

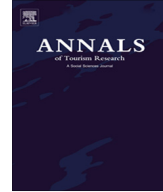


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Community and cosmopolitanism in the new Ubud



Graeme MacRae*

Massey University Auckland, New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

Ubud has, since the 1930s, represented a distinctive model of tourism in Bali—based on “traditional culture” but also engagement of foreigners with the local community in which the line between “tourists who stay longer” and an expatriate community has been blurred. From the 1970s tourist and expatriate numbers increased steadily and since 2010 numbers have exploded and new kinds of tourists and expatriates and new relationships with local culture and community have developed. Ubud is no longer a village-with-tourists but a diversifying international town. This article documents this “new Ubud” and argues that the categories of tourism studies are inadequate for making sense of it, suggesting instead cosmopolitanism as a potentially more useful tool for understanding this transformation.

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Introduction

In 2013, a regular visitor to the small town of Ubud in Bali, lamented (on Facebook) that Ubud was no longer the village she remembered and loved and that she would not be back. A long-term foreign-born resident pointed out that foreigners had been saying this since the 1930s. Another “beg(ged) to disagree. It has gone way over the top this time”. Yet another described “the once sleepy hamlet of Ubud, now overrun with expat yoginis and villa people” who “feel empowered and speak of “his/her community”” (Wijaya, 2014). Clearly something was happening, so when I arrived in mid-2014 after a gap of several years, I thought I was prepared.

* Tel.: +64 9 414 0800.

E-mail address: G.S.Macrae@massey.ac.nz

I was not surprised by material developments such as new shops, hotels and restaurants, but the first locals I spoke to told me that most of the new restaurants were owned by foreigners, those owned by locals could not compete and, apart from landlords benefitting from high rents, most people were uneasy about this. Many of these new restaurants featured organic, vegan, raw and even “hi-vibe” foods; homestays, hotels and massage shops were rebranded as “spas” and the streets were full of young foreigners on motorbikes in flowing robes or nothing much at all (not even shoes or helmet), carrying yoga mats and didgeridoos. Something really had changed while I’d been looking the other way.

The aims of this essay are firstly to document and explore these changes, secondly to reflect on implications for the future shape of a community based economically on tourism but also marketed as a bastion of “traditional culture” and in so doing, to make a critical contribution to tourism studies. My argument is firstly that the developments of recent years, while not unprecedented, represent a significant break, in style as well as scale, of tourism/expatriate culture/economy in Ubud. Secondly, to make sense of this new Ubud, traditional analytic frameworks based on concepts of “tourism” and “local community” have limited utility. I suggest therefore a cautious and strategic use of the concept of cosmopolitanism as tool for making sense of these changes in a more integrated and inclusive way.

While tourism studies have expanded in many directions in recent years, the mainstream has remained remarkably reliant on a conceptual toolkit of long standing, inherited from a small group of foundational theorists (Franklin & Crang, 2001, p. 6). This journal is probably the closest to an exception, but even here, “markets” and “destinations”, “demands” and “satisfaction”, “impacts” and “lifecycles”, “authenticity”, “staging” and “gaze” remain prominent and of course “tourism” itself remains the primary taken-for-granted category, albeit with an ever-proliferating range of adjectivally-prefixed sub-varieties. My point is not whether these are suitable or productive conceptual categories for the discipline of tourism studies, but simply that they provide limited capacity for making sense of complex dynamic socio-economic situations such as the new Ubud in which the processes of tourism come home to roost, and that to make sense of these, we need new tools of analysis.

Cosmopolitanism is not a perfect tool for this job but it is (as Winston Churchill said of democracy) less imperfect than “all the others” (such as multiculturalism or glocalism). Among these imperfections are its resistance to precise definition and its diversity of levels and spheres of application, from the philosophical to the political, the personal to the social, the aspirational to the empirical (Vertovec & Cohen, 2002, p. 8). But this also provides it with a certain flexibility of application and more so when expressed as a process of becoming—cosmopolitanisation—which enables us to say something more than the sociological empirica of alternative terms such as multicultural. I use both terms here—strategically and cautiously, but experimentally, with a view to provoking debate on forms of community emerging as new combinations of people and lifestyles assemble in places across the world. But cosmopolitanism is not merely a global abstraction—it “must take place somewhere, in specific sites and situations” (Abbas, 2000, p. 772).

Ubud was, until recently, a culturally homogenous village (notwithstanding some 80 years of tourism and expatriate residents) but is now rapidly morphing into a sprawling town accommodating a larger number and wider range of people from all over the world. The economic enterprises and cultural outlooks of these new arrivals are very different to indigenous ones and they now live side-by-side in largely separate worlds. This could be said of many towns and cities all over the world, but in this case, the speed and scale of change and the contrast with the ideology of tradition force us to take notice.

While these new residents are tourists, expatriates and migrants of various kinds, and their presence in Ubud is driving its transformation, focusing on them alone is insufficient to understand the emerging socio-economic formation. Furthermore, conventional categories of tourism studies such as those listed above are, in my experience, conceptual obstacles to the kind of holistic understanding we need to make sense of new kinds of developments. A tourism studies that focuses narrowly on “tourism” is unlikely to develop the insights necessary to interpret the changing situations in which tourism actually occurs and which in turn shape tourism.

I am not the first to make observations of this kind (Cohen & Cohen, 2012; Franklin & Crang, 2001; Tribe, 1997, 2005a, 2005b). The remedy suggested by these writers is a more critical and reflexive

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