Suomen matkailututkimuksen seura

Ethics of Hospitality – Participatory Tourism Encounters in the Northern Highlands of Nicaragua

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Abstract

How do hosts and guests welcome each other in responsible tourism encounters? This is the question addressed in *Ethics of Hospitality*, an ethnographic study on tourism development in coffee-growing communities in Nicaragua. The research follows the trail of development practitioners and researchers who came to the communities with a desire to help, teach and study the local hosts. On a broader level, it is a journey exploring why these guests, as well tourists proper, expect unconditional hospitality in their encounters with rural communities. The theoretical approach builds on Emmanuel Levinas' thought on ethics of hospitality which invites to envision ethical subjectivity as responsibility and receptivity towards 'the Other'. The analysis put forward in the research suggests that hospitality, responsibility and participation all require a readiness to interrupt one's own ways of doing, knowing and being. The research contributes to the streams of tourism studies which call attention to other-orientedness in social relations. The results can be applied as a source of encouragement to decolonize research methodologies, promote participatory projects and develop pedagogical approaches that keep the door open to the unpredictable and the unexpected.

Introduction

'The coffee is ready – Kahvi on valmista' When we hear these words, they stir expectations and awaken assumptions. For starters, we probably expect that there will be a social encounter. If I invite you to have a coffee, I take the role of host – and you are my guests. We can also think what associations coffee has. Is it a bean? A beverage? A livelihood? A way of life? A commodity? Or perhaps a tourist attraction? It can be all of these. And then, what does it mean to say that something is ready? That something is prepared? If we think of drinking coffee as a social encounter, what does it mean that someone has prepared the setting for the encounter, that everything is ready (see also Veijola et al. 2014, 1–2).

Although we would know who will be there drinking coffee, the encounter between hosts and guests cannot be really predicted. So can we really prepare ourselves when we welcome guests? Can we be ready? Or would it be better to be prepared to be unprepared? To leave the door open to the unexpected (Derrida 1999, 21–6).

This is a glimpse of where my research journey has taken me this far: exploring and challenging the expectations of readiness in encounters – more specifically, in tourism encounters. And that journey is what I have hoped to share with you in my doctoral thesis.

Welcome to the coffee trails in Nicaragua

Based on previous discussions in cultural studies of tourism, one of the best settings to identify responsible host-guest relations is in small-scale tourism initiatives based on active local participation (Singh, Timothy & Dowling 2003; Tosun 2005; Saarinen 2010; Höckert, Hakkarainen & Jänis 2013; Jamal & Dredge 2014; cf. Butcher 2007, 2012). In many cases this has meant experiencing, studying or promoting community participation in economically marginalized rural villages around the Global South. Continuing this tradition of community case studies in tourism research (Dredge & Hales 2012), I took a bus to the coffee cultivating communities in the Nicaraguan highlands with high hopes of finding a sustainable way of developing tourism.

In August 2008, a local tourist guide came to pick me up at the bus stop and bid me welcome to the coffee trails. During our walk to her home community, I got to hear the entire story of tourism in the region, starting from the international solidarity movement in the 1980s. At that point, tourism was not yet organized and visitors were 'attended as friends, not as tourists', as she put it. These guests expressed an interest in helping, but also in learning from the collective spirit of the Nicaraguan socialist revolution and the newly founded coffee cooperatives (Höckert 2011, 14-5). The guide went on to say that after the severe coffee crisis in 2001 (see Valkila 2009), the regional coffee cooperative union and international NGOs introduced the idea of beginning an official tourism programme (see also Butcher 2007). In addition to providing supplementary income and new contacts with coffee consumers, tourism was expected to contribute to gender equality and to create new job opportunities, especially for young people (UCA San Ramón Project Document 2008). The guide told that the ones committed to the tourism programme had been through many different forms of training in order to become *ready* to receive guests. They had also been encouraged to take loans in order to improve their material conditions of hospitality.

After the walk, we arrived in a village with about forty houses, an elementary school and football field. There was also plenty of tourist signage, making the community more, as tourism scholar Bella Dicks (2003) puts it, 'visitable'. The printed and painted boards

welcomed visitors to the community, indicated the houses offering tourist accommodation, showed how to get to the waterfall, the old gold mine and the scenic lookouts, helped identify the trees and explained which coffee plants were organic. There were also posters reminding everyone of the generous donations from different aid organizations.

