

THE CREATIVE ROLE OF TOURIST GUIDING

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ABSTRACT

In today's international tourism, culture is an important asset for many destinations and a means of their national identity promotion. Without the role of mediators, however, it may happen that existing resources remain either unavailable to visitors or not properly understood and valued by them. Intercultural communication and, particularly, interpretation of local cultural heritage, living culture, values and cultural identity in general are key components of the contemporary guide's role. Tourist guides are front-line professionals who, unlike any other tourism actors establish a close, intense and influencing contact with visitors at the same time protecting interests of sustainable cultural tourism. They are often called "tourism ambassadors" or "spin doctors" of their destinations. Nevertheless, their profession is commonly perceived as a repetitive, uninspiring and mass tourism activity, although it can be a creative and effective tool in the construction of tourist experiences.

KEYWORDS

Tourist guiding; Guided tour; Intercultural mediation; Creativity.

INTRODUCTION

Tourist guiding has relatively recently received more attention in academic literature. The interest of researchers coincides with a growing concern about the heritage sustainability. Guides started to be perceived as an effective medium for conveying important environmental messages to visitors and tourists. This naturally caused a more comprehensive analysis of other roles they may play in contemporary tourism and emphasized the need for monitoring guiding standards.

The role of a tourist guide is complex and diverse, consisting of numerous “sub-roles” (Holloway, 1981). By analyzing the studies published on the subject, Zhang and Chow (2004) have noted down no less than 16 particular roles ascribed to guides, whereas Black and Weiler (2005) have noticed 10. Insisting on the fact that guides are of vital importance both for tourism and tourist experience, Black (in: Pastorelli, 2003) has identified the following roles: information provider, social facilitator, cultural host, motivator of conservation values, interpreter of the natural and cultural environment, people mover. She also mentions “other roles and responsibilities of tourist guides“: teacher or instructor, safety officer, ambassador for one's country, public relations representative or company representative, entertainer, problem solver, confidant and counsellor.

However, guides still “represent a largely underrated, undervalued and under utilized human resource despite the widely acknowledged benefits and significant roles they assume in the tourism system“ (Dioko; Unakul, 2005).

BETWEEN INFORMATION AND MEDIATION

The origin and evolution of the guide's role was expounded by Cohen (1985), who was a pioneer of making tourist guiding a matter of scientific attention. In his opinion, the role of

professional guides consists of two components: social mediation and cultural brokerage. In the first case, it is all about the mediator's role being in direct contact both with tourists and the local community, whereas in the second, the mediation in comprehending different cultures is in question. Cohen especially emphasizes the significance of interpretation identifying that term with intercultural mediation, explaining it as “translation” of foreign and unknown elements of the host culture into a cultural “idiom” which is close to the guest.

Such “translation” is often necessary, since the majority of tourists spend only a short time at a destination, hardly possess any local knowledge and view their temporary surrounding from a leisure perspective of tourist activity. Therefore, most of them cannot comprehend the local values, beliefs, tradition and everyday life of inbound tourist regions (Ooi, 2002).

Various studies confirmed that the majority of guides see themselves mainly as information-givers (Holloway, 1981), much more frequently to what their employers or clients would want. Interestingly enough, customers also share the same opinion: in a survey on the principal role of residential guides conducted by this author among 176 American participants of a sightseeing tour, 90% of them selected “information giver and educator“, whereas other options such as “cultural broker and mediator“, “leader and organizer“, “escort and caretaker“ and “ambassador, PR and destination 'protector” had 2.4% each (some tourists have chosen more than one answer).

Not so rarely, guides make use of information capacity to prove their “expertise“. It was Mark Twain formerly who noticed that guides feel a strong urge to impress their audience by “revelations“, which is depicted in the famous writer's travel notes.¹ This is probably why (and not so infrequently) they even resort to fabricated tales, narrating unverified stories, the

¹ Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad*, 1980.

www.literaturepage.com/read/twain-innocents-abroad-206.html

practice dating back from the ancient times.² There are educated individuals in this profession who possess impressive knowledge on various subjects, but there are also instances when “providing information” assumes a form of monotonous enumeration of facts and figures.

