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WORKING PAPER: HEART STRINGS CYCLE TOURS, S. E. ASIA: THE HUMANITARIAN GAZE

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ABSTRACT

Cycle tourism is a growing activity. In Siem Reap, Cambodia, tourists can hire bikes with or without guides, to cruise Angkor Watt and the temple complexes, and /or surrounding villages. In Bali, Indonesia, tourists pedal through rice fields, temple gardens, and into Balinese families' compounds. The cycling tourist is the affluent visitor seeking the exotic gaze. Local poor people are positioned as spectacle to be 'consumed' by that gaze, and by pocket-sized cameras /phones.

On my own cycle tours in these locations, either with my own guide or in a small guided group, I met people living in extremely modest conditions. Occasionally we'd stop at a stall to buy fruit, or to drink tea in someone's yard. The guide translated the conversation with the local people. I was commonly asked – via the guide – was 'how old are you?' and 'where is your husband?' Despite obvious poverty, no-one ever asked for money. The cycle tours were not promoted as 'pro poor' tourism.

Yet cash gifts were slipped into local hands, or left in a cup on the bench. Liberal western compassion might help a little. In Siem Reap I was aware of the proximity of Angkor Wat and its thousands of tourists each day paying entrance fees; and of the numerous bars and restaurants frequented by visitors. Yet just a few kilometres away people lived without decent housing, electricity, tap water or education.

For the tourist who wishes to make an unsolicited donation: is it an assault to the recipient's dignity to give unasked for monetary gifts? On a repeat visit to a Balinese family one year after giving a little cash, I was told that the money had provided food for two months during difficult times. How could one *not* give, if that is the outcome, even when knowing that such gifting does nothing to address the larger structural issues?

Numerous websites offer advice on handing out cash when travelling. Questions include: 'will what I'm doing improve this person's life, or degrade it? Will it promote greed and dependency, or foster some small degree of autonomy? How will travellers to this place — tomorrow, next month or ten years from now — be affected by my actions?' (www.kashgar.com.au/articles/To-Give-or-Not-to-Give-When-Travelling-Abroad). Donating to reputable aid organisations is the recommended alternative. But on a fleeting visit there is not time for such investigations. The Red Cross enjoys a solidly positive reputation; but spontaneous gifts to people the visitor actually met and enjoyed some communication with, will be lost if the giver waits until later to arrange a formal donation. The significant impact of that direct human connection cannot be overestimated; it drives the impetus to give. Yes, in accordance with website advice, this giver also buys items from local fund raising charities such as fair trade –style enterprises.

This paper is an early stage of my investigation of the dilemma and politics of this form of giving. It is based on experiences on cycle tours in Siem Reap in Cambodia, and in Bali, Indonesia.

PEDALLING THE EXOTIC

Cycle tourism is a growing activity. In many countries, tourists can hire bikes and set off alone, or with other cyclists. Cycle tours in Siem Reap and in Bali, either with a personal guide or in a small guided group, are about seeing the 'real' Bali / Siem Reap.

In Siem Reap, Cambodia, there are several companies which offer bicycles for hire. Many homestay accommodation and hotels also provide bikes. This has enormous appeal to those who wish to cruise around the breath-taking Angkor Watt complex, and /or surrounding villages – with, or without, a guide. The tourists pedal into little villages, meeting people at the wayside, who are perhaps selling fruit or tea. In Bali, Indonesia, visitors tourists pedal along narrow tracks through rice fields, into temple gardens and Balinese family compounds.

In these spaces the cycling tourist achieves the exotic gaze, close-up. Local poor people are positioned as another touristic spectacle to be 'consumed' by that gaze. Many are 'captured' on pocket-sized cameras and phones. For many tourists, it is something of a bonus to directly engage with the local people. These encounters assure an authentic experience.

Advertising material for the cycle tours features pretty landscapes, smiling people, and touches of exotica eg flora, fauna, artefacts. An enjoyable day out is assured, free-wheeling through novel scenery, observing local people going about their daily lives, and perhaps visiting a temple or a small craft operation. Its seduction is the anticipation of experiencing genuine localness away from the city tourist's traps.

