Tourism, Globalisation and Cultural Change

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An Island Community Perspective

Donald V.L. Macleod

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Preface

What influence do tourists have on a community? This was one of the motivating questions that drove me to live in a remote Canary Island fishing settlement for a year. Back in 1989, there were just a handful of books within the discipline of social anthropology that dealt head on with the impact of tourists and tourism. Following a reconnaissance trip to the Canary Islands with the original intention of studying pre-Hispanic traditions manifest in contemporary culture, I changed the emphasis of my study to what I perceived as a more important and interesting issue: change in a community and the influence of tourism.

Over the years there have been many changes and one of the tasks of this research is to highlight those changes that can be most directly associated with tourists and tourism. Related to this is the conviction that specific tourists will have specific influences. The majority of visitors to La Gomera are those whom I term 'alternative', and as a result of their characteristics, I argue that they communicate and interact with and consequently influence the local community to a greater extent than would package tourists. These influences and changes penetrate almost all areas of culture and most of the population's lives: personal as well as public. A longitudinal research project, in this case covering the years 1990–2002, which includes a full continuous year of intensive participant observation fieldwork, is a particularly good way of enabling the researcher to appreciate the breadth and depth of tourism's influence on a community.

Despite its intensive focus on one community, this study has ramifications worldwide and, in true anthropological tradition, comparisons are made with examples taken from a wide canvas, in space and in time. Furthermore, the relevance to other island communities is made clear throughout the book and all peripheral communities experiencing tourism will be able to draw parallels with their own experience. The bulk of academic literature and sources are taken from anthropological works, with much support from sociology and geography, and the area of Tourism Studies with its collection of academics from a wide variety of backgrounds has also supplied much material.

Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that the majority of material is primary research data, gleaned through talking with people in the community – fishermen, shopkeepers, foreign settlers, tourists and so on. This is the stuff of ethnographic fieldwork: the fieldworker tries to blend in with the community and pick up information without overly distorting or influencing opinions and conversation. The book, therefore, contains a diverse collection of opinions, ideas and perspectives, which further increases its richness: an intended goal that partly supports the contention that tourism, globalisation and cultural change are complex by nature. Nevertheless, I have developed arguments that run through the book relating to the subject of globalisation, the nature and causes of cultural change, the influence of specific types of tourist, the immense influence of tourism, the relevance of power, the social construction of identity and the importance of individual human agency in the entire process. Furthermore, in the tradition of the ethnographic monograph, I hope that the reader will gain a good picture of the people described and a general insight into the human condition.

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Special thanks are due to numerous people, organisations and funds and I will attempt to acknowledge them in rough order of their appearance in the making of this text.

At the University of Oxford, where the adventure began, the Pirie–Reid Scholarship funded three years of postgraduate studies; Brasenose College provided a warm collegiate embrace, the award of the Hulme Continuation Grant and a Travel Scholarship; the Institute of Socal and Cultural Anthropology provided an excellent research environment and the Peter Lienhardt Travel Scholarship – Peter had been an enlightening first supervisor in social anthropology; Marcus Banks gave inspired and conscientious doctoral supervision; and Peter Riviere offered support and insightful comments.

In the Canary Islands, I acknowledge the help of Alberto Galván-Tudela and Juan Pascual-Jimenez for their initial encouragement and in particular, I thank the people of Vueltas who were a most welcoming community and have proved to be enduring friends.

More recently, the University of Glasgow Crichton Campus has provided a good base for reflection and a vigorous one for research in the Crichton Tourism Research Centre. During the latest development stages of the book, Mike Robinson has given excellent advice and been an invaluable reader of the material. Finally, I would like to thank my immediate family for their continuing and good-humoured support.

Part 1

The Issues, The Community and the Tourists

Chapter 1

Tourism, Globalisation and Cultural Change

Introduction

Tourism is a genuinely powerful and unique force for change in the community. This study outlines its impact on economic, social and cultural life: all these are embraced by the broad term 'culture' but, for the sake of the analysis, the different elements which make up a culture are broken into specific areas.[1] Anthropologists and others have sought to view different elements of society in a unified, holistic way, intending to highlight their interdependence. For example, in this work we see how families as kinship groups often form the workforce for business operations and influence political inclinations, social identity and values. By understanding the interconnections within a society, we are better able to appreciate the repercussions of external influences such as tourism and the major and deeply felt changes that such phenomena as the introduction of ex-tourists into the family through marriage can have. However, these types of changes are not as obvious as the more salient material developments relating to construction and the economy.

