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# **A Postcard from the Village: Using Reflexive Photography as a Means of Developing Tourism**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This study employed reflexive photography to gain information about themes that residents desired to share with visitors as a component of planning tourism. The use of photographs was grounded in the reciprocal context in which photographs would reflect residents' perceptions of their daily life. The study was conducted in the village of Sambu, Indonesia, in June-July, 2007. Twenty-eight residents were issued single use cameras and were asked to take pictures of things, places, people, or anything else that they deemed important to them in their village that they desired to share with visitors. The photographs were developed and interviews were conducted to elicit information about the pictures they took. Data analysis used both photographs and quotes from interviews. The study used an inductive thematic approach to analyze the data. The study found five major themes that participants desired to share with visitors. Those themes were rural way of life, environmental features, built structures, people, traditional ceremonies and arts. The study recommended that the development of tourism in the village of Sambu should be based on the identified themes as well as the operationalization of those themes. The application included designing routes to connect all themes. The method showed that photographs could facilitate to bridge the cultural distance between local communities and the tourism planners which often became an issue in tourism planning.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

One widespread view regarding culture and tourism is that tourism often contributes to the erosion of the local culture (Dearden & Harron, 1994). Friction may arise between local communities and visitors as both value landscapes in different ways (Doxey, 1975; Dogan, 1989). For residents, landscapes are connected with their daily life, while for visitors cultural landscapes are a gaze for pleasure and a respite from their daily routine. In some developing countries in which the tourism economy is dominated by outside investors, landscapes may also reflect differential access to power with tourism being viewed as a form of neo-colonialism and a means of elite development (Nash, 1989). The differences in backgrounds and interests between local communities and visitors imply that it may be essential to decipher the local landscape and its unique meaning to visitors. From this standpoint, local communities may have an opportunity to plan tourism in their community while controlling their unique meaning of the landscape.

Scheming features as well as interpreting the meaning of those features for tourism consumption play a pivotal role in creating a responsible tourism product (Cave, 2005; Battadzhiev & Sofield, 2004). This effort helps to retain the authenticity of the site (MacCannell, 1973; Cohen, 1979; Hughes, 1995; Salamone, 1997). Nonetheless, local communities customary lack the power to determine which of their landscape features will be displayed for tourism. In addition, the appropriate mechanism to identify specific landscape features for tourism by local communities is also understudied, especially how this mechanism can be adapted in the Southeast Asian context.

The use of reflexive photography in qualitative methodology is grounded in the interactive context in which the photographs attained reflect meaning (Collier, 1957; Heisley & Levy, 1991; Harper, 2002; Samuels, 2004). In this context, the process was dynamic in which interaction between the photographer, the viewer, and the images were controlled. Meaning was then actively constructed, not passively received. From this standpoint, this study was intended to identify landscape features and their meanings, which can aid in the development of tourism in Sambu, a small village in Indonesia. The understanding of identified themes served as the foundation for developing tourism in Sambu. To achieve the aforementioned purpose, this study employed reflexive photography as a means of data collection. By allowing the informants in this study to express themselves both through picture taking and in words, and by shifting the focus from the person to the images, communication and cultural barriers were mitigated.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Reflexive photography is a derivative of photo-elicitation in which research participants are the photographers (Herrington & Schibik, 2003). Photo-elicitation refers to the use of photographs to elicit information from research participants (Heisley & Levy, 1991, Cappello, 2005, Beilin, 2005). The use of photo-elicitation in tourism has received sporadic attention. The earlier studies that employed photo-elicitation focused on tourists' perceptions. Botterill and Crompton (1987; 1996) and Botterill (1988; 1989) employed the photographic method to examine tourism experiences. They combined the use of a repertory grid technique with visual images of personal holiday snapshots and brochure photographs to elicit constructs that pertained to particular destination images. In the first study, tourists were asked to provide their commentary on a Mexican vacation based on six color prints of scenes photographed by the researchers. Using triad procedures, tourists were asked to identify the similarities of two photographs and the difference between a third photograph. It was revealed that individual perceptions of Mexico varied based on personal experiences (Botterill & Crompton, 1987). In the later study, both researchers examined the perceptions of American tourists who traveled to Britain. The researchers analyzed the images taken by the participants and based on this analysis, they concluded that the role of the tourist may affect tourists' experiences (Botterill & Crompton, 1996).

Recently Cederholm (2004) used respondents' own photographs to examine the experience of backpackers. Results indicated that contradictory conditions of backpacking were related to the process of institutionalization. The use of respondents' own photographs enabled the researchers to deconstruct those contradictory conditions which were difficult to decipher with other techniques (Cederholm, 2004). Another study examined outdoor adventure experiences in the United States. The use of similar methods also revealed similar findings in meanings of outdoor experiences which were conducted based on other techniques (Loeffler, 2004).

