Journal of Tourism & Hospitality

Research Article   **Open Access**

Real (or) Staged? Authenticity and Cultural Portrayal in Indigenous Tourism

Kithiia J[1]* and Reilly S[2]

[1]*School for Field Studies (SFS), Yungaburra, Australia*
[2]*Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, California, USA*

Abstract

This study examined the perceptions of authenticity in cultural portrayals by both visitors and indigenous tourism operators in Far North Queensland. Surveys were administered over a two week period to indigenous tour operators and visitors at six locations throughout the region. The results showed that tourists place a high value on authenticity and the majority of them who had participated in an indigenous experience were satisfied with its level of authenticity. The study further found that the use of theatrical effects in cultural presentations was viewed negatively by tourists. A few indigenous tour operators were found to place a higher premium on maintaining the pride of their community's cultural values, rather than work collaboratively with external corporations to provide titillating, but barely authentic, tourism experiences. The overwhelming consensus from all those interviewed was that players in the indigenous tourism market are still grappling with how they could appeal to a broad range of tourists without losing authenticity in their presentation of culture. The solution is likely to be found in local capacity building and multi-stakeholder engagement, not least the involvement of governing authorities and the mainstream tourism sector.

Keywords: Indigenous; Authenticity; Tourism; Culture; Perceptions; Visitors; Operators

Introduction

Tourism is one of the fastest growing industries in the world market today. According to IBIS World, worldwide revenue from tourism is well over US$ 1 trillion, and strong growth is expected to continue over the next couple of years [1]. One facet of growth in this sector is indigenous cultural experiences. The continued growth in this tourism sub-sector has been attributed to a shift in tourist desires away from trips involving participation with modernized, centered cultures to experiences with groups who have historically been along the margins [2]. Consequently, an increasing number of indigenous communities all over the world are becoming important members of the tourist industry [3].

A plausible assumption in much of the contemporary literature, concerning the impacts of modern tourism on host societies, is that tourism leads to commoditization of the life of a community and destroys authenticity of local cultural products and human relations [4]. As cultural products lose their meaning for the locals, and as the need to present the tourist with ever more spectacular, exotic and titillating attractions grows [5], contrived cultural products are increasingly "staged" for tourists and decorated so as to look authentic. Clearly, the development of culturally appropriate indigenous tourism experiences can be tremendously difficult. Authentic portrayal of indigenous cultures is inherently difficult to balance with modernization and lifestyle changes within the community [6]. The tourism industry is often accused of objectifying people and cultures in order to represent the world in the most marketable way [7]. Incidentally, since any presentation of culture outside its traditional context can betray cultural heritage, those opposed to indigenous tourism also accuse its practitioners of the unlawful sale of cultural traditions and practices [8]. On the other hand, there are those who argue that its economic gains can lead to increased cultural preservation. That is, if culture is presented appropriately, education can reduce stereotypes and prejudices [9,10].

In Australia, Aboriginal tourism has only recently emerged as an industry. This is partly in response to an increasing interest in Aboriginal culture, by both domestic and overseas visitors. A previous visitor survey found that close to 20% of overseas tourists cited indigenous experiences as the main reason they visited Australia and another 25% said this experience influenced their decision to visit. Within the Aboriginal community, tourism is seen as a practical, important way to provide an economic base to ensure that communities prosper and that Aboriginal heritage is supported [11]. Towards this end, the government has been encouraging the development of indigenous cultural tourism in regional and remote areas of Australia, so that indigenous communities may capitalise on their local natural and cultural assets [12]. Furthermore, indigenous tourism is seen as a way of reducing welfare dependency and strengthening cultural identity among Aboriginal people, as well as being a means of positioning Australia as a culturally distinctive destination [3,13]. That said, while there exists a significant body of literature on authenticity within indigenous tourism in general, there is a lack of research focusing on the Aboriginal communities in Far North Queensland, and in particular, an analysis of the authenticity-inauthenticity divide in modern Aboriginal cultural portrayal [14-18]. This study sought to examine the perceptions of authenticity in cultural portrayals of Aboriginal tourism in Far North Queensland.

The Far North Queensland region is home to numerous Aboriginal communities. This makes it ideal for the development of indigenous tourism, which both the government and other stakeholders are encouraging [12]. The region is very popular with tourists. Indeed, about 20% of the region's population is employed in the tourism sector. Furthermore, although available statistics show that many international

visitors to the region participate in some sort of indigenous experience, the indigenous tourism strategy report for Queensland has identified low indigenous involvement in the tourist industry as a significant concern.

