

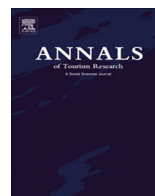


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# Tourists' agency versus the circle of representation



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### ABSTRACT

Tourism studies scholars have criticized but not overcome the passivity inherent in analyses of the reproduction of stereotypes in tourism encounters. Problematizing the category of viewers, I open the black box of the circle of representation as a self-reinforcing process, showing how tourists' (re)production of images of 'the other' is rooted in their agency. Using Q-method and film-assisted observations embedded in ethnography, I describe how Dutch tourists reflexively ignore, interpret and mold contrasting information when they reproduce mythical Maasai imagery. This reproduction often contradicts the 'performance' of their hosts and is not a post-tourist phenomenon. A typology of three tourist perspectives further underlines the non-monolithic nature of these images, and how 'the self' is central in their active reproduction.

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### Introduction

It has been argued that tourism, instead of encouraging cultural understanding, reinforces ethnocentrism and tourists' beliefs in their own worldview (Laxson, 1991) because visitees' "cultural displays serve as a mirror for Western fantasies, reflecting back in performance what the tourists desire" (Bruner 1991, p. 238, see also van Beek, 2003; Wels, 2002). In tourism marketing, there is prominent use of strongly stereotyped images of people from the global South, especially those who are labeled as typical examples of untouched Fourth World peoples (Silver, 1993). The idea that tourism

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interactions follow a circle of representation has been specifically present when describing encounters between Western tourists and these people.

The Maasai, who are often employed as icons of East Africa, are a good example. Bruner describes how Maasai have come to be

experienced with Westerners... Maasai understand the Western fantasy about the pastoral life, and willingly play a part to display their Maasai culture, because, as they say, it is what the Westerners want to see and pay for, and they, the Maasai, are in it for the money. It is a self-reinforcing system (Bruner, 2002, p. 390, see also Wijngaarden, 2012).

Based on my research with Kisongo Maasai and Dutch tourists in Northern Tanzania, I feel the need to problematize and refine this simple circular representation model.

My conclusions are based on five years of anthropological research, including a year of fieldwork in the small village of Encoro. Remotely placed between Ngorongoro and Kilimanjaro, this is the site of a small-scale community tourism enterprise that is owned and operated by local people. The Maasai involved have little experience with tourism marketing and limited exposure to Western culture and fantasies. As a result, no functioning circle of representation can be observed (yet): The Maasai of Encoro receive tourists in their village and their homes without putting on an orchestrated performance, often not responding to tourists' expectations of typical Maasai. Although observing this mismatch, visitors nevertheless stubbornly reproduce their images of 'the other' along the lines of existing stereotypes.

In this article I show that even if the imagery that tourists have of Maasai is in line with stereotypes, it is not monolithic, and the Maasai's appearance and behavior has much less influence on the reproduction of this imagery than the argument of the circle of representation suggests. My description of three types of tourist perspectives and their reproduction makes clear that the production of images of 'the other' revolves primarily around the 'self', stressing that in reproductions that are seemingly passive, the tourist is in fact an active agent.

### Agency in tourism interactions

It has been argued that in the interaction between hosts and guests, tourists' images of local people are transmitted to them through "the tourist gaze" (Urry, 2002). As a result, when locals commodify parts of (the existing images of) their culture as an object of (cultural)tourism, they strategically make use of the imagery they have learned tourists have of them (Bruner, 2001; Bruner & Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1994; Corbey, 1993). Building upon these images they produce a tourist performance which MacCannell calls 'staged authenticity' (1973) and Desmond refers to as 'staging tourism' (1999). The idea of this circle of representation has been useful in the analysis of tourism situations, as it brought to the attention that visitees are active players in tourism interactions, and cannot be considered "passive recipients of an external world which impinges upon them" (MacDonald, 1997, p. 175).

In my research I acknowledge these insights, further extending awareness of the actor status of visitees by specifying how my Maasai research participants comply as well as resist stereotypes that exist of them. Moreover, I research the imagery local Maasai have of tourists with the same depth as the imagery tourists have of them, showing that both images are constructed according to the same abstract patterns, and function following similar dynamics (Wijngaarden, in press). However, in this article I will only deal with the results with regard to the tourists I researched, and focus on the role *their* agency plays in the (re)production of Maasai imagery.

The circle of representation model can easily deemphasize the agency of tourists during interactions with their visitees. To counterbalance this, Rojek and Urry already described tourism as a co-production, underlining that what is shown is never consumed passively, but actively interpreted by the viewers (1997). They explain that although capitalism and commodification have their influence on tourism attractions, this does not lead to monolithic interpretations of these attractions:

Even the most apparently unambiguous [cultural sites] will be 'read' in different and paradoxical ways by different groups of visitors. There is no evidence that sites are uniformly read and passively accepted by visitors (Rojek & Urry, 1997, p. 14).

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