ENCOUNTERS WITH LOCAL PEOPLE

In Bali the roads are mostly paved, winding, with hilly sections and often through thickly forested areas. Detours take the cyclists along narrow tracks through rice fields, ducks scattering. Cycle tourism in Bali is well established. One is likely to encounter other groups along the way.

In a compound in Bali, a family member showed us around: this is our shrine, this is where we cook, this is where we eat, this is where we sleep. They showed us their ducks and gardens. There might also be some pigs. The private household or family compound was 'harnessed in the cultural examination of place' (Everett, 2009; 352). Some tourists made a discreet donation to the family being visited, generally handing some folded money into the palm of one of the women. Most tourists checked first with the guide if this was okay. For the family, displaying their way of life to cyclists supplied income. Why otherwise should they allow strangers to wander into their compound?

Outside Siem Reap apart from around the Angkor Watt complex, the roads selected for cyclists are mostly tracks of red earth. The visitor pedals through verdant open countryside, stopping to admire ponds of towering pink lotuses, an elaborate temple, and the occasional handsome bulky brahmin cow. The land is flat: an expansive sky, palm trees silhouetted against the blue. Along the dirt tracks the cyclist meets pony carts and motorbikes. Whilst this is obviously not an affluent area, to the unknowing tourist, any notion of 'poverty' or 'slum' is obliterated or softened by rurality: the sunny sky, horizontal landscape, flourishing flora, and the occasional pretty grass hut.

In Siem Reap I did not go inside dwellings, but chatted in the yard, sometimes next to the family stall selling produce and refreshments. A rudimentary conversation took place; the guide translated. I was commonly asked – via the guide – ‘how old are you?’ and ‘where is your husband?’ Some households appeared significantly poorer than others: simple shacks in dirt yards, with no electricity and just one outdoor tap. In one, a mother of deaf children showed me the lotus pond where they caught small fish. She fed her children a bowl of plain rice each. They smiled at me as they ate. At another a young woman sat in the dust with her Downs syndrome toddler. She was weaving a basket to sell.

60% of Cambodians live on less than \$1 per day. Despite the obvious poverty, no-one asked for money. Yet cash gifts were quietly slipped into local hands, or left in a mug on the bench. This was an utterly personal gift: it was not driven by advertising campaigns, friendly persuasion or any form of coercion. It was an impulsive response, on the spot, to what one sees. It is an acknowledgement of the immediate needs of another person; and at one’s own inability to do much other than this, to address obvious immediate needs, on a very brief visit. Compassion, rendered in the form of some dollars, might help a little.

THE POLITICS OF GIVING

For the tourist who wishes to make an unsolicited donation: is it an assault to the recipient’s dignity to give an unasked for monetary gift? Is this just another way of expressing the inequity of power inherent in this encounter? Deciding whether or not to give in itself a privileged process of power and control. That very fact of being a tourist in a poor country is to position oneself as a wealth-advantaged position vis a vis local people.

It is pointless arguing that it is the job of the government and the culture itself to take care of its poor. When tourists perceive those things to be failing, they have no venue to address the bigger structural issues that exacerbate poverty. The tourist can only use what resources they have, to make a small intervention. If they need a reward, it is to feel that they have helped somebody. It may be difficult to understand how direct giving, in a country with no social security, can necessarily be a bad thing. In Cambodia it is common to find landmine amputees and other disabled people needing money: those needs are a highly visible part of the culture.

On a repeat visit to a Balinese family one year after giving a little cash, I was told that the money had provided food for two months during difficult times. How could one *not* give, if that is the outcome, even when knowing that such gifting does nothing to address the larger politico-economic issues?

