

# Aunthenticity in tourism



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According to Theobald (1998: 411) authenticity means genuine, unadulterated or the real thing. In modern times tourism is frequently accused of destroying authenticity ((a notion which is problematic in its own term), through commoditization of cultures, such as festivals, dance rituals and food which is produced for monetary gain. The definition of authenticity is debatable by many academics; I will try to explore their views on this subject in this essay. MacCannell, in *The Tourist* (1999), portrayed the tourist as being on a pilgrimage, a search for authenticity.

To define “authentic,” MacCannell drew upon the distinction made by the sociologist Erving Goffman between the “front” and “back” regions of social establishments. The front is the place where hosts and guests, performers and audience, or service persons and customers, meet one another; the back is where members of the home team retire between performances to relax and prepare. The back region, as we all know, allows concealment of props and activities that might discredit the performance out front.

In a literal sense it creates a staged performance situation, the terms “front” and “back” describe actual ways in which the social roles are enacted. This search for authenticity by the tourist is seen as a compensatory process as tourists seek to recreate structures, authentic lifestyles that modernity has smashed. What MacCannell called “staged authenticity”, a way of fooling the observers can, and usually does, take place within the tourism industry: the people being toured understand the tourists desire to see real life, and obligingly manufacture false “back regions” to satisfy it.

In contrast to MacCannell, who believes that tourists desire authenticity, Feifer (Urry, 1990) argues that tourists understand that it is impossible to have an authentic tourist experience and in fact enjoy inauthentic activities. Urry discusses Feifer's theory on "playfulness". Play, she argues is a main feature of postmodernism and has been incorporated into numerous activities. Play has allowed for a de-differentiation between work and leisure. We enjoy "playing" roles in society.

This would suggest that Goffman's theory on public representation is another game we play. We act out many roles in life and when we go on holidays, we enjoy acting the part of the tourist. We know that we are being treated as such. We realise that there is a front stage and back stage and that neither are authentic but we enjoy it all the same and will be fulfilled because we played a part in the spectacle. Some authors like Cohen (1988) reject this idea of tourism being a mass deception of staged authenticity as mentioned by MacCannell.

Cohen as cited in Theobald (1998: 412) has noted that the work on authenticity made three assumptions: that tourism leads to exploitative culture commoditization; which destroys authenticity by 'staging' it; which hinders the tourists genuine desire for authentic experience, however, Cohen did not agree with this assumption. The notion of authenticity is a modern value according to Cohen; whose emergence is related to the impact of modernity upon the unity of social existence such as the emergence of individualism, all of which leads to search of the real thing.

He has said that authenticity is a 'socially constructed concept', the meaning of which is not given, but negotiable to the subject. Fine examples of these processes of negotiation of meaning are provided by Silverman and Timmer (<http://www.iias.nl/iiasn/newslet.html>: November 2001). Silverman demonstrates how a wide spectrum of tourist art produced by Papua. New Guineans in the Eastern Iatmul village of Tambunum attests to the ability of local people to utilize tourism as a context in which to represent and even to create novel forms of tradition.

Timmer argues that Huli men revive their tradition of bodily adornment, triggered off by its world-wide fame, in an attempt to pursue goals of self-determination. The fact that tourists take Huli body art as a sign that these people are unspoiled and authentic makes Huli wigmen a typical tourist attraction. Boissevain (1979) argues that through the development of the Maltese festival over thirty years, the emergence and prevalence of wilder celebrations is a reaction to the more modern lifestyle within Malta, a modern lifestyle that results in a increased sense of isolation and interdependency.

The function of the celebration is to temporarily unite the Maltese in play, and in the process recreate a sense of community. These celebrations thus exist for the benefit of the locals. Boissevain argues against the more common argument that the emergence of explicitly commercialised and wilder festivals are the result of commoditization of the cultural event to satisfy tourist's tastes. Downplaying the economic benefits of the tourists, he argues that tourists are a welcome presence as they give the Maltese a much needed cultural identity.

Tourists, who are neither patronizing or condescending, bear witness to a genuine reaction to modernity as opposed to a staged event for their consumption. They have become an essential element of the celebration, and thus join the Maltese in celebration and obtain a valued cultural experience. Visitors might also contribute to the ' emergent authenticity' whereby contrived events might be eventually accepted as authentic.

As Greenwood(1982) argues ' all viable cultures are in the process of " making themselves up" all the time', and mass tourism succeeds because tourists accept a loose interpretation of authenticity, being satisfied with play and make believe (Theobald: 1998). Boissevain argues that the modern Maltese have not the time nor the interest to maintain this cultural heritage as it no longer reflects their cultural identity. The cultural change in values, as evidenced in the celebrations, is phrased as a movement from organized ritual to a spontaneous play.

These explanations counter the criticism of Greenwood who argues that the increase of festive celebrations results from the commoditization of a culture to appeal to tourists' tastes. This change in the event, they argue, inevitably has disastrous consequences as it destroys the meaning of the event for the host culture and provides the tourists with MacCannell's " staged authenticity" of the cultural event. Like Cohen, Boissevain does not consider tourism a mass deception, even when traditional celebrations have had to hire outsiders to maintain their existence.

It helps persevere a declining tradition. Like Cohen, Boissevain does not use authenticity as a criteria for evaluation and suggests that cultural change is

inevitable and potentially beneficial. Such cultural changes as the commercialisation of the festivals, is argued as evidence of greater cultural pride; for it entices the tourists, not for economic benefits, but as an audience to the celebrations they provide the Maltese with a cultural identity. The cultural change is shown to create a positive experience for the tourist.