

THE ROLE OF THE TOURIST GUIDE: A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract - One can view tourism as a socio-cultural subsystem implanted in a particular society and which according to Jafari (1982), promotes the interaction of three cultures: the local culture, the tourist culture and the imported culture. This paper discusses the role of tourist guides in social mediation and cultural brokerage. Examples from the local scene are also given by the author to show the manipulative power tourist guides can wield.

Introduction

The concept of a system immediately makes one think of functionalism. Despite the fact that since the sixties, this school has lost all its popularity among mainstream European sociologists, one can safely make use of some of its concepts for sociological analysis. One can look at the phenomenon of tourism as a socio-cultural sub-system implanted in a particular society. It establishes a set of relationships with the rest of the system. Even though tourism has its dysfunctional aspect, together with the other subsystems, tourism makes a specific contribution to the maintenance of the whole economic sub-system. Jafar Jafari¹ argues that tourism promotes the interaction of three cultures: (1) the Local Culture, (2) the Tourist Culture and (3) Imported Culture.

The interaction of culture with tourism

Clifford Geertz, conceives culture as an integrated system of meanings through which the nature of reality is established and maintained. It is a blueprint-for-living of a human collectivity. These basic meanings are very often dramaturgically enacted in public rituals. This leads us to two im-

¹ The author prefers Jafari's model because of its anthropological perspective. Mill and Morrison (1985) present a different model based on a market research perspective. Their model identifies the main components of the system as market, travel, destination and marketing.

portant foci: on the one hand, culture is concerned with the everyday life of the members of a particular society; on the other hand, society, refers to the system of inter-relationships which bind together people who share the same culture (Giddens 1989). Consequently, culture neither exists in a vacuum, nor is it simply a mental abstraction : it is enacted in society in time and space in our homes, our villages, shops and workshops. Neither do cultures exist only in chronological succession; they exist also contiguously. When different cultures meet in the same space and at the same time, the result may vary from conflict to acculturation. The result of cultural interaction is always change.

At a certain level of discourse, one can argue that a single global culture is an impossibility, because the world can become a global village only through technological mediation. And the latter is never a perfect substitute to human face-to-face relationship. The values which survived in Soviet Russia during half a century of imposed hegemonic culture are an ample proof of this argument. Every human community has its distinctive culture bound by space and time. It is the glue which binds individuals to form a community. However, cultural boundaries are more often than not harder to cross than territorial ones.

With this mental framework, Jafari (1982) refers to the culture of the tourist-receiving country as the *local culture*. The *tourist culture* consists of the behaviour patterns exhibited by tourists while they are on a tour. It is a culture *sui generis*, in the sense, that it does not have a territorial base and is temporary in nature. It is basically one culture, even if tourists come from different cultural 'communities'. According to John Urry (1990 : 66) "*There are the cultural practices of tourism, which constitute a set of preferred social activities highly structured by distinction of taste*".

In my view, as far as the tourist is concerned, the tourist culture is essentially an episodic cultural expression rather than a way of life. However, though it is transient, as far as the tourist himself is concerned, it is quite permanent from the local community's point of view. In spite of its characteristic peaceful invasion, the tourist culture can interfere and *de facto*, does interfere with the culture of the local community and sometimes threatens to dominate it. Consequently, it can create a conflict-prone encounter between tourists and locals. Its manifestation includes a mixture of customs and costumes, language, play, celebration, ostentation, consumption and peculiar place of residence. It is characterised by a dedication to 'pleasure' and an escape from 'pain'.

Finally, Jafari refers to the *imported culture*, that is, the native culture

of the tourist. Together with his luggage full of personal belongings, the tourist carries also an apparently 'invisible' cultural bag. It is not one culture but a group of cultures reflecting the cultures of different 'foreign' communities.

Tourism and the culture mix

The multi-directional interaction between these three subcultures gives rise to a new cultural dimension, which Jafari calls the *culture mix*. In the creation of this, the host country serves the function of a melting pot. The culture mix depends on a number of variables. On one hand, there are the various characteristics of the tourist namely, the age, nationality, social class and the size of a given group of tourists. On the other hand, there is the culture, history, economic development and size of the receiving country or holiday resort and other intervening variables. All these variables create a dialectical and osmotic relationship between the stimulus, the response and the environment.