Here, it is argued that the community of Valle Gran Rey (VGR) on the Canary Island of La Gomera has experienced tremendous changes in a short period of time since the early 1980s when tourism began to develop seriously. Moreover, the type of tourists has had a particularly strong impact due to their propensity to communicate with and live in close association with the local population. It is suggested that the experience of La Gomera may be comparable with other isolated communities, especially islands, around the world. The advantage of long-term research is that various transformations can be traced over time and family groups can be observed in such a way that the agents of change – local people, tourists, foreign settlers and others – become real personalities. Throughout this book, quotations from those involved in this process are given. Field research has spanned more than a decade, from 1990 to 2002, with the bulk

of the intensive fieldwork taking place during 1990–91 followed by intermittent return visits.

Research has shown that tourism is a very complex business, as are the responses from the destination community, itself composed of different groups with differing interests. Much of the conflict regarding the resources supplied by tourism and demanded by tourists seems to be between local factions. In some way tourism has accentuated and put pressure on fissures within the local social landscape. Political interests were particularly divided over a proposed development plan for the beach – and a massive protest, accompanied by wide media coverage, led to a historic climb down by the mayor and his supporters. Tourism has become a very important part of the political agenda.

The book is divided into two parts: the first 'The Issues, The Community and The Tourists' provides a grounding, giving an overview for the reader, embracing the theoretical concerns, a detailed description of the destination and its history and an examination of the tourists who visit the region. The second part 'The Influence of Tourism' focuses on the specific changes that tourism and tourists have initiated in the community: in particular it explores the areas of work and property, power and conflict, social identity and family and belief. These chapters give detailed descriptions of the people, their lifestyle and their relationship with tourists and tourism. Finally, the concluding chapter ' The Ability of Tourism to Change Culture' draws these issues together, reaching conclusions on the environment and identity, globalisation and tourism and tourism's specific influence on cultural change. It summarises the findings of the research as well as presenting final arguments and thoughts about the role of tourism in changing the culture of a community.

As the introductory chapter, this one outlines the central theoretical concerns of the research, draws attention to the experience of islands and tourism making comparative generalisations, describes the place of 'history' in the book and, finally, places the fieldwork site and research into context.

Theoretical Concerns

Globalisation, change and agency

Tourism is very much part of the globalisation process.[2] In essence, globalisation involves the exchange and flow of economic and intellectual items in terms of goods, knowledge, values and images, as well as people, on a global scale (cf. Featherstone, 1990a, b; Featherstone & Lash, 1995). We will regard it as a process that has its historical roots in the European trading expansion of the 16th century, the opening of the trans-Atlantic

routes and the beginnings of the Eurocentric worldwide network. Scholars such as Wallerstein (1974) and Wolf (1982) have examined this phenomenon, perceiving the origins of the modern world system as lying in the development of the processes that we describe today as global. Other interpretations of globalisation see it as beginning at the dawn of recorded history or with the post-industrialisation of society (Waters, 1995). We can theorise that globalisation as a concept and experience does not necessarily have to be confined to a specific time or place but should be seen as (a) implying a group's efforts to homogenise their 'global' environment as they see it and (b) the development through communication and trade of a vast network. Both notions are grounded in the cultural worldviews of the participating actors.[3] However, for the purposes of this book, we will focus on the European-based expansion and, in particular, on the Iberian colonisation of the Canary Islands that began the globalisation process for La Gomera. We view its development as concurrent with the development of the world system described by Shannon (1989: 20) as

> [t]he set of relatively stable economic and political relationships that has characterised a major portion of the globe since the sixteenth century. Initially the system was limited to Europe and South America in the sixteenth century. Since that time it has expanded to include all areas of the world.

The period following the industrial revolution, with its impact on travel, trade and technology, referred to by Robertson (1990: 19) as the 'crucial take-off period of globalisation' begins the most recent phase. This has accelerated over the past decades with computerisation and, in the specific case of La Gomera, has increased since the mid-1970s as a result of political and economic factors, especially tourism. Wahab and Cooper (2001: 4) give a description of globalisation as it is understood in current times, one that coincides with many popular interpretations:

> Therefore, globalisation is an all-embracing term that denotes a world which, due to many politico-economic, technological and informational advancements and developments is on its way to becoming borderless and an interdependent whole. Any occurrence anywhere in the world would, in one way or the other, exert an impact somewhere else. National differences are gradually fading and being submerged in a homogeneous mass or a single socioeconomic order.

There are numerous understandings, some more abstract than others, which point to the perceived outcomes of globalisation. These include the creation of cultural homogeneity, as suggested here, or contrastingly the increased perception of heterogeneity; the resulting awareness of the