Cohen and several other authors (like Nettekoven, 1979) argue that the communicative component is of crucial importance for the role, either from the perspective of destinations or visitors. According to Cohen, this function of guides in international transcultural tourism is oriented at interpretation. The interpretive role he sees as a form of intercultural mediation, as “translating“ unknown and unusual issues in the destination culture into a “language“ or “cultural idiom“ familiar to customers, most frequently by comparing them with familiar domestic patterns which are well understood: guides use interpretation (by reviving a place, phenomenon, event or the work of art in an understandable and compelling way) to “convey” tourists, intellectually speaking, from the sphere of unknown into the sphere of well-known. Depending on the guide's competence, tourists will be able to understand new and unfamiliar phenomena.

Nevertheless, tourists nowadays tend to interpret everything they experience in their own way, influenced both by initially

² Lucian, mobbed with guides in Rhodes, became convinced that they invented their sensational “facts“ entirely for a gullible audience: “Abolish lies from Greece and the guides there would all die of starvation, since no tourist wants to hear the truth – even for free“ (Perrotet, 2002). Well-informed contemporaries were convinced in fabrication of the given information, as in the case of travel writer Pausanias upon his visit to the city of Argos: “The guides at Argos know very well that not all the stories they tell are true, but they tell them anyway“ (Casson, 1994). Perrotet (2002) probably rightly claims that some of the flaws of ancient guides have persisted up to this very day: “Today's *mystagogi* [ancient term for the guide], who sprint around Greek sites waving spurious credentials and scribbled testimonials from 'contented' clients, have hardly updated their methods.“

formed ideas and expectations or upon regarding the concrete tour beneficial to themselves (Ooi, 2002). The task of guides is to help visitors in locating, perceiving and understanding different features of a destination. No one else is in such a position in terms of tourists and possibilities of influence. This is why Pond (1993) sees the guide as a medium which allows, enables and encourages matters to develop: "In practice, it demands the greatest level of maturity and courage, for it requires that guides subordinate themselves to the traveler and the experience."

Holloway argues that "[o]n the whole, passengers do not have high initial expectations of their guides. They expect them to be reasonably knowledgeable, capable of organizing a successful program and caring for their needs, and able to hold their attention by presenting their information in an interesting way" (Holloway, 1981). Similarly, Weiler and Ham (2002) think that tourists generally do not expect much from the guided tour and guides, but only to spend several hours or days with minimum discomfort, some information and entertainment. Claiming that tourists do not have high expectations could be accepted in the case of microtours, such as city sightseeing, usually conducted routinely. Thus, tourists do not expect significantly different approach in conducting tours on the basis of their previous experience. Guided tours in a standardized and ritualized way are usually offered by certain institutions and industrial facilities, confirmed by Jack and Phipps's (2005) experience upon visiting a whiskey distillery in Scotland.

TOURIST GUIDES AS MEDIATORS

Tourism is the activity with the participation of different mediation types. Furthermore, it could hardly function without mediators assuming that role in all its sectors. Although

mediators operate on economic principles, some of them also create non-economic functions or effects.

Ooi (2002) claims that mediation has a central position in creating tourist experiences. Postmodern tourists and especially group travellers are not ready to invest greater intellectual and physical effort into their experience while travelling. As a result, the visited destination for them may remain a patchwork of fleeting images and signs appearing and disappearing in front of their very eyes. It is the guide who helps tourists to “move forward“ by selecting and interpreting cultural peculiarities (otherwise ignored or misunderstood) since as a “symbol specialist“ he or she offers explanations of “hardly available“ signs. Furthermore, certain authors such as Weiler and Ham (2002), see guides as “providers of tourism experiences“.

Tourist guides show and interpret local cultural heritage, living culture and cultural identity of a destination and therefore represent cultural mediators, of whom a customer expects to show sensibility towards their own culture as well as the guest’s. It is part of the “ambassador’s responsibility” (Yu et al., 2001) of contemporary guides. In that sense, those who are “bicultural” are more successful and competent than “monocultural”, owing to their personal experience which is a result of direct participation in two different cultures, such as education or longer period of time spent abroad (Wu; Haywood, 2001).

