 and prophetic church gatherings, generate recurrent but less centrally organised
10 flows of visitors, contributing further to cumulative economic impacts at the
11 local level.

12 Another important example of sacred travel in Limpopo Province, beyond
13 the Zion Christian Church pilgrimage, is associated with the Mapungubwe
14 Cultural Landscape, located within the broader Mapungubwe National Park.
15 While Mapungubwe is internationally recognised for its archaeological
16 significance as the centre of a precolonial African kingdom dating from the
17 11th to 13th centuries, it also retains deep spiritual and ancestral meaning for
18 descendant communities, including Vhangona, Venda, and other groups with
19 historical ties to the region. Sacred hills, burial sites, and surrounding
20 landscapes serve not only as heritage attractions but also as living cultural
21 spaces where ritual practices, ancestral communication, cleansing ceremonies,
22 and commemorative gatherings take place. These periodic spiritual return visits
23 constitute a form of sacred mobility that, although less centrally organised than
24 mass church pilgrimages, generates recurrent visitation flows with measurable
25 local economic implications.

26 During ritual events and cultural commemorations, visitors create demand
27 for accommodation in nearby towns such as Musina and Alldays, while also
28 stimulating expenditure on transport, prepared food, ceremonial attire, beads,
29 and handcrafted artefacts. As highlighted in tourism multiplier theory (Archer,
30 1982; Fletcher, 1989), such spending produces direct effects in hospitality and
31 retail sectors, indirect effects through upstream supply chains, and induced
32 effects as income earned by local vendors circulates within surrounding
33 communities. In rural contexts characterised by limited formal employment,
34 these expenditure flows support informal traders and micro-enterprises,
35 aligning with sustainable livelihoods perspectives that emphasise diversified
36 income strategies (Scoones, 1998). Over time, heritage recognition and tourism
37 development associated with Mapungubwe have also encouraged
38 infrastructural improvements, conservation investments, and enhanced
39 accessibility, demonstrating spatial spillover effects consistent with broader
40 destination development models (Butler, 1980).

41 This case illustrates that sacred travel in Limpopo extends beyond large-
42 scale Christian gatherings to include indigenous spiritual systems and
43 culturally embedded ancestral practices. Although differing in scale and
44 organisation from the ZCC Easter pilgrimage, sacred mobility linked to
45 Mapungubwe activates similar economic impact pathways and reinforces the
46 argument that faith-based and heritage-rooted travel represents a structurally

1 embedded, economically significant component of the provincial tourism
2 system.

3 4 5 **Economic Impact Pathways of Sacred Travel**

6
7 Tourism impacts are conventionally understood through multipliers that
8 capture how visitor expenditure circulates within local economies (Archer,
9 1982; Fletcher, 1989). For sacred travel in rural contexts like Limpopo, these
10 pathways operate through four interrelated channels: direct effects, indirect
11 effects, induced effects, and spatial spillovers.

12 13 *Direct Effects*

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15 Direct effects refer to immediate expenditure by visitors on goods and services,
16 including accommodation, meals, transport, ceremonial materials, and locally
17 produced artefacts. During pilgrimage peaks, the demand for guesthouses,
18 informal homestays, street food vendors, and shuttle transport increases
19 markedly, shifting local economic activity from subsistence livelihoods toward
20 market exchange.

21 22 *Indirect Effects*

23
24 Indirect effects arise through upstream supply linkages that support the
25 tourism economy, such as wholesalers supplying food vendors, transport
26 companies procuring vehicle maintenance services, and tailors producing
27 ceremonial clothing. These linkages extend economic benefits beyond the core
28 tourism sectors into peripheral industries and service providers.

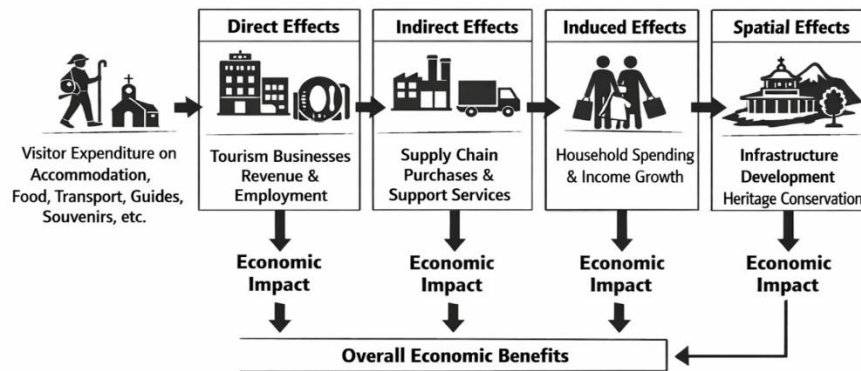
29 30 *Induced Effects*

31
32 Induced effects capture the re-circulation of tourism income within local
33 economies, as households earning income from tourism expenditures spend
34 their earnings on local goods and services. This cycle can stimulate further
35 economic activity, enabling micro-enterprise growth and increased household
36 consumption.

