

Host-family tourism in developing countries: a room for questioning the self?

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ABSTRACT / RÉSUMÉ

Host-family tourism in developing countries as a form of 'educational tourism' aims at informing first world subjects on third world realities. Development agencies seek to connect sustainable tourism with sensitization agenda's. In this article the author tries to determine the effect of dominant development issues on participants. The tourist's gaze is found to highlight poverty and subsequently a distance ensues. Tourist motivation is exposed as including a wish for reasserting cultural hegemony amidst discourses on 'globalization' and the perceived threat to a cultural identity this entails.

Le tourisme dans des familles de hôtes dans les pays en voie de développement comme forme de 'tourisme éducatif' vise à informer les sujets du premier monde sur les réalités du tiers monde. Les agences de développement cherchent à relier le tourisme soutenable à leur agenda de sensibilisation. Dans cet article l'auteur essaie de déterminer l'effet des images dominantes de développement sur les participants. Le regard des touristes accentue la pauvreté et s'en distancie. La motivation des touristes est exposée comme comprenant un souhait pour réaffirmer l'hégémonie culturelle parmi des discours sur la 'globalisation' et sa menace perçue pour l'identité culturelle.

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Introduction

Vacationing has always been about finding a place away from home and the roles and restraints associated with the hustle and bustle of our daily endeavours. Throughout the history of mass tourism, the places we visit have without exception expressed some deep desire for a better way of living. For the overworked desk jockeys of our urban centres utopia may take the form of a sun soaked beach, with the only pressing decision being whether to have the lobster for dinner or the crab. Our grandparents, on the other hand, may seek the excitement of skydiving to spice up their retirement days.

But what pressures does one seek to alleviate by taking a trip to sites of human suffering such as the remnants of the concentration camps of Auschwitz, slave island Île de Gorée or the infamous 'Killing Fields' of Cambodia? (For a discussion on 'Holocaust tourism' see Pollock 2003 and for the same on 'Homeland Tours' for African Americans see Ebron 2000.)

In fact, 'educational tourism' is nothing new. Ever since Aristotle a young Charles The Great took on field trips and later on, in the very first tourist movement of the young aristocrats of 18th century England on their Grand Tour of the Mediterranean, 'the birthplace of culture', travel has borne the reputation of opening one's eyes to the many wonders the world has to offer. What has changed, however, is the unproblematic nature of the relation we have with the history of our European culture. Many have noted that precisely the horrors of the twentieth century, such as the Holocaust and our nations' pillaging of their respective colonies and the latter's subsequent failure to achieve our levels of affluence were responsible for the disenchantment of modernity's promise of progress, a promise barely beginning to surface at the time of the very first 'Grand Tourists'.

The loss of faith in the eschatological project of modernity breeds an atmosphere of apprehension towards the future. A preoccupation with a glorified past is to be expected, yet the better times one yearns for prove difficult to find, as noted in the previous paragraph. What higher ground does this leave for the disillusioned masses at the dawn of the 21st century? All one is left with, according to various sociologists, is an ever-shrinking present.

One such theorist comments on these late twentieth century transformations in conceptions of space and time to elucidate present processes of social memory (Huyssen 2001). In his view, the turn towards memorialisation and musealisation is sparked by a fear of forgetting, which in turn is, quite paradoxically, a response to the way in which the media inundate us with increasing numbers of 'memory-bytes'. The proliferation of game shows where national history or heritage sites are presented, Hollywood's penchant for epic stories where the line between history and mythology is less clear cut than might be desired by historians and 'memory authorities' alike (as the recent controversy concerning the demand by papal authorities that screenings of the immensely popular 'Da Vinci Code' should be preceded by an announcement specifying the speculative nature of the storyline would seem to suggest), as well as new consumer technologies aimed at archiving unlimited numbers of digital artefacts of a personal nature, such as pictures, video and sound files ... all these examples can serve to illustrate our present society's 'cult of memory' as well as alert us to the impossible nature of this project.

For, as Huyssen notes, this project is doomed to fail when the very loci of memory production, the media, belch out such a vast amount of 'memory' that one fears

this system could collapse at any moment under its own weight. Bombarded with mass amounts of information, today's subjects may feel they lack the skills to discern those bits of information that are relevant to their specific spatial-temporal experience, that which Huyssen calls "the distinction between usable pasts and disposable data" (2001: 65). As could be expected, this challenge is attempted just the same, since 'remembering' is an essential part of determining one's place in a social environment. However, the way we go about this has seen tremendous alterations.