Jennings and Weiler (2006) distinguish formal and informal mediators, which can affect the quality of tourist experience individually or cumulatively, emphasizing that the cultural mediation does not necessarily result in a “high-quality“ experience: the mediator's contribution does not have to be always a positive one, but is sometimes negative or neutral. This is partly a result of the fact that “sense-making“ of tourism experience depends mainly on a tourist as an individual, and less upon a mediator. These authors also state: “Having noted that tour[ist] guides and other formal brokers are ‘expected’ to

mediate the tourist's experience, it is important to comment here that the nature of this mediation is seldom monitored or assessed by tourism industry employers, let alone by other stakeholders" (Ibid.).

Also, according to Dahles (2002) the guides are "of crucial importance in cultural tourism, as theirs is the task of selecting, glossing, and interpreting sights". Nevertheless, the author is against an idealized image of guides and harmonious mediation model implying that all parties involved are satisfied. She believes that the mediation process in practice "is not as innocent and unproblematic as this perspective implies." Dahles (2001) is of the opinion, both from the political and economic point of view, that another two perspectives should be added to the mediating role of guides she has named "entrepreneurial mode and the manipulative mode". The first one is focused on guides as small entrepreneurs or individuals which as mediators act autonomously, taking a risk and then making a profit in terms of money and contacts. The other perspective points to the correlation of forces within which these small entrepreneurs have to operate: guides in non-democratic regimes could become pawns a state uses as the means to spread a controlled image of a destination.³

Undoubtedly, certain forms of manipulation can be noticed in the work of tourism mediators (personnel of airlines, hotels, travel agencies), of whom Nettekoven (1979) says: "The profit motive is thus the key to understanding the potentials and limits of their ability to serve as cultural intermediaries." Since it is customary for guides to receive tips from tourists, their behaviour may be conditioned by financial interest and

³ Macdonald (2006) also does not regard guides as "pure" mediators. She has noticed that the role has no obvious correspondence to other media, where the audience (readers, listeners or viewers) are mostly confronted directly with a text or TV program: "[A]ttention to the work of tour[ist] guides usefully disrupts a model of a relatively linear process in which the 'text' is conceptualized as fixed and only open *post hoc* to the diverse 'readings' or 'interpretations' of the audience."

therefore deformed: certain individuals perceive tourists more or less as objects and means for making their earnings as high as possible.

In recent times, tourist guides use the Internet to offer their services to potential customers. Owing to this type of media, they have found a new and efficient channel for direct distribution of their services. It enables them to be real entrepreneurs and also to create and offer independently different types of the “product”, determine the price, but at the same time it leaves more room for possible manipulation.⁴ Some individuals additionally promote their offer on popular portals, web pages or forums and directly communicate with the WWW users.⁵ Independent participation in the market represents competition for other suppliers of the same services, either fellow guides or local travel agencies. Personal promotion undoubtedly contributes to the guide's professional status, but it can also cause animosity of some tourism players. Namely, it has been noticed in practice that there are travel agencies which seldom or almost never hire such guides irrespective of their qualities.

Most authors who paid their attention to this topic are agreed that guides act as mediators who give tourists the access to attractions, information and knowledge (*‘gatekeepers’*), as well as motivate, manage and supervise host-guest interactions. Yu et al. (2004) have summed up various stances on mediator's role of tourist guiding published in academic literature.

MEDIATING ACCESS TO ATTRACTIONS

Tourist guides provide access to attractions which can be visited only within an organized group, i.e. the guided tour (*non-public places*). Customers perceive mediation as useful

⁴ For example see: www.belgradetours.com/ (accessed: 10/07/2009).

⁵ www.travel-library.com/; www.infohub.com/tour_guides/; www.viamigo.com/; www.ourexplorer.com (all accessed: 10/07/2009).

when they expect difficulties in locating specific attractions (the lack of signalization, attraction dislocation, undeveloped infrastructure etc.), and also so as to avoid queuing upon entering tourist sites (when group visits have priority over independent visitors).

Visiting a sight with regular activities, such as industrial facilities or institutions, is frequently limited in terms of the total number of visitors, time and duration of stay or access to certain spots: “[g]uided tours assure that tourists will be channeled into the right place at the right time, while under the control of someone 'responsible' (usually the site's own personnel)” (Schmidt, 1979). Hiring a guide is sometimes obligatory for the benefit of visitors themselves (their safety), as in the case of game parks, even if they decline such mediation.

