

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

THE ASSOCIATIONS OF FRIENDS OF THE WAY TO SANTIAGO. ALTRUISM AND COLLABORATION

Xosé M. Santos

Universidad de Santiago de Compostela
xosemanuel.santos@usc.es
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8088-7454>

1. INTRODUCTION

The excessive focus that is often placed on the pilgrims to Santiago has relegated other important aspects to a secondary position. One of them has to do with governance beyond that of the power relationships dominating formal government in which public institutions and the Church play the leading role (Santos, 2017). One of the fundamental stakeholders for understanding the pilgrimage to Santiago and the whole period prior to its modern-day resurgence, which took place at the beginning of the 1990s, is frequently forgotten. This is an institution which under the generic name of the Associations of Friends of the Camino-AFC played a leading role in the second half of the 20th century in recovering and raising awareness of the Jacobean culture. There are more than 300 of these associations distributed throughout the world and they undertake diverse tasks, from managing hostels or preserving routes to organizing pilgrimages or spiritual help to the returning pilgrim. Only a few studies, such as that of Frey (1998) pay some attention to them and reveal their important role in care for the pilgrim and raising awareness of the Camino.

The scant attention that has been paid to the associations has meant that fundamental issues for understanding the Camino phenomenon have been left aside, not only from the historical perspective but also from the spatial, motivational and power relationship perspective. We are referring here, for example to their contribution to raising international awareness of the pilgrimage, to their role in preserving traditional values rather than religious ones, or to their undertaking of tasks that could be the responsibility of other institutions, such as hostel management or the physical maintenance of the routes

2. AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

The aim of this research is to understand the role of the associations, as well as their contribution to the contemporary revival of the Way and their not always easy collaborative relationships with the institutions responsible for managing the Route. We are also interested in reflecting on the consequences that a weakening of the associations, which base their functioning on altruism and volunteerism, could have on the future of the pilgrimage to Compostela.

The information gathered for this text set out from one main source and two complementary work methods. The main source consisted of a database, including all existing associations. In total, there were 347 entries in 37 countries. Selection work was undertaken to eliminate any duplication and other small problems. A questionnaire was sent to all the associations identified with 17 specific questions. Although the questions were closed-ended, the observations box allowed us to take many nuances into consideration that served to enrich our analysis. Taking simple random sampling and considering that this is a finite population ($N=320$), 75 ($n=75$) questionnaires were received, which implies a margin of error of 9.92% for an acceptable confidence level of 95% ($z=1.96$) and under the assumption of maximum indetermination ($P=Q=50\%$). The origin of the returned surveys was representative of the world of associations.

The first phase, that of the questionnaires, was complemented by undertaking interviews with leading individuals from the world of the associations. In total 10 interviews were recorded of a duration of between 30 and 60 minutes. It was organized in a semi-structured manner, providing considerable freedom to the interviewees so that they could express their ideas and emotions.

3. RESULTS

The type of activities that the associations undertake centres mainly on consultancy and information on the Camino. According to one of the interviewees, this involves de dramatising the Camino. This initial task is central and is complemented by another, less frequent one that is offered by 48.3% of the associations, that of physical and mental preparation, i.e. the organization of excursions for physical training, and talks on the significance of the Camino, of being a pilgrim and exchanging experiences for mental preparation. Related to the latter, there is also a significant percentage of associations that provide assistance for the return home, i.e. reinsertion into the daily lives of the pilgrims and the incorporation of the pilgrimage experience into the daily routine. This post-experience is a little studied aspect (Lopez, 2013) but fundamental for the associations as it helps to provide them with new members.

Apart from the already mentioned activities, there are many others that are common to most of them. For example, the issuing of credentials, signposting and maintenance of sections of the Camino, organizing conferences, courses and promoting Camino studies, and drawing up guides. Hostel management is marked as an activity by 30.6%. One of the most interesting activities is training volunteers to work in the hostels. This is an outstanding activity that several associations undertake, often the largest, for example that of the United States or the British Confraternity of Saint James. Indeed, several of these associations every year send 70 or 80 voluntary 'hospitaleros'. The relevance of this initiative fundamentally lies in the fact that these are individuals that are not going to act merely as information providers on the Camino or workers in lodgings. Their training is based on the Camino tradition, on the meaning of the Camino and on the pilgrimage welcoming function. Therefore, their transmission of information and treatment of the pilgrim fall in line with received values.