The present study aims to show how host-family tourism in developing countries can be understood as an attempt to bridge the gap between 'imagined memories' and 'lived memories' (Huyssen 2001: 64). The former, rather than signal a tautology, is used to describe the way in which at present memories are 'borrowed' from the archive of media productions. To the extent that these 'second hand memories' constitute the bulk of memories internalised, one could encounter problems to stabilise an identity. Undertaking some form of 'pilgrimage' to a site of historical significance may provide a feeling of connectedness with the past of one's nation state. Data collected in the case under investigation, a five week trip to Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo, by nine Belgian students (among whom the author of this paper) in the summer of 2004, seems to uphold this hypothesis. Moreover, such travels may serve a secondary purpose of providing participants a stage where they can play out slumbering anxieties concerning ever present discourses of globalization.

Tourist typologies

The history of anthropological studies on tourism has seen many attempts to establish an exhaustive taxonomy of tourist types. Each author's model has served to highlight that particular aspect of modern tourism which they deem important. Unfortunately, this also means each author seems to restrict himself to his own model. Past attempts have included Cohen (1972) introducing the concept of the 'environmental bubble' provided by the tourism infrastructure, effective to various degrees in shielding the tourist from exposure to the local culture, as well as Smith (1977), similarly focusing on the level of adaptation displayed by the tourist. Although such models would seem quite effective in assessing the nature of a tourist's contact with a foreign culture – of great concern to anthropologists – even this limited scope of inquiry is unsatisfactorily resolved through aforementioned models.

If we look at the type of tourism currently presented, for instance, we may arrive at conflicting conclusions. This is a form of tourism that aims at providing participants with a higher sense of understanding of the reality of third world subjects. We usually find such projects to be envisioned through collaboration between travel agencies and non-governmental organizations active in the area of development co-operation. It typically consists of small groups of highly educated first world subjects and revolves around a stay with a host-family in a developing country. Sometimes these trips include visits to the projects supported by the related NGO.

Such live-ins would find us at the opposite end of the scale from mass-tourism, and the intimate nature of living within a local family-unit would imply a low presence of an 'environmental bubble' and a high susceptibility for 'exploring'. Nevertheless, this author would shy away from straightforward conclusions concerning the level of adaptation to an exogenous culture-set. The host-families on my trip were selected through contacts with one of the main universities in Kinshasa. Consequently, these families were likely to hold financial positions uncharacteristic of the majority of the population and educational levels congruent with our own. In my own experience, I found that our Congolese counterparts shared many of our values and estimations, thus effectively reducing their strangeness' (Cohen 1984) and the need for a buffer. Where do live-ins belong when the concept of exploring and encountering alterity is embedded in a formalised set-up? It appears that little clarification can be obtained in this case by applying either model.

The tourist as pilgrim

In fact, the nature of the culture-contact would put host-family tourism off the map in terms of an 'environmental bubble'. This refusal of classification might persuade some to forego the label of 'tourism' altogether when describing these types of intercultural encounters. This author would half-heartedly comply, even though I would support comparisons with that paradigmatic tourist, the pilgrim. Studies applying this terminology are usually valuable for determining tourist motivations. The 'pilgrim-type' tourist would seek a transformation of the self through travel as well as a connection to a transcending domain. Although comparing 21st century tourism, with all its amenities, to medieval pilgrimages may seem a bit like straining the truth, there remains much to be learned from such a metaphor. It involves describing ways in which people lend meaning to their activities (Smith 1992) as well as hinting

at 'world making' as a possible motivation for travel. Even if we should be careful not to view all tourists in the same light, I do believe the pilgrim-paradigm can be insightful for this specific branch.

This approach is indebted to the seminal work on tourism by Dean MacCannell (1999). In his view, the tourist seeks to 'map out' the many differentiations of society and he believes this quest to be homologous to the function of religion (1973: 589-590) as well as mimicking the earnest endeavours of anthropologists. One of the central themes in his work is 'authenticity'. This is what he believes modern people feel to be missing from their lives and subsequently go out to find in the lives and activities of others. Redfoot (1984) borrows this concept from MacCannell to construct his own tourist typology. The four divisions indicate the extent to which the tourist believes the experience of reality to be ready at hand or rather requiring an effort. His first order tourist corresponds to the classical derisive application of the term 'tourist'. Their unreflective experience is scorned upon by representatives of the other types for being more involved in the communication of their impressions to an audience back home rather than the immediate experience of the present moment. Redfoot's paper advocates the rehabilitation of the first order tourists who are more concerned with establishing intimate relations with members of their own society, as opposed to revealing in the supposed authenticity of interpersonal relations abroad. In this article, however, I would like to focus on the 'anxiety over reality' present in the experience of many contemporary tourists. They are well aware of the contrived nature of the tourist experience and therefore seek out other modes of being a tourist. Aspects of this tourist-role include evading the presence of other tourists, making attempts at establishing contacts with the local population as well as sharing their housing and eating arrangements (Redfoot 1984: 296).