Giving is not a one-way process. The cycling tourist seeking authenticity has been richly rewarded. They have appreciated their glimpses into the culture. They have gained an idea of how everyday life takes place, away from the distorted impression created at the tourist attractions. Their narrative later, whether as a casual chat to a friend, or to the world on a www forum, will include these new experiences as they grow their personal travel biography.

Website advice

Numerous websites offer advice on handing out cash when travelling. Questions include: ‘will what I’m doing improve this person’s life, or degrade it? Will it promote greed and

dependency, or foster some small degree of autonomy? How will travellers to this place — tomorrow, next month or ten years from now — be affected by my actions?’ (www.kashgar.com.au/articles/To-Give-or-Not-to-Give-When-Travelling-Abroad). That question about promoting greed: who is to judge, and how? And how is that word relevant, when people are poor? Is it greedy to want to feed one’s children?

Another website that recommends that visitors do not give money explains:

- ‘Unable to help everyone means that giving money or buying things creates an uneven distribution of wealth. It may cause friction, when a person is given something, but someone else in the same situation is not.
- Tourists giving money is teaching dependence on tourism. If tourists give, then this becomes the normal expectation, pressuring those tourists who choose not to give.
- Giving handouts makes it more difficult for them to learn how to stand on their own two feet...
- Casual giving is not sustainable. A quick fix may help with immediate needs, but does not supply a long term solution.
- Whilst well intentioned, this could be doing more harm than good. It may be going against the policies of government and NGO plans to relieve poverty.
- Do what is best for the country and the people, not what you think is best for them. It is easy to look at things from a Western perspective, and have a ‘my money will fix all’ approach. Poverty is complex, and best left to the people who are trained to understand it.’

<http://globetrotterguru.com/should-we-give-money-to-beggars/>

A further website’s instruction to tourists: ‘If you looking for ways to make a positive contribution when travelling, here are some alternatives to putting you hand in your pocket and handing out alms. But be warned. These suggestions are not always easy to follow and will require some effort on your part to achieve.’

- **Feed a person, keep them healthy.** Find the local equivalent of an organization like the Red Cross or UNICEF and donate to them directly.
- **Research worthy non profit organizations** before you leave home, and buy things that they produce, such as handicrafts, textiles, a meal, postcards. Buying hand made goods rather than giving charity promotes a healthy work ethic, a sense of self worth and most importantly, self-sufficiency. Support groups that focus on women and the elderly.
- **Spend a day and night of your holiday with a community aid group** – often these centres have guesthouses and the income generated from your visit will be most welcome.
- **As you travel look out for local schools.** Drop in and make a donation in the form of money or equipment such as pens, books, ruled paper and maps.
- **When paying locals for photographs** think about what you can give them in exchange rather than money.
- **At the end of your trip you may have a few items that you no longer need:** old clothing that you’ve replaced via shopping, old toiletries or even hotel amenities. Give them to the needy – an elderly street beggar, a local charity or a school. They will put these items to far better use than your hotel staff, who sometimes sell your cast-offs to supplement their incomes.

The reader is sternly admonished: 'If you're not prepared to give responsibly, then you shouldn't give at all'. Their viewpoint is, of course, from the point of view of a visitor. It is very easy to assemble a list of 'but...' responses to this advice.

<http://www.kashgar.com.au/articles/To-Give-or-Not-to-Give-When-Travelling-Abroad-the-Issue-of-Begging>

In summary, online travel guides and travel information sites overwhelmingly advocate that giving should be discouraged.

This was also the view of one of the referees of this paper when I submitted it before the conference. That person noted that 'a fundamental western problem is that people in developing countries are seen and treated as poor, when really they are rich in culture and social connection'. This overlooks the \$1 per day that many Cambodians must try to survive on. Their other comments also tally with the website advice, above.

It was hard to find any site that encouraged or supported direct giving. The focus was on beggars; not on local people visitors might encounter, who appear to have needs where a small donation might help. The proposal of giving in kind - water, food, clothing - is not always do-able. A cycling tourist is unlikely to come laden with such items. Cash is small, light and portable – and extremely useful to the recipient.