In contemporary tourism, attractions and localities must be equipped for tourist reception, whereas planning and organizing are of crucial importance for managing mass visitation. Site visit procedure is sometimes a complicated process, affecting the duration of stopping times, activities, experience and visitor satisfaction. In case of crowded sites and congestions, it is the guide's skillfulness and experience that often influence the way a group will experience the visit. The guide must adapt itinerary on the spot as well as the length of stay at some points, time for breaks or shopping for souvenirs and the like.

MEDIATING INFORMATION

Mediating information is a form of cognitive brokerage. It is a service aimed at making it easier for tourists to comprehend the destination they are staying at. Guides provide different kinds of information on attractions and the basic form of this mediation is narration about a concrete topic or subject. The selection of information and a commentary respecting the

guests' culture encourage customers to comprehend various aspects of the destination in an appropriate way.

As a source of information on the attraction, guides are responsible for making it (attraction) really possible. Namely, according to Leiper's definition, a tourist attraction is a system emerging when three elements are interconnected (tourist, nucleus or central element and marker or information element). The author claims that one of these markers is necessary at least before linking three components and forming an empirical entity, the attraction system. Leiper (1990) named markers outside the destination region as detached and divided them into generating and transit, depending on whether the information is obtained before or during travelling. Even though the visited place can make a tourist disappointed, the relation between places and information about them creates attraction and "draws" visitors. The Leiper's stance is more important than it seems at first sight. In some respect, he indicates that attractions whose attributes are not special or remarkable can also be evaluated in tourism if followed by information, narration, stories related to them. In that sense, the guide as an element in the tourist attraction system (representing one of the contiguous markers) is an important medium for informing tourists on visited sights and especially for interpreting certain, both physically and mentally, not so easily accessible places or their "hidden" attributes. Leiper himself points out that sightseeing tourists are exclusively interested in certain phenomena due to markers and not because of anything particularly exceptional in the attraction itself.⁶

⁶ Using Leiper's terminology, Bras (2000) has concluded that during a single tour, guides may provide information on specific nucleus on more than one occasion. Their narration *en route* represents a "transit marker", whereas at the visited site, information consists of "neighbouring markers": it is related to close surroundings. The guide takes tourists around a site, specifies the name of a facility or site, interprets events associated with it and, according to the MacCannel's process of sacralization, figuratively speaking, puts a frame around objects and places or opens them up for visitation and labels

According to Moscardo (2003), guides primarily provide information on available possibilities and alternatives in terms of *in situ* activities followed by data encouraging the sense of security and comfort, facilitating more efficient dealing with possible difficulties during the stay, as well as better understanding of local warnings or prohibition signs. Visitors frequently do not notice warning signage or might even misinterpret them. In organized tourism, guides bring tourists' attention to such messages, explain their purpose, help customers to understand these warnings and accept them with approval.

MEDIATING SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

Since they speak the language of customers, guides also appear as relationship catalysts between visitors and local residents, enabling communication, comprehension and actions among people who speak different languages and belong to different cultures. Upon these contacts, it is often necessary to have someone's mediation along the way, especially if visitors do not speak foreign languages. Guides appear as brokers who can give tourists an opportunity to establish interactions with people living at a particular destination as well as take it away. Communication and participation in various activities including music, dance, tasting local dishes, listening to local tales or watching shows performed by local inhabitants bring visitors not only in a direct contact with the employees in the tourism sector, but with the local community members, too.

and reproduces them. The guide makes up an interpretative framework, which helps tourists to share feelings with the guide being aware of the importance of the site. Bras points out that in the attraction system analyses, the role of mediators or cultural brokers has been neglected and believes that "[m]ore detailed information on tourist guides' positions between the three components – sight, marker and tourist will serve to explain how markers are used, manipulated, adjusted or (re)invented".