Exposure participants appear to fit well in this scheme. Their search for novel experiences would relegate them to the category of the 'anti-tourist'. Anxiety over the authenticity of the experience and the need to distinguish themselves from other tourists can be thought of as resulting from class prejudice (Löfgren 1999: 260-267). However, during my own exposure I have seen myself and my fellow travellers alternate between different tourist-modes. If an earnest effort aimed at savouring the intricacies of the host society's cultural experience dominated the enterprise, there have also been occasions to indulge in more stereotype tourist activities, such as writing lengthy emails to the home front and buying souvenirs.

This lack of consistency in tourist roles may lead one to believe exposure participants hold yet another category, that of the 'post-tourist' (Feifer 1985). The post-tourist is believed to be a reaction to both the ordinary tourist and the anti-tourist.

Being well aware of the impossibility of escaping 'tourist-hood', they respond in embracing this position and its consumptive practices but always from an ironic stance (Löfgren 1999: 264). In my own experience I have found our exposure to have seen bouts of irony – most striking are those that comment on the paradigm of development co-operation that laced the trip – but I would be hard-pressed to pigeonhole the entire trip as ironic. Rather, this occasional distancing served as an outlet for accumulated pressures associated with the well-intended nature of the endeavour.

Even though my small group consisted of varied subjectivities, I would propose all of us found our experience meaningful. Rather than perceiving this to be a fortunate sideeffect, I believe the quest for a meaningful experience motivated the participants from the very beginning. Not merely a meaningful tourist experience, as opposed to the more ordinary ways of vacationing, I am convinced that our efforts envisioned a more meaningful way of being. In this form of tourism, the search for a site where one's presence matters is paramount. Perhaps this is the present day incarnation of the much discussed liminal character of the voyage. When our daily lives are circumscribed by alternating efficiency with pleasure, where is meaning to be found?

'Via crucis' as paradigm

While researching this article I have examined the travel reports of my peers. These reports were part of the debriefing phase of the 'intensive learning route' as proposed by the organisation responsible for this project. We were invited to write a short essay of our live-in experience in a Congolese host-family centring on three 'critical incidents'. It refers to situations perceived by the participant as problematic. Due to their acute and demanding nature they are considered prime opportunities for learning (Fowler and Mumford 1995: 142). Although this focus on the negative as well as the limited scope of the group under inquiry excludes any conclusive remarks, examination of the information thus obtained is helpful in assessing the main focal points of this type of travel.

When studying these reports, one notices a great deal of attention is spent on the difficult process of adaptation to the host family and the unfamiliar surroundings. The lack

of control over the schedule of activities, the lack of freedom in general as well as too much freedom due to the absence of well described roles, the physical discomforts and feelings of disorientation over the chaotic nature of impressions are recurrent themes throughout.

These descriptions usually lead to some form of 'lesson learned' and the resulting increase in confidence regarding intercultural interaction is presented as a personal victory. Since host-family tourism is promoted as an intercultural encounter, this type of discourse is to be expected. In addition, it fits well within an overarching ideal of travel as an opportunity for learning and personal growth. It corresponds with a notion of learning through first-hand experience and hardship. In this sense these travellers share the paradigm of the *via crucis* with the pilgrim. Inasmuch as the medieval pilgrim hoped to achieve spiritual gain through his voyage, this hope was not in the least connected to the risks and effort associated with travel at that time. The idea would be that no one in their right mind would voluntarily go out into a world full of potentially life threatening situations without the promise of a reward of magnanimous scale.

These rewards tended to belong to the spiritual realm. No material gains were to be gained although a large percentage of the pilgrims were found among the famined for whom the alms generally extended to pilgrims could be conceived of as an incentive. In a guilt-centred system such as Christianity, pilgrimage often took the form of penance (Turner and Turner 1978: 7). Obstacles are thus perceived as opportunities for purging oneself from sin. Jim Butcher (2003) is one to discern an increasing sense of culpability in contemporary studies on 'Third World Tourism'. Is there any insight to be gained from understanding exposures in developing countries as an earnest attempt at relieving nagging feelings of guilt towards less fortunate counterparts? A further reading of exposure accounts may provide some answers.