It is within the above framework that it is pertinent to ask: what role do tourist guides play in the tourist system? Tourist guides are a specific category of workers in the service industry. One can include this category among the newly emerging group, which Bourdieu (1984) calls the 'new petit bourgeois' of occupations involving presentation and representation. Much of their work is symbolic. They are acting as cultural intermediaries, that is, as culture brokers (Nash 1978).

The tutor² or mentor who used to accompany the young Englishman on the Grand Tour is the historic prototype of the contemporary tourist guide. A similar though less intellectual role during that period, was that of the Italian *vetturino* who would help foreigners find their way, especially in mountainous regions³ In this paper, the tourist guide's role is considered to be more similar to that of the tutor and the mentor rather than that of the pathfinder. His role is here considered to consist in social mediation and cultural brokerage. The skills required are communicative ones. These skills relate to the guide's role as a broker between the tourist(s)

² V. Knox describes the tutor as "...a grave, respectable man of mature age, who would in addition to his duties as pedagogue and guide, 'watch over the morals and religion of his pupil'", quoted by Eric Cohen (1985:8).

³ See Brodsky-Porges, E. (1981).

and the local population, local institutions/organisations and the “*objects of the tourist gaze*” (Urry 1990).

In his analysis of the communicative component of the mediatory sphere, Cohen (1985) distinguishes four principal elements, namely, selection, information, interpretation and fabrication.

Guides have necessarily to select the “*object of the tourist gaze*” and the object of the tourist consumption. No tourist can see every object worthy of his “*gaze*”, not even in a small country like Malta. Neither can the tourist “*consume*” in an unlimited manner! Hence selection is a principal element in the guide’s role. It is often left to the discretion, often unchallenged, of the guide’s employer. Thus, tourist guides enjoy significant manipulative power. This power can be used for the benefit of the receiving country. For example, this can be achieved not only by showing the tourist what is ‘beautiful’, but also by positively not allowing them to see what the guide or his ‘masters’ does not want them to see. This was the stance commonly taken by guides in Communist countries before the fall of the Berlin Wall. It also happens in some Third World countries where tourists are not ‘allowed’ to gaze on abject poverty. Besides this, tourist guides can use their power to select sites according to their own personal benefit. In Malta, for example, there are some guides who have established a veritable racket. In some instances, some tourists are only taken to those shops and restaurants that pay these tourist guides a commission.⁴

The tourist guide’s role includes also the transmission of correct or incorrect information to tourists. It is agreed that guides do sometimes give meagre and insignificant information. They do so, notwithstanding the fact that the information they relay is of utmost importance owing to the impact it leaves on tourists’ attitudes towards the host country. There is a commonly-held opinion among Maltese tourist guides that the knowledge which tourists have of the receiving country, varies from one nationality to another. As the Germans are renowned to be very knowledgeable about the countries they visit, very often they are stereotyped as being finicky. This might, in turn, create reciprocal irritation.

However, the key element in the tourist guide’s role is interpretation. For the same reason that most tourists do not succeed in seeing a country but a broker’s ‘selection’ of a country, similarly they do not get ‘informa-

⁴ This issue was also raised in the Maltese Parliament.

tion' but 'interpretation'. This interpretation is as important as it is difficult, especially when one is mediating between two cultures. For the tourist guides it becomes significantly more difficult because they have to mediate between the three cultures mentioned earlier, namely the local culture, the tourist culture and the imported culture. It is the role of the interpreter that makes the tourist guide a real culture-broker. Very often, repeated interpretation brings about the sacralisation⁵ of "*the object of the tourist gaze*".

When the interpretation given by guides to tourists is not based on reality or facts but on imagination or fiction, the result is fabrication. Tourist guides resort to this device when they are faced with either difficult questions, which they are unable to answer or awkward questions which they find embarrassing.

Conclusion

It follows from the above that the tourist guide has the power to structure the tourist's perception of the country that is being visited. Consequently, though extremely important, the role of the tourist guide in the tourist system described above is highly ambivalent. If performed professionally, it is very functional to a tourist destination. The product will be a beneficial "*culture mix*" to which Jafari refers. If it is performed in a manner which suits only the interests of the tourist guides or their employers, it will be dysfunctional. The tourists will feel cheated and on their return home they will transmit either a harmful image or a thwarted view of the country visited. The end result will be culture conflict and social friction. It can also 'enshrine' pseudo-attractions at the expense of authentic ones.

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⁵ Sacralisation here has the same connotation as in MacCannel (1976).

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