It was Nettekoven (1979) who emphasized guides' dominant role in intercultural encounters. They are, especially, at the beginning of tourists' stay at a destination, the most important source of information on local conditions. Potentially, guides can motivate tourists to establish a contact with residents, thus creating possibilities of cultural exchange, even though it is a difficult task they have not been adequately prepared and trained for. As opposed to that, Holloway points out that the guide's "representative" role in managing a tour group as well as his interpretation of attractions decrease chances for contacts with the local population since guides function as a "buffer" between a group and outside influence or experience. The guide directs tourists where to go, what to see and above all, how to interpret things they have seen. Focusing the group's attention is thus achieved towards inside, the guide, rather than outside, towards the site (Holloway, 1981). One of the reasons for peculiar "isolation" of tourists from the local setting, Schmidt (1979) finds in the very nature of guides' commentaries: explanations sometimes given to tourists can differentiate substantially from those offered by local community members.

Naturally, the aspect of guide's mediation is also important when it comes to interactions within a tour group, whose members (despite their belonging to the same nation or culture) usually do not know each other. Many authors, such as Cohen (1985), state that the guide initiates spending time together and socializing in a heterogeneous group; it is the guide who is by far responsible for the accomplished degree of integration among the group members. This activity becomes particularly significant on multiday bus tours when participants spend most of their time socializing together and participating in various activities. Apart from the usual content, such as sightseeing and visiting attractions, itineraries also frequently include other forms of animation during a trip, either at the particular destination or on the bus ride. The success of a guide in this respect, depends mainly upon the guide's experience, but also on his or her personal characteristics.

Concern for the group and the guide's interaction with its members, customers themselves see as one of the main functions of tourist guiding. Quiroga (1990) is even of the opinion that managing group dynamics is a guarantee for achieving some degree of satisfaction of the tour participants. She points out that this fact should be particularly taken into account by tour operators and travel agencies, when due to economizing they replace professional guides with their employees or send groups without a guide, thus showing that they neither appreciate the job of tourist guiding nor take into consideration the needs of customers.

CREATIVITY IN TOURIST GUIDING

Creativity is “a mental and social process involving the generation of new ideas or concepts, or new associations of the creative mind between existing ideas or concepts... An alternative conception of creativeness is that it is simply the act of making something new.”⁷ Can we then talk of creativity in tourist guiding? Since originality is the product of creativity, the question can be reformulated: in what sense can a tourist guide be original?

Despite being attractive at first, many are of the opinion that the job of a guide is not particularly serious and even not so creative.⁸ The experience proves that most guides are not in a condition to or do not attempt to adapt their standard tours to clients' characteristics: such guides are very rarely focused on customers, their needs, motivation, wishes, preferences, cultural background, educational level – all being the key

⁷ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Creativity> (accessed: 15 June 2009).

⁸ This is why customers can be pleasantly surprised by the educational level or social background of certain guides, which is in discord with the typical image they create about this profession (Holloway, 1981): “You seem to be very intelligent and well-educated. Why are you a tour guide?” or “Is this your *real* job?” (Pond, 1993).

factors of individual tourist experiences. Generally, tourists do not belong to a homogenous group of people: even a “typical” tour group consists of individuals with different expectations, roles and behaviour.

There are individuals on a guided tour who are not in a position to travel independently for some reason, and if they could, they would gladly avoid the limitations of mass tourism. They do not feel comfortable about being in a tour group and following a standard program (despite having chosen it), and impatiently wait for “time at leisure”, when they can try to satisfy their “adventurous” fantasies. Led by instincts, with information obtained before setting out on a journey and advice given by a person who is outside the tourism industry (an acquaintance, friendship by sight), these people will use the leisure time to experience what they really want. These “anti-tourists” or participants who see themselves as travellers and not as “typical tourists”, mainly do not have confidence in their guide, believing that he or she is not going to encourage them to go beyond the central tourist area (destination's frontstage), since “economic factor determines the interests and behavior patterns of indigenous and foreign tour guides alike” (Nettekoven, 1979).

If satisfied with the guide, clients usually say: “he or she is knowledgeable... told us everything... is extremely fluent... kind, humorous, charming...” They primarily pay attention to the manner of the guide's commentaries, his or her appearance and behaviour, i.e. to the guide as a personality. Seldom do tourists notice other important skills (navigation, positioning of a group, situation control, logistics). Nevertheless, the originality of their interpretation is what makes the individuals different and tourist guiding more than a sheer trade.