37 38 *Spatial Spillovers*

39
40 Spatial spillovers describe the longer-term infrastructural and accessibility
41 improvements that accompany sustained tourism demand. Recurrent
42 pilgrimage flows can justify road upgrades, enhanced signage, sanitation
43 facilities, and community service investments, benefits that extend beyond the
44 pilgrimage event itself and support broader economic participation.

45
46

1 **Figure 1.** *Conceptual Framework: Sacred Travel Economic Impact Pathways*

2

3

4 Figure 1 above illustrates the sequential economic pathways through
 5 which sacred travel generates broader regional economic benefits. The
 6 framework begins with **visitor expenditure**, representing spending by pilgrims
 7 and religious tourists on accommodation, food, transport, guides, ritual
 8 services, and souvenirs. This initial spending constitutes the primary economic
 9 stimulus within host destinations.

10 The second stage captures **direct effects**, where tourism-related
 11 businesses, such as hotels, guesthouses, restaurants, and local transport
 12 providers, experience increased revenue and employment. These direct impacts
 13 reflect the immediate financial gains and job creation generated by sacred
 14 travel activity.

15 The third stage highlights **indirect effects**, which occur when tourism
 16 businesses purchase goods and services from local suppliers. These supply
 17 chain linkages stimulate production in supporting sectors such as agriculture,
 18 handicrafts, construction, and logistics, thereby expanding the economic reach
 19 beyond frontline tourism enterprises.

20 The fourth stage presents **induced effects**, arising when employees and
 21 business owners spend their increased income within the local economy. This
 22 household spending further amplifies economic circulation, contributing to
 23 income growth and enhanced local demand for goods and services.

24 Finally, the framework incorporates **spatial effects**, emphasizing longer-
 25 term structural outcomes such as infrastructure development, improved public
 26 services, and heritage conservation around sacred sites. These investments
 27 enhance destination competitiveness and reinforce sustainable regional
 28 development.

29 Collectively, the diagram demonstrates how sacred travel functions as a
 30 multiplier mechanism, transforming individual visitor spending into layered
 31 economic impacts that culminate in overall economic benefits for host
 32 communities.

33

1 **Informal sector participation and micro-enterprise development**

2
3 Sacred travel's economic significance in Limpopo is most pronounced in
4 its stimulation of the informal sector and growth of micro-enterprises. In
5 contexts where formal employment is limited and rural economies exhibit
6 persistent underemployment, event-based tourism flows, such as those
7 generated by pilgrimage gatherings, provide accessible opportunities for
8 income generation (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020). Periodic sacred events create
9 localised demand for goods and services, which are often supplied by informal
10 vendors, small-scale traders, and community-based enterprises. Women, in
11 particular, dominate segments of the informal economy associated with sacred
12 travel, especially in food vending, small retail of religious paraphernalia, and
13 provision of basic hospitality services such as refreshments and seasonal
14 accommodation (Scheerpeltz, 2018).

15 For many rural households, sacred travel presents a low-barrier entry point
16 into the tourism economy, enabling participation without extensive capital
17 investment or formal training. Local entrepreneurs often mobilise existing
18 skills, such as cooking, craft production, tailoring, and transport operations, to
19 capture returns from recurrent pilgrimage cycles. For example, it is common to
20 observe clusters of temporary food stands within walking distance of major
21 pilgrimage sites such as Moria's ZCC Easter grounds, where community
22 members prepare and sell local dishes to pilgrims arriving from across South
23 Africa and neighbouring countries. Similarly, informal vendors selling
24 traditional beads, prayer books, ceremonial attire, and handcrafted souvenirs
25 capitalise on the cultural authenticity valued by visitors (Timothy & Olsen,
26 2006).

27 The cyclical nature of these markets supports livelihood diversification by
28 supplementing incomes derived from agriculture, remittances, and temporary
29 labour. In turn, this income is frequently reinvested locally, stimulating further
30 economic activity outside the tourism cycle. For households living near
31 pilgrimage sites, the financial inflows during peak sacred travel periods can
32 constitute a significant portion of annual income, contributing to resilience
33 against economic shocks and facilitating incremental improvements in living
34 standards (Ashley et al., 2001).