In later development, Volunteer-Employed Photography or Visitor-Employed Photography (VEP) emerged as a subsequent technique of reflexive photography. In VEP, visitors are given cameras and requested to photograph items or scenes based on guided questions. VEP has been used to examine natural scenic beauty (Hull & Stewart, 1992), children playground activity patterns and preferences (Cunningham & Jones, 1999), evaluation of tourism destination images (MacKay & Couldwell, 2004), examining important attributes of tourism itinerary design (Groves & Timothy, 2001) and analyzing visitors' behavior in the forest (Oku & Fukamuchi, 2006). Recently, Garrod (2008) used VEP to explore place perception of destinations. He found that both residents and visitors adopted similar ways of viewing a destination.

Resident-Employed Photography (REP) has emerged as a response to expand the use of reflexive photography to residents. Stedman, Beckley, Wallace and Ambard (2004) used REP to examine residents' attachment to high amenity places. In their study, they found a complex relationship between ecological and socio-cultural factors in place attachment. Similar techniques were also used by Kerstetter and Bricker (2008) to examine residents' sense of place in Fiji. It was found that the method was more successful than other techniques with respect to the understanding of a sense of place among residents. The present study was reflexive in nature and thus guided by reflexive photography.

### **CONTEXT OF THE STUDY**

Sambi is a small village (62.76 acres; population 223) located in the northern part of the island of Java, Indonesia. It is approximately 22 miles from the city of Yogyakarta and in close proximity to Gunung Merapi National Park, which covers 43,265 acres on the slopes of two neighboring volcanoes: Mount Merapi and Mount Merbabu. Most residents are Javanese and their main occupation is rice farming (Village Record, 2006). Tourism in Sambi is a relatively recent phenomenon. The village was promoted as a new rural tourism destination that was packaged with Yogyakarta and Mount Merapi. The incorporation of Sambi presented a diversification of the tourism product offerings in Yogyakarta and was promoted to attract more visitors to the region. The potential for Sambi as a transitory destination was strategic due to the abundance of tangible and intangible cultural heritage resources. A small numbers of visitor arrivals were evident in the ensuing years and village leaders have recently begun to review strategies to develop new tourism packages to attract more visitors. The basic concept is still to focus on the existing natural and cultural resources in order to provide a unique tourism experience for visitors. Accordingly, the first step was to determine input from all community stakeholders with respect to product identification, packaging and transactional viewing. To accomplish this objective, multiple methods to seek information were recommended.

In the discussion with the elders, it was found that there had been several studies that were conducted in Sambi by universities students. All of these studies employed verbal methodologies such as interviews and surveys. The elders said that residents were reluctant to participate in past studies. As a result, reducing residents' reluctance to participate in the study became the main consideration in selecting reflexive photography for this study. The free expression by residents through photography was thought to be significant motivation to participate in the study.

## RESEARCH METHODS

The fieldwork for this study was conducted in June-July, 2007. Data were gathered in three stages: participants screening, photo-making process, and a photo interview. This study used 'criterion-based sampling' (Patton, 1990:179). The criteria were age, gender, occupation, educational background, and length of residence in Sambu. Twenty-eight residents of Sambu were recruited for the study. Participants were given information about the research and the use of the findings and photos and were provided with opportunities to withdraw their participation or the use of their photos.

Participants were issued a single-use camera with a built-in flash containing 27 pre-loaded color exposures. After a short training on how to use a single-use camera, participants were asked to take photos of things, places, people, or anything else, which reflected what was unique and important to them in their village that they desired to share with visitors. Participants were given two weeks to take pictures. When the participants completed their assignment, the camera was taken for developing and printing.

The next step in the study was the interview phase in which interviews were conducted with participants concerning the photographs they took. This interview was used to explore participants' values, beliefs, attitudes, and meanings in order to elicit memories or to explore group dynamics (Prosser, 1998: 124). All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. An inductive-thematic analysis was conducted using both participants' photographs and interview transcripts. In addition, a microanalysis procedure of each photograph (Collier & Collier, 1986) was employed to establish the categorization of photographs.

## FINDINGS

The participants (N=28) took 653 photographs of which 618 were used in the interviews. Thirty-five photographs could not be used due to various reasons such as being out of focus, too dark or at the request of the participants. Initially the photographs were coded by content into 15 detailed themes and categories for analysis. These categories were initially grouped by participants themselves in the photo interview in which they were asked to classify and re-classify photographs that they took based on a research question. These categories were then collapsed into six emergent photographic themes.

