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African roots, routes and rumours: From tourism imaginaries to dreams of cosmobility

ABSTRACT

Transcultural travel is widely accepted as one of the main pathways to accrue cosmopolitan capital and Africa is marketed and sold as offering plenty of opportunities to encounter Other worlds. By way of a Tanzanian case study, this paper critically explores the processes involved in turning tourism on the African continent into cosmopolitan-enhancing experiences, and this in rather unexpected ways. According to stereotypical thinking, the more locals are perceived to be immobile – true natives (born in the place where they live) – the more they must be authentic. Successful African tour guides, knowing perfectly well that foreign visitors often see them as an integral part of the exotic experience, use a variety of mechanisms to portray themselves and their lived environment as more local (and, by association, immobile) than really is the case. This makes them complicit in the perpetuation of biased tourism imaginaries as well as in the construction of (re)created local identities and traditions.

Longitudinal ethnographic fieldwork in northern Tanzania, however, reveals that there is more at stake in guided tours than a mere replication of tourism fantasies of African immobility. Local tour guides are operating and positioned in the liminal space between mobile people (foreign tourists) and those who are imagined as immobile (Africans). One moment, local guides are playing the immobile native (forced to be looking culturally inwards), and other moments they are distancing themselves from other locals (dreaming of roaming the wide world out there). Guides use their privileged contact with foreign visitors (and global media and popular culture) to become more “cosmibile” – accumulating cosmopolitan knowledge and capital, which enables them to climb on the social mobility ladder. Using ethnographic examples, I show how Tanzanian guides creatively deal with the paradox of, on the one hand, wanting to become more modern (if not western), and, on the other hand, having to (re)present and sell their African life world as not developing at all. I illustrate the subtle techniques guides use to reinforce existing socio-cultural imaginaries as well as to contest and modify them. Although most guides want to broaden their knowledge of the world in general, they demonstrate a particular curiosity for learning more about Western cultures, clearly showing the directionality of their imaginative cosmobility. This case study illustrates that, in order to understand mobilities, we need to pay attention to immobilities as well, to the structures and processes that facilitate certain movements and impede others.

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BIOGRAPHY

I obtained my PhD from the University of Pennsylvania (USA) and am currently a Marie Curie Fellow (7th European Community Framework Programme) and Post-doctoral Fellow of the Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO) at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Leuven (Belgium). In addition, I am a Visiting Research Associate at the Centre for Tourism and Cultural Change, Leeds Metropolitan University (UK). My research interests include anthropologies of mobility and travel, the local-to-global nexus, discourses and imaginaries of Otherness, cultural brokering, and public interest ethnographies. I have published peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and newspaper articles on these topics in the USA, the UK, India, Indonesia, Belgium, the Netherlands, France, Spain, and Colombia. I am currently writing a book on the anthropology of tour guiding and researching the complex (dis)connections between tourism imaginaries and ideas of transcultural migration (with ethnographic fieldwork in Indonesia, Tanzania, Chile, and Belgium). I am on UNESCO's and UNWTO's roster of consultants and an expert panel member of the National Geographic Society's Center for Sustainable Destinations. More information about my research projects and publications is available online: <http://nbsalazar.googlepages.com/index.html>