35 Research also points to the gendered nature of sacred travel's economic
36 impacts. Women's participation in informal markets is disproportionately
37 higher than in formal enterprise sectors, which often require access to credit,
38 formal business registration, and mobility that women in rural areas may not
39 possess (Dube & Nhamo, 2017). The ability of sacred travel events to create
40 temporary yet recurrent opportunities for women's economic engagement
41 demonstrates an inclusive dimension of this form of tourism, supporting
42 broader objectives of gendered empowerment and social participation within
43 development frameworks such as the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework
44 (Scoones, 1998).

45

1 **Infrastructure and Planning Challenges**

2
3 Despite the evident potential for sacred travel to contribute to regional
4 economic development, several structural constraints limit its capacity to drive
5 sustained growth. Among the most pressing are inadequacies in infrastructure,
6 including transport networks, water and sanitation services, electricity
7 provision, and public amenities. Many sacred sites in Limpopo are located in
8 rural areas that are underserved by paved roads, reliable public transport, and
9 basic visitor infrastructure. The ZCC pilgrimage site at Moria, for example,
10 periodically experiences severe congestion on access roads during peak
11 seasons, with limited parking and insufficient traffic management. These
12 conditions not only diminish the visitor experience but also reduce the
13 efficiency of service delivery by informal vendors and formal hospitality
14 providers alike (Rogerson, 2018).

15 Inadequate sanitation and waste management facilities further compound
16 the challenges, posing public health risks and environmental degradation
17 during extended pilgrimage periods. Pilgrims may remain at sites for several
18 days, and the cumulative effects of inadequate waste removal, limited access to
19 potable water, and temporary shelter strain local infrastructure. While such
20 challenges are not unique to sacred travel, their recurring nature underscores
21 the need for strategic planning that anticipates seasonal demand pressures and
22 implements targeted investments in basic services.

23 Moreover, the lack of integrated spatial planning and destination
24 development frameworks means that sacred travel sites often exist outside the
25 formal circuits of provincial marketing and development strategies. Tourism
26 master plans for Limpopo, while comprehensive in addressing wildlife,
27 heritage, and adventure tourism segments, rarely articulate sacred travel
28 explicitly as a market segment warranting focused investment. This omission
29 limits opportunities for coordinated infrastructure upgrades, signage, safety
30 improvements, and visitor orientation services that would support sustainable
31 growth over time (Limpopo Department of Economic Development,
32 Environment and Tourism [LEDET], 2022).

33 In the absence of designated support structures, local communities
34 frequently bear the burden of managing large crowds, organising informal
35 service provision, and maintaining temporary infrastructure without adequate
36 resources. These grassroots efforts, while commendable, lack the institutional
37 backing needed to sustainably scale their economic impact. Addressing these
38 infrastructural limitations requires multi-level coordination between municipal
39 authorities, provincial tourism agencies, traditional leadership structures, and
40 faith organisations to align investments with demand cycles and visitor flows.

41 42 43 **Governance Dynamics and Policy Gaps**

44
45 Effective governance is critical to realising the full economic potential of
46 sacred travel, yet the institutional landscape in Limpopo is characterised by

1 fragmentation and overlapping mandates. Governance fragmentation often
2 results in unclear lines of responsibility between municipal authorities,
3 provincial tourism and economic development departments, traditional leaders,
4 and faith organisations that administer sacred sites. This lack of coherent
5 governance structures complicates strategic decision-making, resource
6 coordination, and the development of tourism products that responsibly harness
7 sacred travel for economic growth (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020).

8 Sacred sites may fall under the jurisdiction of traditional authorities, which
9 exercise cultural custodianship, while tourism planning falls under the purview
10 of municipal and provincial governments. The lack of formal frameworks to
11 coordinate these overlapping authorities impedes the integration of sacred
12 travel into provincial tourism development plans and resource allocations. As a
13 result, planning efforts are often reactive rather than proactive, responding to
14 immediate crowd management needs rather than long-term infrastructure
15 development, destination planning, or formal enterprise support.

16 Policy gaps are also evident in the lack of targeted support mechanisms for
17 pilgrimage-linked micro-enterprises. While mainstream tourism policies offer
18 various incentives for formal business development, such as grants or
19 enterprise development programmes for small, micro, and medium-sized
20 enterprises [SMMEs], these often do not reach informal vendors who dominate
21 the sacred travel economy. Without formal recognition or organisational
22 support, these micro-enterprises struggle to access credit, training, quality
23 assurance programmes, or market exposure that could enhance their
24 productivity and resilience. This policy disconnect limits sacred travel's ability
25 to serve as a year-round economic engine.

26 The governance challenges extend to data collection and market analysis,
27 as there is limited systematic tracking of visitation patterns, expenditure flows,
28 or economic impacts associated with sacred travel. This means policymakers
29 and planners often operate with incomplete evidence, relying on anecdotal
30 insights rather than robust data. Strengthening data systems and incorporating
31 sacred travel indicators into provincial tourism statistics would provide a more
32 accurate foundation for designing interventions and monitoring progress over
33 time.