### A. Way of Life

The theme which participants most wanted to share with visitors was their daily life. This was evidenced by the volume of photographs which were characterized by this theme. All participants (N= 28) discussed their desire to share rice-farming activities with visitors. Sixty-seven photographs of rice farming activities were found to support this theme. These activities include preparing the field before they planted the paddy seed until the day of harvesting. A participant named Penta when she was asked to describe the photograph she took said:

... This is my husband harvesting rice with some other farmers. When we harvest rice, we need many people to help us. We cannot do it alone. I think it is an interesting activity for people from the city. We can teach them how to harvest rice with *ani-ani*, a traditional instrument to cut the paddy. Some tourists have come here to learn it.(Penta)

### B. Environmental Features

The second theme that consistently appeared in the discussion with participants was the environmental features of Sambu. These environmental features include water features, vegetation, and roads which were captured in 174 photographs across participants. Nana, a

private employee in the nearest city of Sleman, who has lived in Sambu for five years, explained that the main asset in Sambu is its landscape.

...I took this picture when I went to the field. I stopped and took a picture of it... I thought the scenery is really good for people from the city. In the city you cannot find such things; fresh air, dirt roads, and even that coconut trees. This is Sambu and I want people to know that our village has beautiful landscapes.(Nana)

### **C. Built Structures**

The third theme revealed by most participants was built structures such as old houses, a village entrance sign, and other important structures which were represented in 73 of the photographs. For example, a participant named Hesti took a picture of a guest house in Sambu village and said:

... No foreign tourist stays at Baruna (guest house) nowadays. The owner even took the water heater out, and locked the rooms. I still remember when many tourists stayed there... I wish we would have more tourists. (Hesti)

### **D. People**

The fourth major theme that participants chose to share with visitors was people. This theme ranged from photographs of themselves, family members, close friends, elders, and important people in the village. This theme was present in 53 pictures found across all participants. This theme illustrated residents' intention to share their life with visitors. It is about the story of the people of Sambu.

That is *Mbah(Mrs) Surip* and *Mbah Tini*. They are quite old.. *Mbah Surip* is 86 years old. I am not sure with *Mbah Tini*, but I think around 70. Although they are old, they still work at the rice field. Both of them are still healthy. They always walk everywhere. I took this picture because I think *Mbah Surip* and *Mbah Tini* are examples of very tough women. I think the younger generation like mine can learn a lot from their experience.(Rostati)

### **E. Traditional Ceremonies and Arts**

The fifth theme revealed from the discussion with the participants was traditional ceremonies and arts, represented in 20 of the photographs. Although the number of photographs was low, more than eight participants discussed this theme in the photo interview. Photographs of the *Wayang Kulit* (leather puppet) performance were the most prevalent in this category. The *Wayang Kulit* performance is the most popular arts performance in Sambu. There were nine photographs which were taken by nine participants depicting *Wayang Kulit*. One participant, Bismoko, said:

This is the *wayang* performance last night. The title is *Petruk dadi Ratu* (Petruk becomes a king). It was a funny story. Many residents showed up and watched it. The show ended around 3 in the morning, but I went home around 2 as I had to work. Visitors should watch the performance.(Bismoko)

## **DISCUSSION AND APPLICATION OF RESULTS**

This study demonstrated that photographs can be a valuable alternative tool in understanding what local communities really want to share with visitors and how they should share it. This study found that using photographs as a trigger sharpens the participants' ability to inform stories of their daily living and to reflect on them. Participants felt empowered throughout the process of the study and learned to take photographs freely within their expressive thoughts

and concerns. This process provided good evidence of the ability of reflexive photography to be used as a medium to increase local participation in tourism development.

The identified themes reflect three interrelated aspects of landscapes: visual (forms), cognitive (meaning), and experiential (functions) (Terkenli, 2001). As participants become increasingly aware of their landscape, tourism becomes an avenue for residents to validate the significance of their contemporary rural lives. Consequently, tourism development should focus on these themes.

As an application, having identified landscape features that residents want to share with visitors, the next step was to highlight all identified landscapes features by creating routes which connect each feature to allow visitors to experience daily living in Sambu. It is also necessary to communicate the local landscape features and their meanings for visitors through interpretation. Interpretation is essential to the delivery and enjoyment of the landscapes as well as to ensure that visitors understand the context of it. Empowering community organizations in Sambu is also seen as a significant strategy in the local development. As there is one guesthouse and some additional houses that can be used as seasonal guest houses in Sambu, trainings or workshops in hospitality are crucial. Similarly, as women's groups organize to cater to visitors, training in catering management needs to be considered. In addition, as other villages may have similarities in landscape features due to their close proximity to the slope of Mount Merapi, it is suggested that Sambu develops village tourism corridors with neighboring villages. These villages can then collaborate in joint marketing programs through making calendars of events by highlighting the major attractions in each village. In the case of Sambu, selected participants' photographs that were used in this study can also be used as marketing aids such as postcards, brochures and other marketing aids.

Finally, it is recommended that the reflexive photography receives further consideration for use in the investigation of tourism experiences, especially with those who have been historically marginalized by the tourism research process and to make the process more enjoyable.

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