

“I’m a real Fijian now” – (Re)Visiting Authenticity in a Tribal Village

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Introduction

Particularly in relation to cultural tourism, the concept of authenticity is an important one. Much has been written about in the tourism literature concerning authenticity (see Reisinger & Steiner, 2006 for a review of the concept). Originally, the use of the term applied to whether objects and artefacts where are they claimed to be and hence of sightseeing value. This occurred in a museum context (Trilling, 1972). The concept then evolved from objects in a museum to objects, rituals, festivals, food, dress and performance as witnessed by tourists in situ. The question of authenticity related to whether these cultural elements were genuine and real (even in the absence of tourists). McCannell (1973) argued that it is unlikely that tourists witness authentic culture of the host community. He coined the term ‘staged authenticity’ to denote the situation where, the host community in an effort to protect their culture, created backstage areas where real life for the host community occurred with all its traditions and protocols and a front-stage area where the host community performs for tourists, showcasing what and how they want their culture to be portrayed. It is in this front stage area that the host community performs and exhibits its culture, albeit in a packaged form for the tourists, where the culture is commodified. Wang (1999) distinguished between two types of authenticity. Object authenticity is the type of authenticity outlined above where culture, both tangible and intangible elements, can be assessed to the extent to which they are genuine or real. This type of authenticity involves an evaluation of the hosts’ culture. Existential authenticity in the tourism context is concerned with predominantly the tourists’ self identity, their sense-making, knowing one’s self and having a sense of one’s identity. It is the experiences associated with individuality, self-realisation and self-development. This is an important part of the tourist experience especially for the backpacking and volunteer tourist experience (Pearce & Foster, 2007).

This paper revisits the idea of authenticity in a case study of an indigenous tourism project in the north east of Fiji. The project, entitled, Tribewanted, claims to be a sustainable development project whose aims are: community building, sustainable living and an adventurous experience. Tribewanted is an alternative tourism experience whose Tribe members fall within the backpacker/volunteer/adventure tourism market.

Method

Data were collected in three ways. The first method used for primary data collection was in-person semi-structured interviews conducted among tribe members (tourists) and Team Fiji (the

local community members who were employed on the project). The second method used to collect data was through personal observation; an 'immersion methodology' (Jarvis & Peel, 2010). Here, the research team travelled to Vorovoro and stayed on the island for seven days each in April and November 2010, experiencing what it is like to live as tribe members and participating in all the activities the tribe members did. The third method of data collection was a review of TW experiences online via personal travel blogs, with diaries from blogs considered the same as word-of-mouth and used as first hand examples of The Tribe and Team Fiji's experiences

Findings/Discussion

The cultural experience of the project, that is, to live as if in a traditional Fijian village with all its customs and protocols is a large motivator to visiting the island. In addition to being involved with the daily jobs such cooking, firewood-collecting, gardening, and feeding the animals, tribe members also learn and perform *mekes* (Fijian dances), presenting *sevusevu* (ceremonies), taking Fijian language lessons and sit around the *tanoa* (kava bowl) in the evening and drink kava. Tribewanted is a unique eco-community on Vorovoro in Northern Fiji. Some of these protocols have diminished in some Fijian villages but are maintained on Vorovoro.

Conclusion

The paper explores the issue of authenticity from a tourist as well as host perspective and reveals inconsistencies from both sides of the tourism experience. While local expectations about the project were unclear and the perceptions were generally shaped by what was shared by Tui Mali (the paramount Chief in the area), affirming expectations that Tribewanted was to function just as any ordinary village in the district. Issues such as who are the gatekeepers and reinforcers of the culture and which culture is presented to the tourists are explored. Given that culture is dynamic, evolving and contains elements of objectivity in addition to be subjective, questions are raised as to whether the concept of authenticity is appropriate at all.

"Authorisation" (Ryan & Huyton, 2002) may be more useful in understanding the cultural tourism experience. Perhaps, in the end, authenticity is like John Stuart Mill's idea of happiness (Mill, 1999) in that authenticity can be attained by not making it the object of attainment. Those only who authentic have their minds fixed on some object other than their own authenticity. Thus aiming at something else (being themselves), they find authenticity along the way. Ask yourself whether you are authentic, and you cease to be so.

Social Science discipline used

Sociology / Cultural Studies

Key References (APA style)

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