"We are the real victims"

Five out of eight participants also discuss instances where they have experienced some form of breach of trust, usually involving money or valuables. The basic structure in this type of incident speaks of bonding spontaneously with someone from the host country which is subsequently betrayed through the introduction of monetary relations. Assessing this experience, they admit to having been 'naïve' but now feel they have learned and gained some wisdom. What they do not realize is how they have learned to value

'pure' friendship relations, not contaminated with financial matters. They fail to apply that essential step in intercultural interaction of suspending judgment awaiting the comparison of the cultural frames involved, even though I remember similar cases being discussed during the preparation sessions. The tendency to gauge all proceedings according to one's own value system seems deeply rooted.

Furthermore, what these questions reveal is a preoccupation with interpersonal morality. Obviously the wish for equitable relations between North and South has coloured the enterprise from the start. Therefore, we should not be surprised to find that a lot of energy is devoted to devising a suitable response to the request represented in the confrontation with human need. This Levinasian 'appeal' is hard to ignore and when one does, feelings of guilt are bound to arise. But when you are approached as 'cash machine', the resulting disappointment stems from finding yourself snubbed in your position of irreducible 'Other'. Thus the tables are turned and the first-world subject can now lay claims to the victim position. Presenting instances where one feels unjustly treated effectively serves to relieve pressures linked to being in a position that provides ample demand for assistance.

Constructing a positive self-image

A tourist's position is often believed to entail an asymmetric, unidirectional and superficial relationship to the host population, if there is a relationship at all. Reciprocal relations distinctly mark non-tourist behaviour. The opportunities for acts of reciprocity in hostfamily tourism seem to allow for the transcendence of the tourist persona. However, in this example we have seen participants reluctant to step out of the safety of their tourist roles. The refusal to really 'matter' to locals suggests one is more concerned with constructing a flattering self-image than actually establishing enduring relations.

Charles Taylor writes of the need for individuals to identify with certain values (1989). These values represent what it means for those individuals to be 'a decent person' and are thus inscribed into one's identity. He denotes the rallying potential of values. One is inclined to respond to situations which call upon a certain character trait held in high esteem. In fact, one may even actively seek out specific occasions rich in opportunities for displaying moral prowess. Similarly, live-ins to developing countries can be understood as reflecting a need for participants to prove themselves morally and consequentially represents a 'rite of passage' into the newfound status of moral subject. The

occasion has thus turned into an event that centres on the individual and the construction of his very identity as well as his introduction into society. The locales of travel merely exist as exotic backdrops in an epic tale revolving around the 'hero-traveller' figure, a formula to which live-ins are no exception. This is clear to one participant, who writes: "The live-in has mainly confronted me with myself [...] the most noteworthy issues are not related to the Congo but are of a personal nature."

Cosmopolitanism, or the search for the 'inauthentic'

On the other hand, reading the exposure reports reveals that a lot of effort is put into describing Congo. This approach characterises participants as 'amateur anthropologists'. Clearly the live-in paradigm hints at anthropology's method of participant observation and the objective seems to be to attain an insider's perspective on Congolese society. However, since accounts remain restricted to observations on poverty and tell of the many ways in which Congolese society fails, the insights gathered do not rise above the level of exoticisms. Participants have been encouraged by the development agency to inquire into images of poverty and processes of exclusion but rather inadvertently this has led to an overall negative image of the country and many group members observe a newfound appreciation for their home society.

Dean MacCannell terms such preoccupations 'negative sightseeing' (1999: 40). In his view, tours of derelict buildings, signs of social 'evils' or historic crime sites constitute the negative pole of respect and admiration for monuments and together they combine to form the essence of his argument that tourism is a moral activity. Each location's list of 'must-sees' as well as agreed norms and tastes accompanying tourist trails point out tourism's proficiency in establishing in-group solidarities. Just like every visitor of Rome should see the Colosseum it is imperative that one should 'get out' and see the world. In doing so, one gains respect and is received into a social universe not unlike the pilgrim who was initiated into a spiritual community.

But just like the pilgrim trail provides "solidarity in a church bent on supralocal or supranational jurisdiction" (Nash 1981: 7), one can conceive of live-ins as carrying a distinct ideology. Michael Harkin discerns in tourism a strategy of Bakhtinian 'exotopy': "to leave a bounded area designated as 'home', to come into contact with a cultural other, and to return with some sign of gain (or loss) reflecting the experience." (1995: 650-651). At stake is an

“appropriation of otherness” (1995: 650). Harkin distinguishes stereotyping and ‘cosmopolitanism’ as two modes of this hegemonic discourse. Whereas stereotypes are more directly hegemonic in drawing the cultural other into a sphere of shared meaning, cosmopolitanism seems to take a more circuitous route as the celebration of intercultural communication becomes the norm (Harkin 1995: 660). No longer engaged in a metonymic search for quintessential representations of a specific culture, more experienced tourists reclaim the ‘inauthenticity’ of cultural fusions as prime interests. More accurately, in a ‘globalised’ world lacking distinct cultural entities, the ‘inauthentic’ becomes the ‘new authentic’.

