

# Research Group Transnationalism

Institute of Cultural Anthropology and European Ethnology  
Johann Wolfgang Goethe University Frankfurt am Main

## Travellerscapes. Tourism Research and Transnational Anthropology

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Research Group Transnationalism Working Paper Number 6  
September 2004

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Paper for the conference „Alltag der Globalisierung. Perspektiven einer transnationalen Anthropologie,“ January 16-18, 2003, Institute of Cultural Anthropology and European Ethnology, Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main

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### **Abstract**

Even though tourism has been recognised as an important field for transnational research today, there are few attempts to place tourism in the context of transnational theories or to think about transnationalism from the perspective of tourists. I argue that in researching tourist practices one can add important aspects to transnational approaches. The prerequisites of mobility and interaction for example are the features chosen by backpackers to describe what their Round-The-World-Trip is about. A form of tourism is adopted, or created, that itself confronts many aspects of globalisation: First of all there is the immense dynamic that is involved. Backpackers try to cover as many places and experiences as possible, travelling at high speed. They adopt all kinds of touristic experiences ranging from beach to adventure to culture tourism. They don't focus on a specific area or country but travel the world. They cross national borders perpetually. Additionally they form a transnational network in which they interact with strangers of similar backgrounds (other backpackers, tourist professionals). This network helps them interacting with people from different backgrounds (the so-called hosts or locals). Considering my research Backpackers forge a certain identity from these transnational practices which I want to name *globedentity*. *Globedentity* expresses a type of identity construction that not only refers to the individual (I) but reflects the world (globe) in this identity. This *globedentity* is not fixed but is perpetually re-created and re-defined. It also embraces the increasing popular awareness of globalisation which backpackers, coming from highly educated middle class backgrounds, in particular have identified with. Due to the constant awareness of the latest global social, cultural and economic developments in these educated milieus they know exactly which tools to use to become successful parts of their societies.

Keywords: tourism, backpacking, globalisation, identity production, globality, mobility, de-territorialisation, globalisation winners, globalisation tourism

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## Travellerscapes. Tourism Research and Transnational Anthropology

### Tourism and transnational research

Beyond doubt, transnational research is emerging as the new paradigm of cultural anthropology. Its interest is focused on practices that question the idea of distinct and stable „national cultures“ in observing the movements of people, ideas or goods across borders and how they manifest themselves in everyday life. However, the paradox that the nation state is simultaneously important and unimportant is one of the most striking issues of this paradigm.

Although this paradox is most obvious in the practice of tourism, there has been hardly any research in the area of tourism, as migration and political transformation processes seem to have dominated the theory building of transnational approaches so far. Even though tourism was recognised as an important field for transnational research by such pioneering anthropologists as James Clifford, Arjun Appadurai or Ulf Hannerz<sup>1</sup>, there have been few attempts to place tourism in the context of transnational theories or to think about transnationalism from the perspective of tourists.<sup>2</sup>

This paper aims to fill in this gap by reviewing the issues of tourism and transnationalism in the case of backpacking. Backpacking is an interesting example as it demonstrates the complex relationships between culture and place; not only that it shows how culture is produced between places but also how it is re-linked exclusively to specific places and therefore re-established in a „national way“. The role territory plays in tourism has to be distinguished on a practical and on a representational level. I intend to apply the transnational paradigm to tourism research and theory, and at the same time add a new facet of practices to transnational theories.

Fusing the subject of tourism with transnational concepts introduces different new perspectives to thoughts on transnationalism:

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<sup>1</sup> James Clifford thinks about re-conceptualising the ideas of culture and the anthropological idea of the field. To him, both concepts seem to be static and locally bounded. He wants turn the anthropological focus towards mobility and movement and therefore invents the model of *routes* (Clifford 1997). Tourism is one of the practices revealing the need for concepts to describe movement. Ulf Hannerz mentions tourism as being one of the important fields in the methodological concepts of transnational research, unfortunately without becoming more explicit on the methodological impacts and difficulties (Hannerz 1998). Also Arjun Appadurai mentions tourism as one important producer and product of globalisation and its flows (Appadurai 1991).