It is thought that interpretation represents the “act of juggling and balancing, subtle and gracious ballet of interaction between the guide's presentation and the listener's mind” (Sharpe, according to: Pond, 1993). This allusion is intentional: interpretation is an act of creativity, like an art form, or even a

performance – resembling jugglers, dancers and actors. For each artistic creation “raw materials” are necessary, and their transformation into a final “product” is a result of intuition, sensibility, passion and skillfulness. One of the Australian guides explains his interpretive role in a following way: “Interpretation to me is the attempt to build a structure that not only endures, but also is a thing of wonderment and inspiration. I need to take my raw materials, gather my tools and employ trick of my trade to build effective messages, communicate and teach, so that my visitors remember long after the holiday has finished” (Crabtree, in: Pastorelli, 2003).

A creative approach to work implies coming up with an original, but still applicable idea relating to participants' profile and the tour theme. The most important thing is to achieve balance between the need for making the guide's commentaries precise and accurate in terms of facts without turning them into a high-brow academic lecture at the same time. The guide must be interesting and, above all, radiate enthusiasm.

It is of vital importance to make interactions, encourage clients to participate actively in the communication process by triggering their potential knowledge and prompt them to express their views and perception. Interpretation must not be the guide's monologue, but an attempt to establish a dialogue with the audience including a wide range of feedback information and emotions. Richards and Wilson (2006) rightly claim: “One of the keys to developing creative experiences is to allow the participants to develop their own narratives and draw upon their own imaginative potential, rather than providing ready-made storylines for them.” However, not all tourists are keen on participating in communication as well as in group activities. A tourist experience frequently includes some physical and intellectual effort individuals are not ready for due to various reasons.

Creativity in tourist guiding is manifested mainly when the tour concept and program are in the hands of guides. In that respect, they can have significantly less room for maneuvering,

as in the case of regular or scheduled tours whose program and itinerary are defined by a company or when upon the employer's request they must abide by the "script", as noticed by Macdonald (2006) in the case of "History for All" tours in Nuremberg).

Interestingly enough, Wynn (2005) believes that guides who conduct walking tours serve as "improvisation thinkers", intelligent historians and passionate story tellers on urban environment offering a wider context consisting of three interconnected strengths: the growth of city tourism, increased interest in cultural heritage and new "festival" culture. Many of such New York guides have moved away from the educational aspects in favour of entertaining ones. Anthropologist Pilar Rau takes the commentaries of residential guides into consideration arguing that local tours in New York do not only differentiate according to their contents, but mainly according to the ways of presentation, sometimes assuming the form of "folk performance" and even represent a kind of art.⁹

CONCLUSION

Tourist guiding operates in the form of a tour, chosen by participants themselves: its informal character enables efficient dissemination of information and knowledge so as to contribute to achieving a safe and quality tourist experience. Guides have influence upon the quality of integral tourism product, as well as products of travel agencies offering guided tours (Mossberg, 1995).

It seems that in estimating what makes a "good" guide there is nothing controversial, still employers, clients and guides themselves can have different perceptions on significance and priorities of particular qualities. Pond (1993) remarks that it is extremely important for guides to possess several specific

⁹ www.nyu.edu/classes/bkg/touristblog/archives/2005/10/the_truth_about_1.html (accessed: 11 April 2008).

characteristics; others are skills that should be acquired and demonstrated in practice. Some of these are so vague and fluid that it is not easy to define them, let alone measure them. The nature of contact with clients, and above all a high level of interaction it entails, influence customer perceptions on guides' personal characteristics and their interpretation as an integral part of the service quality.

Desire for success, enthusiasm and business creativity are the main trigger of quality tourist guiding. To what extent will the members of this profession really manifest these traits depends not only upon their personality, knowledge and acquired skills, but also upon their ethics. Socio-economic and political circumstances in which guides work are also relevant, as well as the status they have in their society. Guides should be considered as tourism players who fulfill a very important mission on behalf of the destination. It is neither just nor justifiable for them to be even today treated as “orphans of the tourism industry” (Pond, 1993), whose status is somewhere still undefined and “hidden“. or openly ignored.

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