Tourist experience and cultural sustainability tourism essay

Tourism is mostly regarded as the way how tourists get meaning to their life through experience by travelling some unfamiliar places. Beside to its economic benefits to the host country, it has socio-cultural benefits by introducing it to the world. Lacy and Douglass (2002) said that tourism as endeavor to record the customs of exotic societies before they vanish into the mainstream of a one-world culture.

Now a time, tourism is widely discussed and practiced all over the world. Mostly Western countries travel to new and indigenous places to get new experience. Authenticity is mostly the center (reason) for tourist to travel. However, the concept of authenticity is hardly understood that created a big debate in current times. When we come to culture tourism, authenticity is more complicated because of commodification. Commodification is inseparable part of tourism that threatened the originality of the culture in southern parts of Ethiopia.

Generally in my essay, I tried to look at different related literatures and then developed conceptually grounded framework that can help us to see how tourist experience is being offered by thinking of authenticity in relation to the case of commodification that is taking place in southern parts of Ethiopia. In doing so, it is possible to offer authentic tourist experience in the manner that cultural sustainability of that place is maintained.

Problem Statement

Sothern parts of Ethiopia is well known place for its cultural tourism destination. Different types of tribes are living there as pastoralism life. Their culture seems primitive, unspoiled, natural, traditional, and exotic that is

attracting large numbers of national and international tourists who go there to have unique experience that is different from their everyday life. In connection to this cultural tourism, the notion of commodification of the culture is affecting authenticity which is the primary reason for most of visitors who travel to there. Even if this trend of commodification has positive impact, it is also negatively affecting the cultural sustainability of that place which needs attention. By understanding such situations of cultural tourism in southern parts of Ethiopia, I would like to develop conceptual framework that can help me to look at the tourist experience and cultural sustainability that cannot only used for that place but also for other areas that are found in similar situations.

Critical Reflection of Literature

The southern part of Ethiopia is well known place for cultural tourism. Tourists go to this area to get authentic experience. In connection to increasing tourist flow to the place, commodification of the culture is widely taking place. Cultural commodification in this situation has both positive and negative impact on the society`s everyday life.

Here it is better to have clear meaning of authenticity, commodification, culture and their relationship from tourism context. Dean McCannell (1999) in his book of the tourist said that actual tourists are going throughout the world in search of experience that gives meaning to their life. In support to this, Redfoot (1984) also said that tourist is a metaphor for shallowness and inauthenticity that leads them for searching authenticity in someone else`s reality. In contrast to this, Boorstin (1961) said that tourists go out because of alienation and isolation for pseudo-event. Wang (1999) who came with

alternative concept on authenticity in tourism study said that authenticity is still relevant to some kinds of tourism such as ethnic, history or culture tourism which involves the representation of other or the past. Bruner and Silver also said " that authenticity is stereotyped images and expectations on to toured objects (cited in Wang, 1999) which is western criteria for authenticity.

Authenticity is not only real objective but also subjective that can be negotiable (Cohen, 1988) which is in contrast to the MacCannell and his supporters meaning of authenticity. Salamone tried to say " authenticity as contextually determined" (cited in Wag, 1999). Actually MacCannell call this type of authenticity as staged authenticity. McCannell (1973) said that modern tourists are presented to staged authenticity. John Urry also said " that tourist spaces are organized around staged authenticity" (cited in Hillman, 2007). This idea of staged authenticity is further strengthened by Redfoot (1984) who said that tourist is merely a consumer of well-known sights. These sights in my case are mostly created by intermediaries (like tour operators and guiders).

In connection to this cultural tourism, the notion of commodification of the culture is affecting authenticity which is the primary reason for most of visitors who travel to there. The current tourism trend in southern part of Ethiopia is showing that local culture is being over commoditized. Intermediaries like tour operators making traditional ethnic rites and festivals to be reduced sanitized to conform to tourist expectations. Products that are being commoditized to tourists are being made based on the impressions that they create on the tourists not as they represent the actual

culture or identity of that place. This situation is creating big question on representing the real cultures of the society which needs attention. Cole (2007) said that tourism turns culture into a commodity that results in loss of authenticity. Shepherd (2002) said that because of cultural commodification, degradation of local cultural practices will be created that can cause host of social ill or " the bomb impact on target". This situation seems to create debate on the necessity of tourist authenticity to the host society. In contrast to this, Cohen (1988) said that commoditization does not necessarily destroy the meaning of cultural products. Here what I would like to argue is that commodification of the culture should not challenge the originality of the culture. Thus, there should be a limit to adaptation to make the culture of that area sustainable.