<sup>2</sup> There are a few positive exceptions that one should not forget: Chris Rojek and John Urry (1997): *Touring Cultures: Transformation of Travel and Theory*; *Tourists and Tourism* by Simone Abram, Jaqueline Waldren and Donald Macleod (1997); *Tourism in Global Society* by Kevin Meethan (2001).

In contrast to migration, tourism is not based on the need for survival but has the character of self-fulfilment and pleasure. But what makes crossing national boundaries so pleasurable in the context of tourism? How exactly is this pleasure perceived? And how is identity created in the act of border crossing by tourists? The examination of these issues clarifies how concepts of culture are used in a profitable way in everyday life.

Additionally our eyes are turned to the fact that a transnational identity in the context of tourism can only be created by documenting border crossings. Borders and distinctiveness on both sides of a border remain immensely important in tourism practices. They have a symbolic value that is essential to the tourism experience especially for forms of tourism that backpacking is part of. These tourists want to experience the difference of „national cultures“ on both sides of a border. In creating a transnational practice between places, places should remain as different as possible. This points to an important difference that has to be made between peoples everyday talk and practices on globalisation and border crossing, and analytical concepts of transnationalism. We have to keep this difference in mind when trying to develop new concepts of culture.

Thirdly, tourism research focuses on how the individual takes part in the process of globalisation without explicit political, economic or social ambitions. Individual global networks and connections out of pleasure are revealed and we can see how this specific transnational cultural and social capital is applied in „glocal“ (Robertson 1992) life and identity. Tourism research shows how touristic experiences in the form of transnational practices are turned into individual benefit in a globalised world as the position of globalisation winners can be gained or maintained.

In the following paper I am going to elaborate on these three points quoting from my research among backpackers. But not only does the fields of tourism enrich transnational approaches. Introducing transnational approaches to tourism research on the other hand allows a differentiating view on this still very homogeneous and normatively approached subject, distinguishing strictly between „bad tourists“ and „exploited hosts“.

### **Backpacking and its distinction capital: globalisation tourism**

These questions of ambiguities toward transnational practices and place from a touristic perspective are investigated in my PhD thesis about Round-the-World travellers (Binder 2004).

As tourism as a whole is a very complex phenomenon, my research focuses on one specific group of tourists – backpackers. Backpackers are no group in a sociological sense, having neither regular contacts among each other nor having an integrated social structure. They form a loose network which does, however, have a distinctive production of symbols and discourses, exchanged through websites, books and constantly changing short-term face-to-face contacts while travelling. One of the most important theme in my approach was the common production of identity through practices and their representations. Everyone I followed and interviewed was a self-identified backpacker, had travelled for more than six months, had crossed several national borders and was taking advantage of the specialised tourism infrastructure for backpackers. Additionally some of them allowed me direct access to their personal e-mails and photographs.

Round-the-World travellers practices are an interesting transnational phenomenon in various ways:

- Backpackers form an extremely mobile network. They purchase cheap Round-the-World airline tickets in order to visit as many continents and to cross as many national borders as possible.
- The composition of the backpacker network itself is transnational. Backpacking has an allure for young people of middle class descent from all over the world. Despite the common perception, backpacking isn't a particularly „Western“ phenomenon. Backpackers from Japan, South Korea, Singapore and Israel are encountered almost as frequently as those from North America.
- Backpackers identify themselves as cultural brokers. Ideas, ideologies, religions, souvenirs and goods are constantly exchanged within the backpacker network, with the local population and with friends and families back home. Backpackers see themselves as the interface in this process.
- Backpackers make extensive use of new information networks. Via emails and websites backpackers report live from their journeys, exchange and produce cultural knowledge and stay in touch with various places and people at the same time – independently from time and space. Different systems and networks intertwine and therefore form a new transnational space on yet another level.