Asked about the general situation of the Camino, half of those surveyed indicated that it was good, which together with those that gave the maximum score, makes a total of 61.2%. Only somewhat less than 10% said that the situation was bad or very bad. This quite general positive opinion does not deter from the fact that there is a critical view on certain aspects of the route. For example, 60% were of the opinion that the number of pilgrims is high or too high during the peak season. These opinions reflect an idea that is expressed more specifically when they asked about the main problem of the Camino. In this case, mass tourism appears as the most frequent response, cited by 43.5% of those surveyed.

Just as in the surveys, the interviews also make it clear that overcrowding is one of the main problems of the Camino. In all cases, the responses received on this issue in the interviews are coherent with that stated in the question about priorities for improving the pilgrimage experience. 50% of those interviewed chose "putting limits on marketing the route". Along the same lines, only 27.4% indicate that the promotional policy of the Camino is good or very good, so reflecting the influence that this has on the two issues that are considered to be the main ones: overcrowding and the loss of the traditional sense of the pilgrimage.

Although it did not appear among the questions on the survey, several written observations and, in particular, the interviews pointed to a specific problem concerning the two questions cited at the end of the last paragraph. This is the 100-kilometre minimum that is required to obtain the Compostela. Official data for 2019 state that a little more than 40% of the pilgrims began the route at the 100-kilometre limit, so converting the town of Sarria into the main starting-off point. In this way, a measure that was taken to prevent just anyone arriving in Santiago and demanding the accredited certificate has ended up being a recipe for overcrowding and the loss of the traditional sense of the pilgrimage according to many of those interviewed. In fact, the International Fraternity of the Camino de Santiago drew up a document in 2016 entitled "Proposal for raising the minimum distance required for granting the Compostela to around 300 kilometres". That proposal is based both on historical criteria and on others aimed at reducing overcrowding.

The loss of the traditional sense of the pilgrimage, which is a side effect of the predominance of the touristic vision, is a problem that arises from the dialogue with the associations, both in the surveys and in the interviews. Again the question of the 100 kms. appears as a central issue. This, in general, is seen as favouring the proliferation of walkers seeking to obtain a certificate quickly, without truly appreciating the significance of the Camino. Although the aim of this research is not to debate the motivation of the pilgrims, some responses, especially in the interviews, reveal significant concerns.

The last group of questions refers to the role of the associations. The results are in line with others obtained from surveys and interviews. The most common response was "to maintain the traditional sense of the pilgrimage", although "raising awareness of the Jacobean culture" and "invigorate the pilgrimage" were also highly represented. This question was complementary to another that asked about the role that the associations should play. Again, two responses expressed the great majority of opinion: to help maintain the traditional sense of the pilgrimage and, in particular, to raise awareness of the Camino culture and support the pilgrim. This latter response was cited by 72.5% of those surveyed.

The results of the surveys show us that there is a dominant feeling that the associations are not taken into consideration as major stakeholders. In particular, several responses make specific reference to their abandonment by the church, although it is true that there is a general desire to maintain their own autonomy, without depending on anyone. To understand this, we have to consider unequal power relationships as the source for their exclusion from the participative processes (Lee *et al.*, 2009). Buzinde *et al.* (2014) state that collaboration is most likely when all members of a group feel included. The feeling of exclusion is aggravated by a certain critical perspective that characterizes several associations when they reflect on the current situation of the Camino. Trust, as one of the bases for networking and organizing collaboration (Fyall *et al.*, 2012; Powell, 1990) is fundamental, as is redirecting relationships of power towards a more horizontal structure. Complex problems such as the overcrowding of certain sections of the route could be tackled in a much more effective way from that perspective.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The associations are fundamental for understanding the modern-day recovery of the Camino de Santiago, its international success and its complex nature. Their work is little known and recognised, being associated, often wrongly, with a religious character. Although they are very heterogeneous in composition, one of the elements that provides them with cohesion is their concern for preserving the traditional values of the Camino, which are centred mainly on providing hospitality and the sense of communities that develops during pilgrimage process, not only physically but mentally.

