Touring responsibility: The trouble with 'going local' in community-based tourism in Thailand

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the question of responsibility with reference to community-based tourism. Local communities are often presented by the tourist industry as an inherent value to recognize and protect. Tourists visiting distant places are thus frequently exhorted to 'go local' through having a 'real' experience with local people and communities; they are also invited to behave responsibly and to appreciate the value of responsible management. In this article, we reflect on the consequences of the 'contact zone' produced by these trends and, more in general, on the rapid changes that the label 'responsible tourism' is generating in the ways that many travelers approach the experience of local communities and their lifestyles. We do so, by analyzing an Elephant Camp in Thailand, where tourists spend periods being involved in life of the camp and the management of the elephants. The tourists at the Elephant camp indeed show how this approach to travel often becomes an imbroglio of detachment and involvement, of paternalistic protection and mutual exploitation, of generosity and hospitality, but also of corruption and self-interest. All in all, we present the Elephant Camp as a laboratory for reflecting on how questions of responsibility towards distant people and places, especially when actually enacted in place – which is what tourism does – often become a complicated affair, which is at the origin of new opportunities but also new tensions, of learning and but also misunderstandings, of neo-colonial practices but also of actual support to the local economy.

Community tourism (sometimes called community-based tourism) is a form of tourism which aims to include and benefit local communities, particularly indigenous peoples and villagers in the rural South (i.e. 'developing world'). For instance, villagers might host tourists in their village, managing the scheme communally and sharing the profits. There are many types of community tourism project, including many in which the 'community' works with a commercial tour operator, but all community tourism projects should give local people a fair share of the benefits/profits and a say in deciding how incoming tourism is managed.

(Tourism Concern)

Community-based tourism is travel to local indigenous communities that have invited outsiders to experience their customs, food, lifestyle, and set of beliefs.

These communities manage both the impacts and the benefits of this tourism, strengthening their self-governance, economic alternatives, and traditional ways of life in the process.

(The Pachamama Alliance)

1. Introduction: Tourism, responsibility, care, community

Recent decades have seen a rise in what is called 'community-based-tourism' – travelers choosing tours or holiday accommodation that benefit 'locals', helping out while having fun, or do-gooders on vacation (Jones, 2005; Reed, 1997; Ruiz-Ballesteros and Hernández-Ramírez, 2010; Simmons, 1994). Central to the rhetoric in community-based-tourism is the idea that tourism ventures can and should bring about positive impacts to host destinations, and that, with strong overtones of 'social', 'justice', 'pro-poor', 'green', and 'eco', tourism has the capacity to make a direct and tangible improvement to host communities, or at least minimize harm.

From what started off as a niche sector taken up by only few pioneers, community-based-tourism experiences are now increasingly available (and popular amongst tourists) in many corners of

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the world (see, for example, Responsibletravel.com). Yet alongside enthusiastic and positive statements on the great potentials that all forms of 'responsible tourism' (including the community based one) has in addressing poverty and environmental issues, are also pessimistic and cynical assessments of the ethical implications of many of these 'alternative' forms of travel, with journalists suggesting that they are nothing but a "a morally seductive adaptation of modern mass tourism" (MacKinnon, 2009). Positioned against larger trends such as ethical consumerism in tourism, religious mission travel, work and study immersion programs, and academic fieldwork as 'community based tourism', this paper therefore considers some of the key implications of travel based on supposed benefits to social, charitable or environmental causes.

'Responsible tourism' – another branding lined to similar ethical preoccupations (see Sin, 2010) – is indeed very often related to ideas of community, normally to 'traditional', 'local' communities. The word 'community' is omnipresent in the promotional material produced by that part of the industry busy with organizing forms of responsible tourism.

> Community based tourism enables the tourist to discover local habitats and wildlife, and celebrates and respects traditional cultures, rituals and wisdom. The community will be aware of the commercial and social value placed on their natural and cultural heritage through tourism, and this will foster community based conservation of these resources.

> The community may choose to partner with a private sector partner to provide capital, clients, marketing, tourist accommodation or other expertise. Subject to agreement to the ideals of supporting community development and conservation, and to planning the tourism development in partnership with the community, this partner may or may not own part of the tourism enterprise (Responsibletravel.com).