In this sense, the category of authenticity serves to link ethnic tourism to the presentday third world. In host-family tourism to developing countries, we know not to expect ‘Bushmen’, so encountering cosmopolitan counterparts makes us believe we are experiencing ‘authentic otherness’. This snobbism makes the live-in participant a tourist par excellence, for he is thoroughly engaged in the ‘dialectics of authenticity’ (MacCannell 1999: 145). MacCannell has described how the tourist arrives at marking his experience authentic through discerning it from what he perceives as inauthentic. In a practical sense, the concept of staying in a host family can be considered an attempt at evading what MacCannell (1973) dubs ‘staged authenticity’ in order to gain access to the backstage regions so coveted by tourists.

Imperialist nostalgia

Such an example of tourist one-upmanship serves to illustrate live-ins’ concern with presenting a positive self-image. In addition to gaining intercultural confidence, promises of sophistication and moral lustre may attract candidates, yet a deeper, more hidden motivation may be guiding their actions. It is not inconceivable for feelings of guilt to spur this kind of travel. First world subjects are frequently exposed to accounts that lay the blame for third world poverty on an economic world system that is governed by First world states and is designed to maintain their dominant positions. An encounter with third world subjects may primarily serve the purpose of releasing feelings of guilt and defusing an, in essence, antagonistic relationship.

This corresponds with Renato Rosaldo’s (1989) description of ‘imperialist nostalgia’. He uses this term to describe the awkward situation where instigators of change (in his case colonial representatives) lament that which is lost in order to absolve themselves of guilt. Or in this case: members of a

dominating group exhibiting sympathy for the oppressed. Rather than stimulate responsibility, such a position may in fact merely provide the peace of mind necessary for these subjects to lead a more unburdened life back home.

In this sense, Harkin’s cosmopolitanism seems to be the driving force behind exposures. The celebration of cultural difference along with the recognition of increasing contact between cultures can be said to encompass a broader affirmation of cultural hegemony. Western subjects may feel threatened by the introduction of foreign cultural elements into their urban centres. The positing of an all-inclusive ‘generic’ world culture may serve to appease such anxieties. Exposures can thus be viewed as a response to a lack of confidence concerning economic and cultural globalization. These apprehensions constitute a very real obstacle for intercultural contact for first world subjects will find it very difficult to think of themselves as belonging to anything other than majority culture. It is my belief exposure participants will withdraw into in-group contacts in order to mitigate the stress resulting from contact with other subjectivities, for whom this first-world culture may seem peripheral.

Conclusion

In this essay I have argued that host-family tourism to developing countries serves to provide participants with a sense of confidence regarding intercultural contact. In as much as this type of travel allows first world subjects to demonstrate their adaptation skills and confront anxieties over the loss of cultural homogeneity in their home societies, they seem more concerned with identity construction than establishing intercultural relations. As a result, the objectives of the developmental agencies that endorse this form of tourism, i.e. adopting the viewpoint of the population of developing countries, are unsatisfactorily met.

I am aware, however, of the many shortcomings of this study. The random nature of the data gathered inhibits an authoritative appraisal. Furthermore, an emic reading might provide a more favourable outcome, in accord with the sense of meaning the participants themselves assign to their experience. Certainly, this subject deserves further attention. Long term effects may be assessed through data collected at a later point after respondents’ return. A study by Gard McGehee (2002) covering similar territory suggests network formation as a positive outcome. Also, appreciation for and understanding of this form of tourism by the population on the receiving end could be included. From personal correspondences I have gathered that

discourses on globalisation also frame local perceptions. Additional research is needed in order to determine the possibility of a mutual meeting ground along these lines.

What this study does confirm is how development issues effectively guide the gaze of the participants. This is detrimental as it reduces the contact with the cultural Other to a case-study on underdevelopment. Not only does this entail a 'distancing' which raises questions pertaining to identification processes that thrive on exclusion (Mowforth and Munt call this process 'Othering'), one could conceive of this false sympathy to merely boost participants' self-appreciation. It would be interesting to find out to what degree the presence of a developmental NGO is responsible for this focus and to what degree participants themselves bring these preoccupations to the project, but in any case more attention should be designated towards imaging sensibilities in the preparation phase.

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