Considering my research Backpackers forge a certain identity from these transnational practices which I want to name *globedentity*. *Globedentity* expresses a type of identity construction that not only refers to the individual (I) but reflects the world (globe) in this identity. This *globedentity* is not fixed but is perpetually re-created and re-defined. It also embraces the increasing popular awareness of globalisation which backpackers, coming from highly educated middle class backgrounds, in particular have identified with. Due to the constant awareness of the latest global social, cultural and economic developments in these educated milieus they know exactly which tools to use to become successful parts of their societies.

Backpackers today are part of the first generation that has grown up during a constant discourse on globalisation and have a need to incorporate their attitude towards it as part of their personal identity. Backpacking is seen as one way to achieve such an identity – a *globedentity* to be precise.

Following the globalisation discourses in economy, education, and social and cultural sciences especially the features of bodily mobility and face-to-face interactions stand out as prerequisites for an identity meeting the requests of globalising societies. Not only do global players ask their employees to be flexible, mobile and to speak different languages but already from early education on pupils are trained how important it is to get to know „the Other“ through open minded travelling. The prerequisites of mobility and interaction are interestingly enough the two main points chosen by backpackers to describe what their Round-The-World-Trip is about. Obviously a form of tourism is adopted, or created, that itself confronts many aspects of globalisation: First of all there is the immense dynamic that is involved. Backpackers try to cover as many places and experiences as possible, travelling at high speed. They adopt all kinds of touristic experiences ranging from beach to adventure to culture tourism. They don't focus on a specific area or country but travel the world. They cross national borders

perpetually. Additionally they form a transnational network in which they interact with strangers of similar backgrounds (other backpackers, tourist professionals). This network helps them interacting with people from different backgrounds (the so-called hosts or locals).

Considering these aspects, one can also think of backpacking as *globalisation tourism*. That does not mean that globalisation itself is looked at and visited somehow but that globalisation is constructed and enacted by this touristic practice. Backpackers thus develop a means to become active participants in the process of globalisation and not just passive observers, unable to handle unknown and difficult-to-grasp processes.

That backpackers can be seen as active participants in producing their environment and therefore enacting a certain culture. Culture is here understood as a set of practices, symbols, artefacts and ideologies which can be made re-cognizable through different modes of representations. Representations are therefore most important for „culture“.

The representation of *globedentity* as the outcome of the backpacking experience for example is one crucial aspect for the production of backpacking culture. The representations which lead to the idea of *globedentity* (photographs, emails and narrations of mobility and interaction) help to transform the backpacking experience into a cultural resource with a distinctive character that is of use for contemporary societies.

In calling this practice *globalisation tourism* the approach of transnationalism can be connected to the well-known idea that distinction is one of the main purposes of tourism. Coming from that point of view backpacking can be seen from a completely new perspective; tourism and globalisation are approached by backpackers as an opportunity to participate in a globalised world and a late modern economy. It becomes a part of their qualifying education.

Until now theories of transnationalism have mainly focused on migration processes; the focus on a practice like tourism shows the use of more privileged actors like backpackers. This shows the need to incorporate thoughts of distinction and the self-conscious use of transnational practices in an overall theory of transnationalism.

In the following pages I will focus on the two already mentioned categories that seem to best express *globedentity* for backpackers, and are therefore at the centre of their travel representations: mobility and interaction. I will describe what these categories express in the contexts of tourism, transnationalism and globalisation.

### **Mobility as a characteristic for *globedentity***

Suzie, a Canadian backpacker, stops in Singapore on her way from Europe to Australia. She came to that decision only a week before leaving Europe, after meeting a woman from Singapore travelling in Switzerland. After three days in Singapore she opts for a quick trip to Malaysia – not wishing to miss the chance now that she is in Asia for the first time in her life. One day in Malakka, two days in Kuala Lumpur and back to Singapore. In Kuala Lumpur she meets a couple of people who tell her about the beauty of the Malaysian countryside, and mention that they are on their way to Thailand for the well-known Full Moon Party which is two weeks away. Suzie has heard a lot about these parties and arranges to stay in contact with them and plans to eventually meet

again. She finally delays her flight to Australia for another four weeks and starts exploring Malaysia. She visits the highlands but due to permanent rain she moves on after a single night and makes her way to a national park. When she finally reaches it, after two days of tiring travels, she realises that every option inside the park is too expensive for her budget. There also don't seem to be many backpackers around. After two uninspiring hikes through the jungle she decides to leave again. To reach the east coast of Malaysia takes another two days of constant travelling. She sleeps in her clothes, taking night trains and early morning buses to save both time and money. She reaches the coast hungry and sweaty, and waits for five hours for the cheapest boat to save money. She is looking forward to go to an island. Finally she wants to relax for a couple of days.

