



Transnational migrant home visits as identity practice: The case of African migrants in South Africa



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 24 March 2016

Revised 26 December 2016

Accepted 24 January 2017

Keywords:

Transnationalism

Migrants

Memory

Identity

Home

VFR

ABSTRACT

Focussing on the temporary journeys of transnational migrants in South Africa to their home countries on the continent, this paper explores the motivations, subjective experiences and perceived significance of these home visits for the migrants' sense of identity and belonging. Based on a qualitative interpretive research approach, the study finds that memories and comparisons invariably underpin the experience of the home country, the encounter with the home and engagement with social relations. This induces new insights and sometimes 'small epiphanies' (Pearce, 2012), which can lead to self-reflection, self-transformative experiences and shifts in consciousness, affecting the migrant's sense of belonging.

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"Well, I think I didn't realize that I was seeing South Africa as home until when I went home" (41/F/A/Nigeria)

Introduction

The so-called 'mobility turn' in tourism studies has fostered exploration of the interconnectedness between tourism and transnational migration, including research on different types of diasporic tourism and migrant return travel (Coles & Timothy, 2004; Duval, 2003; Feng & Page, 2000; Urry, 2007). This research contributes to the burgeoning literature in this emergent niche area and aims to respond to a challenge posed by several scholars in this field, namely the need for more differentiation and nuance between first generation migrants on home visits and later generations of diasporic communities who embark on various types of 'roots tourism'. This is achieved by foregrounding the role of personal memory – a neglected area of research in tourism studies (Marschall, 2012) – in the migrant tourists' motivations, experiences and their perception of the meaning of home.

The second major contribution of this paper lies in its geographical focus on the African continent, a vastly under-researched terrain within the field of diasporic tourism and indeed tourism studies more generally. This study explores the home visits or 'provisional returns' (Long & Oxfeld, 2004) of African migrants in South Africa, one of the continent's most important host countries since 1994. According to most recent calculations (Stupart, 2016), over one million people have

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2017.01.011>

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applied for asylum in South Africa between 2006 and 2014, mostly from the African continent, of which just under 400,000 cases are still pending. Many of these asylum seekers are essentially economic migrants; less than 10% are officially recognized as refugees (UNHCR South Africa., 2015). Due to South Africa's liberal legislation, asylum seekers and refugees enjoy freedom of movement and access to work opportunities, education and other services. In addition to asylum seekers, many Africans and migrants from other parts of the world come to South Africa temporarily or permanently to take up professional employment opportunities, start a business or upgrade their educational qualifications.

Some of the travel behaviour considered in this paper falls within what Rogerson (2004) calls 'regional tourism', the movements of Africans, including transnational migrants, across borders in the Southern African region. The present study focuses more specifically on the temporary return journeys of South Africa-based migrants to their home countries across the African continent. Virtually no research has been done in this field and even internationally, the home visits of migrants as a wider phenomenon accompanying global transnationalism, remain poorly understood by tourism scholars, policy makers and the industry alike. The third objective and contribution of this research then is to investigate the significance of these journeys – not in terms of socio-economic, but emotional indicators: the migrants' subjective motivations, experiences, and perceptions of the meaning of these journeys.

Based on a qualitative research approach involving in-depth interviews, the study explores how African migrant participants experience the journey 'back home', its impact on their relationship towards the host and the home country and in turn their sense of belonging. The theoretical framework fuses memory, place experience and the impact of touristic practices on self-identity. It is argued that these home trips may unexpectedly lead to self-transforming experiences and profound personal insights that can deeply affect the migrant's sense of identity and personhood.

African migrants and tourism

The term 'migrant' is used here to refer to all foreigners who are in South Africa temporarily or permanently, legally or illegally, irrespective of the length of their stay, their reasons for coming, and their intentions to return. While the experiences of these migrants and their varied social and economic impacts have attracted considerable research attention (e.g. Gebre, Maharaj, & Pillay, 2011; Neocosmos, 2010), their mobilities and specifically touristic behaviour have rarely been investigated. South African tourism authorities largely ignore migrants as tourists, nor do migrants see themselves as such, because they feel they are 'just going home'. In the South African and African context, tourism is popularly viewed as a leisure activity conducted by the prosperous and privileged. Yet migrants are significant for tourism, as they induce bi-directional Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) tourism and engage in a host of other types of travel domestically and internationally.

Migrants and their return journeys home

In a general sense, the current research shares common denominators with the fields of VFR tourism (Backer & King, 2015), especially studies that foreground the emotionality of VFR in a migration context (e.g. Mueller, 2015); second homes tourism (Hall & Müller, 2004; Rogerson & Hoogendoorn, 2014); family reunions travel (Kluin & Lehto, 2012; Ramirez, Skrbis, & Emmison, 2007); and repeat visitation (Alegre & Cladera, 2006), to name but a few. It resonates with conceptual developments associated with postmodern tourism, notably its emphasis on identity and dedifferentiation, the blurring of boundaries between notions of home and away, the every-day routine versus touristic experience (Cohen & Cohen, 2012; Urieli, 2005). More specifically it relates to niche area forms of tourism grown out of migration and diaspora.

'Roots tourism', diasporic tourism', 'ethnic tourism', 'legacy tourism', 'personal heritage tourism', 'emigrant homecoming', 'homeland tourism', 'genealogy tourism', 'homesick tourism' and a host of related typologies have been defined in recent years and become potentially lucrative niche market products (e.g. Arnone, 2011; Basu, 2004, 2005; Bruner, 1996; Iorio & Corsale, 2013; Leite, 2005; Marschall, 2015; McCain & Ray, 2003; Meethan, 2004; Ostrowski, 1991; Timothy, 1997). Some of this literature informs the current research, especially with respect to concepts of home and belonging, memory, experience, and identity. These types of tourism include – and in some cases exclusively denote – the touristic movements of second, third and later generations of diasporic communities. Being often lumped together, more analytical distinction is needed between migrant tourists of the first and subsequent generations, because their respective memories and experiences of the old home differ markedly (Higginbotham, 2012; Huang, Ramshaw, & Norman, 2016). Moreover, roots tourists are often prosperous leisure tourists in search of identity and belonging, while migrants on home journeys are usually budget travellers whose visit home is primarily motivated by emotional or material necessities.

Migrant return trips home tend to be classified as a sub-type of VFR tourism in official statistics and sometimes the scholarly literature, but several researchers consider this label inadequate (e.g. Duval, 2003; Feng & Page, 2000; Scheyvens, 2007). Duval's (2003, 2004) seminal studies of Toronto residents of Eastern-Caribbean extraction (informed by Baldassar's (1997, 2001) pioneering work) clearly distinguishes the 'return visits' of migrant families to their homeland from ordinary VFR tourism on the basis of the cultural differences between the home and the host society. The need to maintain social and other ties with the homeland and to immerse oneself in the familiar environment of traditional cultural and religious values underpins many international case studies (e.g. Hung, Xiao, & Yang, 2013; Nguyen & King, 2004; Stephenson, 2002). They are less

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