Rural Tourism in the ‘Third World’: The Dialectic of Development

The Case of Desa Senaru at Gunung Rinjani National Park in Lombok Island

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Lincoln University (Digital Summary Version) by Matthias Schellhorn

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Extended Abstract

Brief Background

Alongside international aid agencies, the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) promotes the sector for its poverty reduction potential in ‘third world’ countries. Conservation agencies also frequently support tourism development as a sustainable alternative to more extractive resource uses. Integrated conservation models, in particular, present ‘eco’tourism as an effective instrument to enhance rural livelihoods while protecting the environment. The underlying model conceptualises tourism development not only as an effective solution to the dependency on scarce natural resources but also a predictable and closed system.

Rural communities hold concomitant expectations of tourism’s socio-economic and cultural development potential. Furthermore, ‘eco’tourism functions as a growing niche market for the globally expanding tourism industry and local entrepreneurs. As such, it fits well into the macro economic rationale that underpins neo-liberal market strategies. With such a diversity of interests at stake, the question “What kind of business is tourism?” has become more complex, critical and pertinent than ever before.

My thesis explores different social dimensions of this question through a case study of tourism development at a gateway village to Gunung Rinjani National Park in the Indonesian island of Lombok. In attempting to understand this ‘local setting’ in the global context of international tourism development, I integrate qualitative and quantitative methods, their iteration across time (a six year period comprising five return visits to the study site), and self-reflexivity of the research process.

Awareness of the researcher’s position in time and place, my professional background as a tour leader and development consultant in particular, added a critical dimension to the multi-faceted social nature of the subject matter. Rather than shunning the inherent complexity, I critically examined various facets of it through the lens of a dialectic analysis. This research approach aimed to extend the understanding of international tourism as a significant social phenomenon alongside the sector’s worldwide promotion as an economic development tool. A critical exploration of the relevant ‘personal-local-global nexus’ provided appropriate depth and richness to this study.

Results and Discussion

Informed by development theories and the sociology of tourism, my analysis focused on the multiple dichotomies that characterise ‘third world’ tourism. In the case of tourism development in Desa Senaru, several paradoxical outcomes were identified. The most profound of these is the ‘social justice paradox’ that describes the way tourism costs and benefits are distributed within a heterogeneous community of native residents and migrant settlers. While most of the case study’s tourism attractions are part of the cultural heritage of the native wetu telu Sasak hamlets, these derive few economic benefits and struggle to access the new development opportunities ‘eco’tourism offers.

Expectations of ‘eco’tourism as a ‘soft’ industry analysed vis-à-vis the global biosphere effects of air transport highlight the ‘eco-paradox’ of international tourism. The cleavage between the poverty-focused aid policies of the New Zealand Government and an integrated conservation project, whose benefits local elites have largely captured, serves to illustrate the ‘project paradox’ of rural tourism development programmes.
In the ‘development paradox’ of cultural tourism, symbolic constructs of ‘otherness’ (such as ‘aesthetic poverty’) contrast with various development agendas; in their search for the ‘real’ traditional village, for example, the tourists reject all signifiers of modernity and material progress. Their curious gaze at the syncretistic spiritual practices and everyday life world of the wetu telu villagers manifests opposite a recent history of state-sanctioned religious discrimination. Taken together, these various paradoxical local outcomes highlight the significance of power relations and political dimensions within the globally expanding ‘business of tourism’.

Thus, the ambivalent nature of the business of tourism results in a multidimensional development dichotomy. In the case of Senaru, it emerges along the dividing lines of ethnicity, gender and socio-economy. Filtered and directed by historical political relations, several key barriers to a meaningful participation of native people in the ‘business of tourism’ have been identified. These include the prevailing conditions of education, culture, ethnicity, socio-economy, location, mobility, skills and tourism related knowledge.

In addition to these local conditions, my analysis also points towards the less obvious effects of current development practice as demonstrated for an aid project funded by the New Zealand government. A deep-rooted, yield oriented ‘project culture’ favours established business entrepreneurs, while assistance directed towards the wider community development needs of the poorest sectors of Sasak society lacks sustained support. Thus, the process of development aid in itself, especially the combined effect of ‘production thinking’ and ‘normal professionalism’ (Chambers, 1997:46ff.), contravenes the ambitious social goals, for which tourism is widely promoted.

The politics of culture

The diversity in interests extends beyond the host community per se and includes the realm of tourism consumption. In ‘third world’ countries, ‘eco’ tourism offers new niches for a discerning consumer market whose growth is met by industrial expansion. Interview responses by Lombok’s leading tour operators point towards an economic rationale of a globally expanding cultural tourism industry that constantly requires unique selling points. The tourists I interviewed confirmed the concomitant demand for ‘ethnically distinct’ products. The resulting diversification in tour products and attractions reflects a general trend to individualism in post-capitalist societies (Mowforth and Munt, 2003).

The growing demand for ‘exotic’ and ‘unique’ tourism experiences may well conflict with the national priorities of Indonesian cultural politics. The official rejection of wetu telu as a (suitable) cultural attraction demonstrates this tension clearly. It also points towards a wider political dimension of the development process that is evident in the way cultural tourism has historically developed in Indonesia as a state-sanctioned doctrine and national ideology. Lombok’s provincial government continues to pressure Senaru’s native people in much the same way as the former ‘new order’ regime long suppressed various traditions that the tourism industry nowadays claims as attraction assets.

Thus, my research paints an ambiguous picture of ‘eco’tourism’s cultural effects; while this relatively new development increases public exposure, appreciation and revival of old customs (adat), it also enhances the potential for conflict between existing (power) interests, and concomitant development priorities. Through this ‘political paradox’ manifests a diverse development potential that includes socio-cultural empowerment as well as repression and hegemony – a dichotomy, which highlights the conflict-prone and divisive nature of the business of tourism.
Clearly, ‘eco’tourism development is yet another facet of the complex set of paradoxes that characterises the globally expanding business of tourism. Even more than other types of tourism, it renders explicit the ideological grounding of this business.

**Tourism – a complex and open system**

The analysis of local conditions, processes and paradoxes of development sheds light on the highly political nature of the business of tourism. Over recent years, the development of the tourism industry in Indonesia, and Lombok in particular, furthermore points towards this business being rather ‘unreliable’. Most of the documented historical threats to the development of the sector originate outside the tourism system itself and, therefore, constitute risks that are very difficult to predict and manage. The far-reaching impacts of the Bali terrorist attacks especially highlight an inherent problem of tourism-based development: it depends on a highly ‘fragile industry’.

To operationalise the ethical concerns raised, the thesis posits a model of a holistic approach to development. This recognises tourism as a complex open system. Social relations are as much part of this system as are the ecological realities that support them. While the latter form the currently conceivable ‘outer’ bounds of systemic limitations, the values that underpin the former define their ‘inner’ bounds. The (integrated) tourism system, as a whole, can only sustain itself by striving for a balance between these two spheres, i.e., it requires a balance of ecological reality with socio-cultural values and mores. This process demonstrates the dialectic of development that was the main focus of my analysis.

**Keywords**

Indonesia, Lombok, ecotourism, cultural tourism, *wetu telu*, tourism development, development project, tourism ethics, open system, holistic development, paradox.

**References**


**Access**

A printed complete version of the thesis is available for loan from the Lincoln University Library, Lincoln, New Zealand.

Reference (for request purposes):