Dick Hebdige has remarked that „in a globalised world the individual doesn't have to move to be a cosmopolitan, as all global flows meet the local“ (Hebdige 1990, 20). Backpackers on the other hand stress the importance of active physical engagement in experiencing the world.

As mentioned above, individual activity is crucial in creating *globedentity*. The experience and representation of constant movement is especially important, as movement is a crucial aspect of globalisation, and is the way globalisation processes are dealt with in the discourse on globalisation. Winfried Killisch, a geographer, has looked at the implications of special movement for social mobility, and in how far mobility has to be seen in a sociostructural context (Killisch 1979, 4). Chosen mobility – as distinct from such forced mobilities as labour migration, exile or refugee – in this social context becomes a new reference of status coinciding with economic and educational privilege (Zoche 2002, 22).

In the specific context of backpacking, physical mobility is then a marker for social upgrading, where travelling expresses a flexibility of actions. In representing the high mobility involved in a Round-the-World trip the individual is able to communicate the achievement of a higher social status, not so much as a specific professional upgrading but more the embodiment of a discourse that stresses the importance of mobility in times of globalisation. The chances of mobility that are coming along with globalisation are determined by political, cultural and economic circumstances. Only for some people an „enriching“ mobility opened up during the last decades – and backpackers a certainly among them.

But mobility is not the only way to produce and perform *globedentity* and with that achieve higher social status. My investigations reveal that in addition to evidence of high mobility, proof must be collected of face-to-face interactions with „Others“ encountered across the various borders.

### **Interaction as a characteristic for *globedentity***

The subject of interaction between tourists and their host is dealt with in a highly morally and normative way in most tourism studies. Tourist are frequently described as ignorant in their misinterpretation and stereotyping of the locals as „friendly natives“. Instead of criticizing backpackers once more I want to take a closer look at the function of this stereotyping in the context of creating *globedentity*.

Looking at the everyday life of backpackers it becomes obvious how important interaction with local people is for the whole experience. Their descriptions of encounters with members of the host societies comprise both specific experiences and re-enacted imagination, based on traditional concepts of distinct „national“ cultures. The „Self“ and the „Other“ are held in contrast and exaggerated to make distinct the experience of „Otherness“ in the creating of an individual *globedentity*. Their accounts of the „Other“ are inextricably linked to the perception of personal enrichment in these encounters. Then the interesting question is when and how knowledge of „different cultures“ develops into positive or negative stereotypes or descriptive knowledge is linked to normative or moral knowledge.

While I was conducting my second field trip in Malaysia, backpackers frequently talked about the events of 9/11 which had just occurred. As Malaysia is a mainly Muslim country, there was a strong wish to hear the Malaysian response. On Kecil Island in north-east Malaysia, many backpackers gathered in Karim's Bar, asking him about religion and everyday life in a Muslim country. Karim seemed to be a good person to ask as not only was his English fluent but also his lifestyle and background were quite similar to those of the backpackers. He had grown up in Kuala Lumpur and had worked there for an advertising agency. He had travelled extensively, spending quite some time in Europe. He sees himself as a cosmopolitan, dropping out of mainstream society to find self-fulfilment. Because Karim's class and generation grew up never lacking material goods they have the luxury of attaching the higher value to non-material things.

On Kecil Island the living expenses are low and during the backpackers season Karim can make enough money by running a bar and batik course to dedicate himself to his passion of painting for the rest of the year. His bar is very popular among the backpacker crowd on the island and it is obvious that he knows how to please them. The interior is rustic and designed right after a Barcardi rum commercial, the music is up-to-date, and he sells cocktails (which are forbidden) as well as European-style coffees. For the backpackers gathering around him he is the perfect liaison between the host country and themselves. He fulfils their desire to get in touch with the locals, as he is truly Malaysian. At the same time he understands the needs and the imagination of backpackers.