34 35 36 **Conclusion**

37
38 This study repositioned sacred travel from the margins of tourism
39 scholarship and policy discourse to the centre of regional economic
40 development analysis. It began by recognising sacred mobility as one of the
41 oldest and most enduring forms of human movement, historically shaping
42 settlement systems, exchange networks, and spatial organisation—yet
43 remaining under-theorised in contemporary provincial economies such as
44 Limpopo. By situating pilgrimage within debates in tourism economics and
45 regional development, the study addressed a key gap in both the academic
46 literature and policy frameworks.

1 The literature review showed that while tourism multiplier theory offers
2 strong tools for analysing visitor expenditure flows, it has seldom been
3 systematically applied to pilgrimage and faith-based travel. At the same time,
4 cultural economy and green economy perspectives frame sacred sites as
5 endogenous assets capable of generating place-based competitive advantage.
6 Synthesising these strands, the study developed an integrated conceptual
7 framework linking sacred mobility to multiplier effects, sustainable
8 livelihoods, and the dynamics of destination evolution.

9 Using a qualitative narrative review methodology, the research synthesised
10 interdisciplinary scholarship, policy documents, and provincial data to
11 construct a conceptually grounded yet context-sensitive framework. This
12 approach was appropriate for an emerging field where quantitative
13 measurement remains limited. By integrating multiplier theory, the Sustainable
14 Livelihoods Framework, and the Tourism Area Life Cycle model, the study
15 positioned sacred travel as both a cyclical economic stimulus and a longer-term
16 development catalyst.

17 The contextual analysis of Limpopo Province demonstrated that tourism
18 already contributes significantly to the provincial economy through millions of
19 domestic trips and substantial annual expenditure. Within this system, sacred
20 travel, exemplified by the ZCC Easter pilgrimage at Moria and other recurring
21 spiritual gatherings, represents a major, though often statistically invisible,
22 driver of visitation and spending. These events generate concentrated economic
23 activity across both formal and informal sectors.

24 A central contribution of the study is the articulation of economic impact
25 pathways. Sacred travel operates through direct effects on frontline tourism
26 businesses; indirect effects via supply chains; induced effects through
27 household income circulation; and spatial spillovers that justify infrastructure
28 development and place enhancement. Together, these pathways reveal
29 pilgrimage flows as multiplier mechanisms that can transform episodic
30 gatherings into layered regional economic benefits.

31 The study further highlighted the inclusive dimensions of sacred travel. In
32 a province marked by high unemployment and rural underdevelopment,
33 pilgrimage cycles provide low-barrier entry points into tourism markets,
34 particularly for women and micro-entrepreneurs. Sacred travel thus supports
35 livelihood diversification, gendered participation, and household resilience
36 alongside aggregate economic output.

37 However, infrastructure deficits, fragmented governance, and limited data
38 collection constrain the sustainable realisation of these benefits. Weak roads,
39 sanitation systems, and public services reduce efficiency and the quality of the
40 visitor experience, while policy gaps and poor coordination hinder strategic
41 planning. The absence of systematic economic measurement further
42 marginalises sacred travel within provincial tourism systems.

43 Policy implications, therefore, call for formal recognition of sacred travel
44 as a structured tourism segment. Integrating pilgrimage dynamics into
45 provincial master plans, investing in targeted infrastructure, strengthening
46 micro-enterprise support, enhancing marketing inclusion, and establishing

1 multi-stakeholder governance platforms are critical steps toward unlocking its
2 developmental potential.

3 4 5 **Policy Implications and Recommendations**

6
7 Given the economic significance of sacred travel in Limpopo, policy
8 interventions should prioritise inclusive and sustainable development
9 outcomes. Sacred travel should be formally integrated into provincial tourism
10 strategies through the recognition of faith-based tourism as a distinct market
11 segment requiring dedicated infrastructure, marketing, and enterprise support.
12 Targeted investments in roads, sanitation, water supply, waste management,
13 and public safety at major pilgrimage sites are essential to improve service
14 delivery during peak pilgrimage periods.

15 In addition, micro-enterprise development programmes should support
16 informal traders through training in hospitality, food safety, financial literacy,
17 and marketing, alongside improved access to microcredit and business support
18 services. Tourism marketing strategies should also incorporate pilgrimage
19 tourism within provincial and national campaigns in collaboration with faith
20 organisations and community stakeholders while respecting cultural and
21 spiritual values. Finally, stronger governance coordination among tourism
22 agencies, municipalities, traditional authorities, and faith-based organisations is
23 necessary to improve planning, destination management, data sharing, and the
24 long-term sustainability of sacred tourism development.

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