Tourists are offered the chance to 'travel like a local' and to get in contact with these communities, sometimes even in very remote areas, and to enjoy their 'hospitality' (another mantra in the tourist popular literature) and act in order to support the locals' livelihoods. One example amongst many is the Karen homestay in Northern Thailand that describes itself as "community based tourism at its best – share life with the local Karen people – interactive, authentic, fun and fascinating!" The website further shares the background of the community, where Karen people were described to be living within National Park boundaries and hence in fear of persecution. This situation was improved "with the help of a local NGO, The Project for Recovery of Life and Culture (PRL)... [where] the community developed a 'Community based Tourism' program to invite guests to stay in their community and share their day to day life", and since then, "the community had become well known as a 'learning centre' to understand Karen life" (Responsibletravel.com).[1]

In this article we would like to argue that the tourist community, for responsible travelers, somehow responds to a widespread popular rhetoric of loss of a hypothetical 'original community'. The perceived lack and loss of an original community in (mainly Western) modern life is precisely the referent of so much tourism promotional material that promises what is an impossible but desirable return/compensation for this loss (see Minca, 2011). The result of this desire is a sort of imagined phantasmagoric geography of peculiar communities that are hypothetically 'out there',

waiting to be visited, and in need of care and protection to survive, precisely as 'communities'. According to Italian political philosopher Roberto Esposito,

> Nothing seems more appropriate today than thinking community; nothing more necessary, demanded and heralded by a situation that joins in a unique epochal knot the failure of all communisms with the misery of new individualisms. Nevertheless, nothing is further from view; nothing so remote, repressed, and put off until later, to a distant and indecipherable horizon (2009: p. 1).

For Esposito, however, community is often reduced "into a conceptual language that radically alters it [...]: that of the individual and totality; of identity and the particular; of the origin and the end or, more simply of the subject with its most unassailable metaphysical connotations of unity, absoluteness and interiority" (2009: p. 1).

This is no place for an extended discussion on the meaning of community for contemporary Western political economies of identity and their related global geographies (for mainstream debates on this see, among others, Agamben, 1993; Bataille et al., 1985; Blanchot and Joris, 1988; Jean-Luc et al., 1991; Virno et al., 2004) However, there is a widespread agreement on the emerging of new manifestations and increasingly radical manifestations of communitarian thinking in Western public culture, often accompanied by a rather superficial but pervasive rhetoric of 'a return to a community' of some kind' Our claim is that these manifestations, present in different interpretation along the entire political spectrum, may have a key role in determining how responsible tours, especially those branded as 'community-based', are influenced by both this communitarian thinking and a widespread desire 'to go local' in order to protect and preserve an ideal cultural and political horizon represented precisely by other people's communities, normally located in the Global South. At the same time, some self-appointed 'responsible tourists' are also part of a virtual global community, a community that shares ideals, travel styles, concerns for the environment, sensitivity for the well-being of the locals and, more general concerns about the preservation and the protective care of (others') local communities. The imagined communities promoted by responsible tourism indeed often makes implicit reference to a hypothetical self-sufficient isolated human consortium, a utopian space where individual subjects can be represented (and visited) as if they were discrete parts of a larger (but vulnerable) collective Self, that responsible tourists want to get to know in person and at the same time help and protect (Minca, 2011).

Community therefore remains a very popular trope in tourism, often intended as a metaphor associated with a specific set of expectations and related spatial arrangements. The interest on the part of a growing number of tourists for visits to remote and 'traditional' people and regions, and for acting responsibly while doing so, is discussed in this paper as part of a reassuring practice of confirmation of the existence of presumed 'local' figures (normally the natives and, in particular, their selected representatives) that putatively stand there and live 'locally'; this form of tourism gravitates around the actual possibility of an apparently unmediated contact with these living figures while behaving responsibly, as tourists. In investigating this complicated space of negotiation – between ideas of community and the actual people working and living in that 'local' – we highlight how the practice of 'going local' and caring (for distant less-privileged communities and their members) is a rather messy business involving questions of power, of morality and the actual management of places, peoples, jobs, money. Our empirical case shows indeed that people traveling responsibly often act in ways that are in line with a specific rhetoric of care and sustainability supported by a popular industry

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[1] Responsibletravel.com is a website that collates responsible tour options from a large number of travel agencies, and was "created to enable travelers to contact carefully pre-screened tour operators and hotel managers directly to make a booking". As such, even though this paper cites a number of examples from one source: responsibletravel.com, these are in reality authored by many different travel agencies that use responsibletravel.com as a portal to attract tourists.