In this context of the conservation and recognition of the traditional values of the pilgrimage, not to be confused with any religious conviction, the associations find themselves in a position of weakness faced with public administrations, more interested in purely touristic aspects, and the church itself, focused as it is not only on pastoral concerns, but others more material and similar to those of the administrations. This is so despite the fact that the hegemonic discourse continues to be that of a historical itinerary that transcends the purely touristic concept. Indeed, a third of associations believe the Camino nowadays to be this. However, the belief expressed by the other two thirds that it continues to be a pilgrims' way shows that, despite everything, there are sufficient elements to continue believing in the Camino as a historic route of pilgrimage that preserves, at least in part, its traditional values.

That strength shown by the associations prevents conflict inasmuch as they consider that their work in relation to the Camino allows them to maintain those traditional values. However, both the surveys and the interviews reveal several significant weaknesses. Let us focus on two that are interconnected: the loss of some of their functions and the lack of generational changeover. With regard to the first of these, research and the study of historical pilgrimages led to the recovery of ancient sections, their signposting and maintenance. More than 50 years ago the initial phase generated a lot of enthusiasm and attracted young people with initiative to the Camino phenomenon; indeed some of the pioneers of the Camino association movement came from universities, as in the case of

the American association. That phase has now been surpassed, leaving, in many cases, only maintenance work to do.

The lack of generational changeover is another problem facing the associations and conditions both their future and their current dynamics. In this study, we did not undertake an in-depth analysis of the causes of this problem. They could be common to the associative movement in general, but could also be due to specific ones such as the loss of functions that we have already referred to. It is true that they maintain many of their activities, but not that which marked their pioneering nature. Perhaps, their most important function at the moment is that of recruiting volunteers to raise awareness of the values of the Camino, and to do also through social networks. Not all associations, however, have the capacity to undertake these tasks.

In a demotivated scenario, what would happen if the associations disappeared from the Camino or their role were to be reduced substantially? The implications could be various. First of all, of a material nature. The associations undertake actions to preserve the routes, signposting or management of the hostels, both public and private. These tasks would have to take over by public administrations, probably replacing the historical-cultural work of the associations with the tourism professional figure of an employee. The associations are fundamental for understanding the uniqueness of the Camino as a pilgrimage route, concentrating as they do on, for example, hospitality, voluntary work or the historical-cultural dimension, rather than religious aspects. In addition, they play a very active role in internationalization. According to the opinion of several of the interviewees, without the associations, the Camino would end up becoming just another tourism product. Even though recognising the diversity of the pilgrimage concept and the blurred frontier with tourism, and considering tourism as an essential part of pilgrimage and that “tourist moments and activities are considered an essential part of a religious journey” (Terzidou *et al.*, 2017, p. 126), we believe that the concept of pilgrimage is not interchangeable with that of tourism and must maintain several differentiating elements related to its spiritual values, though not always religious ones, as, and in our opinion contrary to, what Terzidou *et al.* (2017) say.

Therefore, the need to empower the associations seems quite clear as a strategy to preserve the uniqueness of this pilgrimage route, which transcends the purely religious. One could even go further. Frey (1998) associated the success of the associations with the post-experience and the capacity for promoting social change, in that the emotions experienced on the pilgrimage, such as solidarity, humility and happiness (Lopez, 2013) are important on returning home. Although we can conclude that there is no open conflict between the associations and public administration and the Church, the existing imbalances of power are a potential source of conflict (McKercher *et al.*, 2005) or demotivation. According to authors such as Almeida *et al.* (2017) or Curcija *et al.* (2019), preventing conflict implies recognising it, identifying it, even in its potential form, and analysing it. The idea that Curcija *et al.* (2019) picks up on of conflict providing an opportunity for change is a stimulating one, especially if we consider that we are not talking about incompatibility or even a clash of values (McKercher *et al.*, 2005). On the contrary, it is the fruit of interdependence (Deutsch, 2006). According to Gray (1989), collaboration, which allows one to resolve conflicts, implies recognising the advantages of working together.