The standard suggestion is rather than to directly give, contribute instead to local NGOs. Donating to reputable aid organisations is the commonly recommended alternative. But how does the tourists there for such a short time, discover which organisations are 'reputable'? Example: the Phnom Penh telephone directory includes over twenty pages of aid agencies. Which of these are genuine and reliable? On a fleeting visit there is not time for such investigations. The same question arises when seeking an organisation to volunteer with. Most request fees; but does this money go where the giver intends? Has voluntary tourism itself become another naïve, well meaning, apolitical process that in the end cannot resolve the fundamental reasons for poverty? It has not shown it is able to produce permanent solutions (Mostafanezhad, 2014).

The Red Cross enjoys a solidly positive reputation. But from the point of view of the giver, spontaneous gifts to people they have actually met and enjoyed some communication with, will be lost if the giver waits until later to arrange a formal donation. The significant impact of that direct human connection cannot be overestimated. It drives the impetus to give. Any casual giver *knows* they are offering only ephemeral, very temporary relief. For most, it may be a challenge beyond their capacity to commit, to find ways to make a more permanent impact. Tourists are avid consumers. That day, on bicycles, they consumed an experience of the 'real' countryside. The next day – or later that day – they'll be consuming something else. The intimate moment to spontaneously give has passed.

SLUM TOURISM

In both Bali and Siem Reap it was impossible to be unaware of 'the objectification and commodification of both culture and ethnicity' (Shepherd, 2012; 185). The experience of slum tourism is embedded in the countryside cycle tours, with poor local people amongst the sights one has paid to encounter. The cycle tours promised authenticity; all over the world

poorer areas are claimed as spaces that are more 'real' and authentic than the built-up, generic-appearing town or cityscape.

Slum tourism is a commercial practice which takes tourists to fiscally disadvantaged places to observe people living in poverty. In essence, rich people pay to see poor people, equated by some as similar to zoo visits. Fees to take such a tour do not necessarily accrue to those gazed upon. It is generally derided as an unethical way of generating income (Crossley, 2012). It has been described as 'misery's peepshow' (Cawthorne, 2007).

The practice has been extensively denounced (eg Frenzel, Koens and Steinbrink, 2012; Dyson, 2012; Durr and Jaffe, 2012). It has been condemned as voyeuristic, and for taking advantage of the poor, who are trying to survive without the necessities recommended by the United Nations (UN---HABITAT, 2003): adequate housing, sufficient food and clean water. It is also an incursion in personal privacy and space (Durr and Jaffe, 2012). The main attraction, after all, is the actual way of life of the local residents. Such an invasion of their private domicile would not be acceptable to the tourists in their own homes.

Support for this form of tourism points out its benefits: that it is impossible to understand countries such as Egypt, South Africa and India without first-hand experience of the living conditions of many of citizens (Frenzel and Koens, 2012). Slum tourism has been promoted as a form of consciousness-raising for otherwise-oblivious visitors. It may encourage a spirit of entrepreneurship among the residents eg by selling handmade crafts, or by taking people inside their houses, for a small fee. In these cases, this may become a form of tourism *by* the poor, with the community replacing an external tour operator. This might develop into empowerment. But this has also been questioned: who benefits, who gains, who loses? Ignoring poverty does not make it cease to exist; hence slum tourism may be one of the few ways affluent tourists get to comprehend what everyday poverty consists of. The viewpoint of the very poor, the subjects of this form of tourism, are seldom voiced. One exception is a study undertaken in Kenya (Magio and Kieti, 2013).

Pro-poor tourism is supposed to ensure that benefits flow to the local community rather than to tour operators (Ashley, Boyd, and Goodwin, 2000). In neither Bali nor Siem Reap were the cycle tours promoted as 'pro poor' tourism, or as 'slum tourism'.