Because of commodification, the chance that tourists presented to " staged authenticity" is high. Society`s culture of dancing, singing, bull jumping, dressing and making different ritual ceremonies are unique which got a lot of attention from tourists. As tourists constantly like to visit that area, tour operators and guiders arrange different stages to them to get memorable experience. They are paying to them to show their culture to the tourist. These idea is supported by (Greenwood, 1978) who said that performance for participants had been turned into a show for outsiders. Furthermore, Soejono also said " that performances are varied to the appeal of tourists" (cited in Cole, 2007). Actually those who participate in stage are not really living in that way (primitive, wild life, etc). Some of them are living modern life but they perform stage activities in primitive way to get paid for living. MacCannell(1973) call them as the ex-primitive.

They are being represented to the darkest desires of tourists who still want to think them as primitive and denying their humanity (Maasai). They are objects of tourist gazes. Tourists are told by guiders what is going on the stage so that tourists more open up for the experience. Even more than gazing, they also participate in trying the culture of the community like dancing, bull jumping and so on. When tourists participate in cultures of the society, we can say that they do not care about real authenticity rather they are making postmodern authenticity what Wang (1999) called this as " existential authenticity".

One thing what we can understand from above saying of different scholars on authenticity and commodification is that further researches are needed to clear the air on the actual impacts of cultural tourism on sustainability of the host society`s culture.

Designing Conceptual Framework

Tourists go there to have an authentic experience. They go there to fulfill their expectation of the area that is primitive, unspoiled, natural, traditional, and exotic. If the current commodification trend continues in such refined way, the sustainability of the culture in future will be under question mark. Cole (2007) said that if the products are no longer primitive, they will lose their appeal.

Difference in clear meaning of Authenticity is directly affecting commodification level. Cole (2007) stated that Authenticity is socially constructed and negotiable. This idea is in line with what Cohen (1988) said

as authenticity depends on the type of tourist and their point of view. What we can understand from here is that there is no single real authentic culture.

Cultural commodification is not always bad as it has also positive effect in creating opportunity to get more income to the community. Cultural tourism can give an opportunity for this traditional society to introduce their culture to the world and finally gives them an empowerment. Bianchi said " that marginal cultures have appropriated tourism as political instruments in the construction of their identity" (cited in Cole, 2007). Cole (2007) said that the commodification of culture can lead to dis-empowering experience of tourists as it brings empowerment that leads to the shift of power from powerful to the powerless. Even when tour operators are using the exotic parts of the society culture for promotion purpose, they feel a sense of pride in their culture.

One of the research articles that I was very much interested to look at is Robert Shepherd work which is done on " Commodification, Culture and Tourism". In his work, he tried to talk about the role of tourism in commodification of culture. He strongly argued that the cause and effect relationship between tourism and cultural commodification requires an acceptance of a problematic notion of authenticity. He totally stressed on negative impact of cultural tourism on identifying of that place. Here I agree with his argument that says cultural tourism causes commodification of that culture and finally this creates problem on authenticity. However, he didn`t try to look at the positive impacts of the culture tourism in introducing the identity of the culture and then increasing pride of community on their culture. He also said that tourism increases the demand for cheap copies of

authentic art, leading to a desacralization of what once had been pure. Here he tried to challenge the hegemony of capitalism that is connected to the notion of commodification.

The second article that I have tried to look at is the work of Stoma Cole that is done on " Beyond Authenticity and commodification" in Indonesia. In his work he argued that beside to the negative consequences of commercialization on local identities, cultural tourism leads to positive responses and empowerment to that community. He tried to look at authenticity from three perspectives: government, tourists, and villagers. In my case (Southern part of Ethiopia), the work of Cole is more applicable. Thus, I am going to adapt his conceptual framework in that place. I would like to consider more stakeholders perspective like the perspective of intermediaries (tourism business such as tour operators & guiders) on authenticity and commodification due to cultural tourism. What I have tried to observe in my case is that intermediaries play a significant role in creating and reinforcing authenticity that has great impact on tourist experience and cultural sustainability.