In the backpackers representations all of a sudden Karim mutates indeed into the „friendly native“. That he had been a former member of the transnational backpacker community and having obvious transnational similarities between them receded in their representations. Both Karim and their contact with him were transformed into a marker of distinctiveness and a part of the imagination of the „Other“. In the backpackers representations Karim came to be the representative of an entirely different and fixed culture, bound to certain space: Malaysia. Suzie's photographs picture him as barefoot native, painting traditional batik paintings in front of his hut or serving food on banana leaves. Her e-mail back home after a week on the islands reflects her wish to show how deeply involved she got with the „local cultural“ and how much interaction she had with „the natives“. She writes how friendly and welcoming they were, how they invited her to their huts, gave her local food and how they had long talks about respect and solidarity and how they invited her to learn about the ancient art of batik painting. She doesn't mention that most of her activities were part of a touristic infrastructure, especially set up for backpackers. Nor does she mention her long talks with Karim about what it is



like to work in the advertising industry for a global player. Karim became the symbol and evidence of her ability to cross cultural boundaries. Her experience of a similar transnational network of people with similar backgrounds and ideas is not represented as such, but rather tied back to the idea of mosaic-like cultures covering the world and her personal ability to make connections between them.

This is the way *globedentity* is created by backpackers: the common ground that may exist is re-interpreted and represented as an individual achievement in crossing boundaries through mobility and interaction. The outcome is measured in how close the represented experiences get to the pre-existing imaginations of the „Other“.

„Other cultures“ aren't required for actual „intercultural experience“ which can be used in globalising societies, but as a contrast to represent on a more symbolical level the difficulties of bridging differences between people and cultures. We have seen how difference is created to show the individual abilities to overcome them. Therefore the main principle for selecting destinations and activities is their difference to the already known, an aspect many researches on tourism are pointing out. Looking at backpackers selection of Southeast Asia the searching for difference to modernity becomes obvious. This has the effect, that signs of existing modernity after a so called „Western“ model are left out of photographs and narration. The representations are dominated by pictures of unbureaucratic chaos and traditional purity. As Adrian Vickers notes for Bali it is true for the whole of Southeast Asia (and most of the other so called third world countries) that they are frozen into „pre-modern“ imagined traditions. Modernity is picked up by tourists as a keyword for destruction of „old traditions“. This construction is itself used as a marketing strategy by the local tourism industry as they sell their destinations as „last highly endangered paradises“ (Vickers 1994, 290).

But it is not the ultimate experience of difference that is actually characteristic for everyday backpacking, as one could think considering the representations of a backpacking trip. Backpacking practices are much more about finding an acceptable compromise between the new and the known. This isn't to be judged as naivety or a try to sell the wrong picture of oneself but has to be seen as a necessary move: if somebody wants to describe the overcoming of difference, the difference has to be made obvious beforehand. As the „Own“ and the „Other“ are always constructed categories it doesn't make sense to deconstruct the construction but it does make sense to ask in which way it is used and which purpose it serves for.

Of course, to be exposed to the possibility to choose the degree of difference you want to engage with is only possible because of an specialised backpacking tourism infrastructure. But also with criticising the existence and use of this infrastructure one doesn't get to the point of understanding the use of certain representations. One use, as we have seen, is the creation of a specific kind of transnational identity. This is reached in backpacking successfully in representing high mobility and interactions with „the Other“ the way described in this paper.

### **The Interplay between Tourism and Transnationalism: Travellerscapes**

The practices of backpackers reveal that the features of mobility and cross-border interaction, which we have identified anthropologically as transnational elements in a global-

ising world, are not only side effects of various (transnational) practices but used to position the actors explicitly as transnational subjects in contemporary societies. In this field transnational practices are a more or less conscious way of producing identity.

