



# LIVING PASTS

## Contested Tourism Authenticities

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**Abstract:** Recent critiques of the concept of authenticity in tourism studies have had the unfortunate effect of silencing claims and counter-claims as to the authenticity of tourist performances amongst host communities, and have tended to focus purely on the effects of authenticity as a device for temporally distancing the Other. Rather than simply being an obsession of Western observers however, understanding competing claims as to the authenticity of these performances is of central importance to the understanding of the wider social context and divisions within which tourism is practiced. This argument is illustrated ethnographically with regard to behind the scenes debates surrounding a tourist event in Papua New Guinea. **Keywords:** authenticity, ethnography, postmodernism, custom, temporality. Crown Copyright © 2009 Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

### INTRODUCTION

In recent decades there has been an explosion in the re-enactment and display of the lives of people in former times for the education and entertainment of those of us stuck in the present (Clifford, 1997, p. 219). Such Living Pasts, by which I mean attempts to present either a reproduction of aspects of life in former times or cultural performances that implicitly rely for at least a part of their power on the creation of an atmosphere of unchanging tradition that connects participants and viewers to the past, arouse doubts in many observers. It is not my intention in this paper to evaluate the legitimacy of such doubts, although I will begin by briefly outlining the arguments in order to frame what follows. Rather my argument is that such debates, by focussing primarily on the authenticity of Living Pasts from one particular perspective, only scratch the surface of their importance. In the process they often re-inscribe a totalising perspective that constructs Others as unified cultures, even (in fact especially) in the case of more recent postmodern perspectives whose avowed intent is to critique earlier modernist critiques of authenticity for precisely this reason. In this

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paper, I illustrate ethnographically from fieldwork conducted ‘behind the scenes’ of a cultural tourist performance in Papua New Guinea (PNG), the conflicting ways in which concepts of authenticity are used by those creating and making sense of these performances. This social constructivist critique of object authenticity is contrasted to postmodern critiques of the concept of authenticity itself, as outlined with regard to museum displays in the works of Clifford (1988, 1997), and in the context of tourism studies in the work of Taylor (2001).

Postmodernist analyses have alerted us to the political dangers of the quest to keep the authentic Other in their exotic box; potentially denying them their full humanity by denying their engagement and co-evality with a wider world. Yet such approaches often themselves embody important assumptions, both about the uses of authenticity, most broadly defined, as a concept and following this also about the nature of communities that the concept is allegedly used to judge. One of these is that authenticity is primarily a question of origins and temporality. If the authentic is simply ‘the way it really was’ then attempts to project authenticity onto the hosts of cultural are attempts to place the Other in the past, using time, as Fabian (1983) argued, as a distancing mechanism to deny our co-evality and entanglement with the object of our Gaze.

Although temporal aspects are often, and perhaps always, a central component of contested claims to authenticity, it is my contention that they are not necessarily the most important aspect or the most fruitful starting point for analysis. Indeed, rather than starting from the perspective of temporality as a distancing device that structures contemporary encounters, a more useful starting point might be to examine the contemporary social context that encourages different people to make claims to authenticity in different ways and how that structures conflicting perspectives of pasts in the present. In this paper, I argue that the elements of social life and the ideas (including appeals to the past) which different people appeal to in order to make claims of authenticity are many and varied and it is in the analysis of contemporary social relations and the particular social positions of those making various claims that we will best find the ontologies of particular claims to authenticity and their social effects.

## LIVING PASTS AND CONTESTING AUTHENTICITIES

Debates about the authenticity of tourist and museum experiences can perhaps be broadly divided into two themes, which even more broadly could be divided into two periods of late twentieth century Western academic thought. First of all there is, at the opening of the era in which tourism was taken seriously as a topic for anthropological and academic analysis, a widespread denigration of the tourist experience largely on the grounds of its alleged inauthenticity. Western tourists allegedly went to fill a gap in their souls caused by the alienating living conditions of Western modernity, a gap that could be filled by consuming the authentic living cultures of others who still lived within

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