It is clear that my first period of field work in Nicaragua as a master's student was driven by development optimism. I built my research on discussions on empowerment I had read in tourism research and development studies (Scheyvens 1999, 2002; Cole 2006), and described in my analysis how local communities had experienced the social and cultural impacts of tourism as positive for the most part (Höckert 2009, 2011). However, when I returned to San Ramón in 2012 to work on my doctoral thesis, the atmosphere with regard to tourism activities had changed. The number of visitors had dropped drastically, and the host families had ended up paying back the loans they had taken for tourism development, and the interest on them, with their coffee beans. I noticed the local communities' resistance towards new development interventions and research projects, and how weary people were of waiting for tourists who were no longer coming.

Although the number of tourists had declined, representatives of many bilateral aid organizations and NGOs, volunteers, students and researchers were still relatively frequent visitors in these communities (Perez et al. 2010; Zapata et al. 2011). Many of them, or perhaps more rightly us, were coming to help the locals to participate in tourism in the 'right' way. Doña Hilda, who had received foreign visitors since the 1980's, told me about a visit of a tourism consultant who represented a development project called 'Moderniza'. This consultant had arrived with a great variety of different kinds of recommendations on how local families should improve their hospitality – and take new loans – in order to bring back paying customers. As a response to these modernization efforts, some of those participating in tourism development had decided that the consultants like these were no longer welcome to their homes and home community.

I became frustrated and confused. Despite the principle of local participation, it seemed unclear whose voices were actually heard in participatory projects. I had to admit that despite the recent celebration of local ownership, indigenous knowledges and marginality (Higgins-Desbiolles 2006; Pritchard, Morgan & Ateljevic 2011, 14; Zapata et al. 2011, 23), even the emancipatory tourism initiatives I witnessed were struggling in changing the role of subaltern populations from objects to subjects in tourism development (Tosun 2005; Saarinen 2010). And, above all, as I argue throughout my research, these tourism encounters were lacking mutual openness; that is, they lacked hospitality.

Hosts and Guests in Participatory Development

Needless to say, none of the conclusions about hospitality or participatory development I have come to in this study were apparent when I first visited San Ramón. During my three field visits to Nicaragua, my views were shaped by many experiences and I constantly asked new questions about the possibilities and challenges related to rural tourism development. Reading postcolonial critique on development (Kapoor 2004; Mignolo & Escobar 2010) brought home the realization that despite – or actually because of – emancipatory intentions to help the local hosts, tourism experts seemed to end up dominating the spheres of participation. I realized that one of the possible explanations for the frustration experienced in earlier community-based tourism projects lies in pre-set agendas of participation and assumptions about tourism and the 'other'. What is more, postcolonial critiques helped me to gain understanding about the difficulties of addressing the issues of dominance and exclusion without actually perpetuating otherness and

the binary oppositions subject and object, developed and undeveloped (Spivak 1988; Hall & Tucker 2004; Caton 2013; Mignolo & Escobar 2010).

I began soon to seriously doubt my own right to be there; to collect new data and to represent the local hosts through my research. At the same time, I became curious about the ways in which I had taken for granted an unconditional welcome on the part of local communities. Thus, instead of taking my back and returning home, I decided to continue my analysis on participatory tourism encounters between rural communities and tourism experts by drawing on postcolonial critique and hermeneutic phenomenology (see Levinas 1961/1969; Spivak 1988; Derrida 1999).

Hospitality as Means and Goals of the Study

While my study is firmly moored in tourism research, it crosses thresholds and draws inspiration in particular from postcolonial philosophies of hospitality (see, for instance, Germann Molz & Gibson 2007; Kuokkanen 2007; Lynch et al. 2011). Instead of disposing the idea of participation, my research focus on exploring 'hospitality' and 'welcome' as terms for describing, disrupting and shaping social imaginings and arrangements between ourselves (see also Germann Molz & Gibson 2007; Lynch 2011; Baker 2011; Veijola et al. 2014). In other words, the purpose of this research is to explore how the notion of *hospitality* can offer an alternative approach to analysing the ways we participate; that is, how we relate to others and to ourselves. Situating the idea of participation at the intersection of intersubjectivity, hospitality and ethics, the study asks: How do self and other, or hosts and guests, welcome each other in participatory tourism encounters.