The third article that I have interested to look at is the research that is done by Edward M. Bruner on " The Maasai and the Lion King: authenticity, nationalism, and globalization in African tourism" in Kenya. He tried to analyze how the Maasai of Kenya are presented in three different tourist performances-post colonial, post-independence, and postmodern. He emphasized that tourist`s representation of a single ethnic group are multiple and even contradictory. He also demonstrated how ethnicity, culture, and authenticity gain and lose meanings in diverse touristic and

world contexts. Here what I would like to say is that there should no reason for western tourists to relate their authenticity with the post colonization, and post-independence in my case as Ethiopia is the only country in Africa that was not colonized. Since the living style and their culture is similar with the Maasai of Kenya, tourists perception may be linked with colonization, primitive, unspoiled, wild, poverty and the like that needs verification. In short I don`t agree with his all idea of authenticity in Kenya is going to be similar in Ethiopia.

The fourth article that I was looking at was the research done by Eric Cohen on " Authenticity and Commodification in Tourism". He argued that Authenticity is negotiable rather than primitive concept and commoditization does not necessarily destroy the meaning of cultural products. Here it seems Cohen didn`t try to look at the long term impacts of commodification on culture sustainability that creates modification on the cultural products that are going to be presented to tourists for more economic benefit. My argument is that the impact of commodification has to be considered based on the primary objective of the cultural tourism. This is to mean that if the primary objective of cultural tourism is to introduce the culture of a given society to others, I agree with Cohen that commoditization does not destroy the meaning of cultural products rather contribute to it in positive way. However, if the primary objective of the cultural tourism is to maximize the economic benefit, then commodification will not care for cultures of the society and creates negative consequences in the long run to the cultural sustainability. Due to this situation, tourists will loss real authenticity that can affect their experience. Therefore, I do believe that the primary objective

of cultural tourism is the main thing that has be considered in order to know the real impacts of commodification in cultural tourism to authenticity and cultural sustainability.

Based on above reviewed articles (mainly based on Cole, 2007, & Cohen, 1998) and my own experience about the topic in the area, I would like to shape my conceptual framework in the following way. First I would like to develop cultural tourism objective based on four perspectives: tourist, local, government and intermediaries (tourism business). From tourist perspective, I would like to consider their perception of the place, motivation, and how they want to identify themselves in relation to the place. Knowing tourists perspective from this angel can help me to come up with what kind of Authenticity they are searching for. Beside to this, considering local perspective has also paramount benefit to the cultural tourism objective development. How the local people consider their identity, pride on it, respect and involve in preserving their culture has to be considered to get their positive support to the cultural tourism. In addition to this, government perspective on empowerment to the local people, balancing power, and its tourism policy and governance issues has to be considered that has big impact on both authenticity and commodification which latter affect tourist experience and cultural sustainability. I strongly believe that objective of cultural tourism is the key for the type of authenticity and level and type of commodification that can impose its own impact on tourist experience and cultural sustainability.

Conclusion

This research will try to look at how authenticity is being considered in the place (southern part of Ethiopia). Who are the key players in relation to creating authenticity and how they are involving in it is crucial thing that has to be considered in that place. The impact of tourism on socio-cultural sustainability in the area is debatable and that has to be clarified by considering different stakeholders perspective. The current way of cultural tourism that is going on in the area has to be clearly understood in relation to maintaining the identity and pride of the place. This in other way is to mean that how the current tourism trend is affecting the cultural sustainability of the society needs this research. In connection to cultural tourism, the case of commodification and its benefit to the local people has to be considered. Due to commodification, how the case of authentic experience (which is the main reason for tourists to visit the area) is being considered in the area has to be researched. As different studies with regard to my topic contradict to each other, this study in general will try to apply the above developed conceptual framework to come up with further finding to ensure the cultural sustainability in the manner that they can contribute to the authentic tourist experience.