Backpackers are part of a class which is able to identify and apply cultural resources which stabilize their privileged position for the near future through cultural artifacts that contain transnational aspects.<sup>3</sup> To create explicit transnational identities, which I named *globedentities*, a complex interplay of de- and re-territorialisation processes takes place. Backpackers move across borders, form a transnational network but at the same time rebuild the (so called cultural) borders they cross.

Using the model of *travellerscapes* helps thinking the blurred boundaries and connections between territorial and de-territorialised places and interactions which play a major role in tourism in general. The model *travellerscapes* aims to free them from their materiality while at the same time refers to the materiality these concepts represent for backpackers. The term „scapes“ points to: the deterritorialisation of backpacker networks, the global range and impact of world-travelling, it emphasises the reflexivity and historicity in which the semantics of globalisation are picked up and used, reflects the transnational heterogeneity of the backpacker network, stresses the notion of process and movement of flows across territorial spaces and last but not least points towards a specific perspective with which landscape used to be watched from a distinctive and powerful position, when the term was first invented.

The term *travellerscapes* wants to express these various levels of connection. It is an adoption of Arjun Appadurai's scape concept (Appadurai 1991). But I follow as well Orvar Löfgren who created the expression *vacationscapes* in his book on the cultural history of holiday making (Löfgren 1999). Löfgren sees tourism as an interesting field for current anthropological questions because one finds a more or less globally standardised marketing of an „exotized Otherness“ (Löfgren 1999, 8). At the same time this standardisation on the marketing does not lead to a standardisation of experiences once you start to look at the practices and routines of travelling. They reveal processes of cultural differentiation in a globalised world. Löfgren states, that to describe these touristic „glocalisations“, it is necessary to involve moments of touristic representations. For him the interaction between landscapes, imagination, practices, and representation is what creates touristic experiences and what he calls on an analytical level *vacationscapes* (Löfgren 1999).

The model of *travellerscapes* as I conceptualise them, is also trying to extend Martin Albrow's concept of *socioscapes* (Albrow 1997). It refers as well to the people moving across borders (*ethnoscapes*) as it refers to places and people who are exposed to movement (*socioscapes*). Travellerscapes express localities without fixed social or cultural setting and social and cultural setting without territorial fixation. Travellerscapes aim to describe social and cultural formations in a complex de- and re-territorialisation process. They represent the moment, in which different networks, spaces, discourses and places meet and intermingle.

Transnational mobilities lead to identity constructions, which in themselves produce new meanings. These are related to the crossing of nation borders in a very com-

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<sup>3</sup> The idea of cultural artifacts is used according to a definition of Gisela Welz, saying that cultural artifacts do not only contain material things but also political ideas, scientific knowledge, images of the future and interpretations of the past (Welz 2004).

plex way as we have seen. Even though mobility may have been a common practice in the past, looking at the practice of backpacking reveals dimensions of mobility and flexibility and their relation to late modern societies and economies. The ability to create these identity constructions has to be seen as part of the flexibilities described by Aihwa Ong (Ong 1999). Transnationalism as encountered with backpackers is shaped by its flexibility, the logic of de- and re-territorialisation, global networks, cultural resources and identity.

The concept of *travellerscapes* shows as well how through practices of mobility, interaction and representation *globedentity* can be produced. As an example of transnational approaches in tourism it points to the paradoxical relations between the conscious use of de-territorialised practices and semantics and their successful application with the help of represented re-territorialisation, re-nationalisation and re-ethnisation. In short, an identity construction of *globedentity* can only be achieved through practical de-territorialisation and communicative re-territorialisation at the same time.

With this paper I showed that in researching touristic practices one can add important aspects to transnational approaches in anthropology. Some of these aspects are: 1) an insight into privileged enactment of global connections, 2) an approach to the relation of de- and re-territorialisation processes on the level of representations, 3) the production of successful members of globalising societies, 4) the importance of (national) difference in transnational contexts, 5) the use of the concept „culture“ in the production of fictive world views.

These ideas taken from the practice of backpacking should become crucial aspects in future discussions on theoretical transnational approaches.

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