The approach adopted draws on the discussions of French philosophers Emmanuel Levinas' (1969) and Jacques Derrida' (1999) on renewing subjectivity and ethics through the notions of *hospitality* and *welcome*. For Derrida (1999), the first of Levinas' best-known and extant works, Totality and Infinity (1969), should be approached as 'an immense treatise of hospitality'. In this work Levinas (1969) suggests that the Western intellectual tendency to totalize definitions of subjectivity and ontology should be resisted by the ethical recognition of openness, receptivity and infinity. For Levinas (1969; see also Raffoul 2010), ethics are not situated in self, but in the intersubjective relation with the other person – in being-for-the-other. He argues that the obligation to do justice to the other and to welcome the other 'calls in question the naïve right of my powers, my glorious spontaneity as a living being' (Levinas 1969, 85). The impetus for this stance can be found in his disappointment with the oppressive dichotomies between self and other, subject and object, which tend to prioritize the freedom of being over the relation with the other. What makes their discussions unique in the Western spirit of morality and justice, is the idea of relational mode of being which escapes from the isolated subject by desiring and respecting the alterity of the other (see also Veijola et al. 2014).

Reading Levinas, and Derrida's engagement with Levinas' thinking on phenomenology as openness to other, has helped to recognize how tourism development encounters include not only epistemological conflicts, but equally the potential for conflictive ontological encounters. To put it differently, there are not only different ways of *knowing*, but also *being* with the 'other', and 'multiple others'. However, it seems like the ongoing debates on community participation in tourism, or in tourism research in general, have paid only limited attention to understanding the different foundations of the social (see also Singh 2012). In line with Levinas' notions of totality and infinity, and Derrida's concept of hospitality, the study argues that participation cannot be based on totalizing conditions and rules that are meant to master or control the other. Instead, as in the case of hospi-

tality, the conditions of participation become constantly negotiated in intersubjective relations between self and the other. By doing this, the study builds on the discussions of relational ontologies that embrace and call for openness and unfinishedness in social relations (Veijola et al. 2014; see also Dredge et al. 2013; Tucker 2014).

In adopting this approach, my research also joins the efforts of what Jennie Germann Molz and Sarah Gibson (2007) describe as *mobilizing hospitality*. These authors have called for dialogue and mobility between different discussions of hospitality in order to explore how the deployment of the concept in one disciplinary context may provide insights in other fields. In particular, the theme of ethics in mobile relations is one of the strongest threads that ties together different discussions on hospitality. Most importantly, as Friese (2004, 74 in Germann Molz & Gibson 2007, 2) argues, in these studies the question is not only about thinking of hospitality, but thinking *as* hospitality. Germann Molz (2012) highlights the relationality of hospitality by calling it an act of sharing spatial, material and emotional resources. She encourages us to consider the ethics of welcoming a stranger, the possibilities of doing togetherness at home and on the move and asking what hospitality encounters can teach us about living in difference.

Towards Mutual Welcoming

On a broader level my research asks whether expecting an open welcome from others, without welcoming the other, might carry a somewhat uncomfortable echo of – if not a colonial – at least an egocentric mindset (see also Kuokkanen 2007). For instance, at the intersection of international tourism and the asylum-seeker crisis, it is quite timely to reflect on the ways in which we expect openness from others – and how we welcome the other.

During my research journey I have become very aware of my privilege as a Western traveler and researcher or development worker, or a café latte drinker. However, I must say that the last time – the third time – I went to San Ramón, the concept of hospitality had helped me to take at least a small step towards more hospitable encounters between me and the hosts. I arrived with fewer plans – and, in a way, with more curiosity about what the people I met were saying. And at the end of my visit, when I was heading to the bus that would take me back to Managua, doña Hilda's family gave me a bag of freshly roasted coffee. I put the gift into my bag – and I felt that my bag had now a little more space for other ways of thinking. Doña Hilda and her family told me that I would be welcome back. It felt great.

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