CYCLE TOURS AND CRITICAL TOURISM

Cycle tourism is a site to address within a critical tourism research agenda. In this case study the colossal gap in tourism studies is the perspective of subjects of the gaze, and of the local tourism entrepreneurs (Brickell, 2012). The researched subject misses out on claiming the power of authorship (Tribe, 2008). The very term 'cycle tourism' as a marketable commodity denotes the viewpoint of the tourist consumer, not of those people along the route who make a significant contribution to the overall experience. Cycle tourism is a practise which shows how some local people in poor areas adapt to tourism without capital outlay. They recycle amenities and resources and facilities already present: their homes, shrines, rice field tracks, animals, families and cultural practices. The web advice (examples above) that discourages any personal gifting of cash is notable for its glaring absence of empathy. As Tucker points out, empathy is highly relevant to the field of critical tourism studies. When the goal is to achieve better outcomes for the disempowered who get caught up in tourism, then advice to 'let them stand on their own two feet' (above) is at best

naively disingenuous; at worst, dismissive of the immediate needs of some of the world's most disadvantaged people.

The cycle tours described here demonstrate that large cohorts of tourists have not resulted in the demise of poverty in Third World regions, as predicted by 1970s development theory (de Kadt, 1979). The premise then was that 'tourism provided a new opportunity for Third World countries to secure foreign exchange and stimulate economic growth' (de Kadt, 1979, ix). This implies a largely passive role for those about to experience the transformative impacts inevitable with tourism (Shepherd, 2012).

The cycle tourism example illustrates 'tourism's role in the commodification of culture' (Shepherd, 2012; 183), including a family's normally-private household. Internationally small enterprises comprise the majority of tourism entrepreneurship (Thomas, Shaw and Page, 2011). The cycle tourism case study demonstrates that micro-businesses at destinations with high levels of tourism are 'complex hybrids that convey competing conceptions of home and work, inclusion and privacy, domestic hospitableness and commercial hospitality' (Domenico and Lynch, 2007;336). People in Bali and in Siem Reap have had to find ways to use their cultural resources as 'cultural strategists' or as a 'cultural solution' (Hitchcock and Putra, 2007). The cycle entrepreneurs have created employment; those visited along the routes may gather some income. Whilst families cannot count on random kindness, these donations provoked by empathy may make a significant difference towards daily survival.

CONCLUSION: EXPERIENCE ECONOMY

The rapid development of luxury tourism in both Bali and Siem Reap is juxtaposed against the poverty of large sectors of the local population. Cycle tourists seek an enlarged view of the place they are visiting. Diverse activities that deepen tourists' participation in and understanding of everyday life are burgeoning in popularity.

There has been 'a marked increase in international demand for tourism that enhances tourist knowledge by allowing them to observe, experience and learn about the way of life of the local residents of their destinations' (Jamal, Othman and Muhammad, 2011;6). In the 'experience economy', the tourist can play a role in local fiscal and social life' (Quan and Wang, 2004); not as passive observers, but with some degree of interactivity. A cyclist can readily stop to say hello to someone, to chat, to engage, to be shown something interesting. Proximity was likely to foster empathic engagement (Tucker, 2016); it was notable that the cycle tourists I met were always polite, respectful and genuinely interested in local people. Their interaction might include making small direct donations. For those tourists who favour an impersonal, upmarket experience, venturing into private spaces, including the homes of poor families, may provoke uneasiness. For the more curious or compassionate, it may provide insights unavailable by any other means. How they develop or use these insights – apart from maybe some displays on social media – requires further exploration.

Reflection on the position of 'the privileged tourist empathiser, or indeed privileged critical tourism studies researcher empathiser' has been addressed by Tucker. She too acknowledges that empathy must not be abandoned, when the lack of it annihilates any attempt at cross cultural understanding and social justice. Tourism is not just an instrumental set of processes towards economic ends, but overall a process that privileges the

travel consumer over the local person. It is also a space in which to explore social relations in that moment. Encounters such as those on the cycle tours provide an opportunity to show recognition and respect for others in their own spaces; to gain even slight insight into a far wider world than that of the tourist themselves.

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