In this paper the terms 'Aboriginal tourism' and 'indigenous tourism' are used interchangeably. Ideally, Indigenous tourism is a niche market or special interest sector, which includes a wide range of experiences, built around tourists visitations. In regard to the use of the term authenticity, we are aware of the multiplicity of meaning under negotiation at any given discussion about authenticity. According to Theodossopoulos [16], this multiplicity of meanings provides an escape from a strict and limiting definition of the authentic, an opportunity to apply their own specific meaning. This authenticity polysemy can be advantageous in inviting the understanding of authentic within the cultural contexts of its production [1]. Hence, we will avoid the usual theorizing of the concept of authenticity; instead we will use field-based empirical information to establish what both the operators and visitors to Far North Queensland perceive as 'traditional', and hence authentic.

Methods

A cross sectional survey involving indigenous tourism operators and visitors in Far North Queensland was conducted, in order to gain a perspective on indigenous cultural tourism within the region. The survey was conducted through face-to-face interviews using semi-structured questionnaires. We focused on 3 locations, which receive the greatest number of tourist visiting Far North Queensland, namely the city of Cairns and the surrounding towns of Kuranda [19]. Surveys were administered to both visitors and Aboriginal tourism operators in the selected towns. Visitors were selected using convenience sampling while indigenous tourism operators were selected using a combination of purposeful and convenience sampling [20]. Indigenous tourism business interviewees were selected based on their knowledge of the organization they were working for (length of employment). A semi-structured survey questionnaire was used to gather information from visitors while interviews with Aboriginal tourism operators tended to be more unstructured. The free flowing conversations with the operators were useful in helping to draw deeper meanings of indigenous cultural values and their attendant presentations. A total of 269 visitor and 22 Aboriginal tour operator interviews were conducted. Notwithstanding the small number of Aboriginal tour operators interviewed, their stories were deep, and comprehensive enough to warrant comparison with the interview responses obtained from tourists.

All responses were entered into an Excel spreadsheet for ease of analysis. Responses about authenticity and souvenir selection were coded on a numerical scale and the results were presented using appropriate graphs. JMP (vers. 10) was utilized to perform Chi-squared tests on these results [21].

For the purposes of data collection, we subscribed to Taylor's assertion; that, with reference to authenticity, tourism sites, objects, images, and even people are not simply viewed as contemporaneous productions, or as context dependent and complex things in the present, but are instead, positioned as signifiers of past events, epochs, or ways of life. This equates authenticity with the `traditional or original'. This way, we were able to categorize responses on the visitors' perceptions of authenticity, in Aboriginal cultural portrayal, into authentic, staged and mixed. However, the subsequent discussion of the results does not necessarily replicate this categorisation.

Results and Discussion

Visitors perceptions on authenticity

Our analysis was based on the tourists 'perceived' authenticity of the cultural portrayal of products. Hence, we quantified authenticity in terms of the visitors' own values. For example, if upon a visit to an indigenous tourist site a visitor expressed a feeling that he/she had connected well with the indigenous people, and gained a better understanding of their history and culture, then we concluded that they had encountered authenticity. This characterization of authenticity is consistent with Smith's assertion, that authenticity can be seen as a desired experience or benefit associated with visits to certain types of tourists destinations. Besides, previous research has shown that genuineness or authenticity of a tourism setting is not a tangible asset but a value judgement placed on the setting by the observer [22,23].

The results show that about 75% of the respondents who had previously experienced indigenous tourism considered it an authentic demonstration of Aboriginal culture (Figure 1) (p<0.01). 60% of those who claimed to have had an authentic experience associated the visit with the opportunity to interact with local Aboriginal tour guides, who used local dialect to communicate certain things. The tendency for tourists to develop notions of what they expect to experience, and to often value something that conforms to these expectations over a truly authentic display of culture, has also been reported by Culler [24]. Cultural productions, involve some degree of make-believe, whereby tourists become willing participants in what MacCannell [25] calls "staged authenticity," or the presentation of something inauthentic as the real deal. Tourists are more likely to resort to make-believe to overlook any shortcomings in order to have an authentic experience [18], which could explain why there were an overwhelming number of authentic responses in this study.

A quarter of respondents said the presentations were not authentic. Half of this group felt that the experience had been totally staged, while the other half had mixed thoughts about its degree of authenticity. The primary sentiment among those who expressed mixed feelings was that they had witnessed a staged performance based on the actual culture. One participant in this category responded that "the only way to have an authentic indigenous experience would be to meet an Aborigine in the bush who was not involved in tourism". Several other respondents expressed the view that "any show put on for tourists cannot possibly be authentic". One particular respondent likened his experience to a "theater show" while another said it was "too modernized". The question is whether, from the point of view of these respondents, this characterization of indigenous cultural productions truly captures the authenticity or inauthenticity in cultural portrayal. We contend that this could be true in so far as authenticity is equated to the "traditional",

Figure 1: Tourist perceptions of authenticity after participating in an indigenous tourist experience.
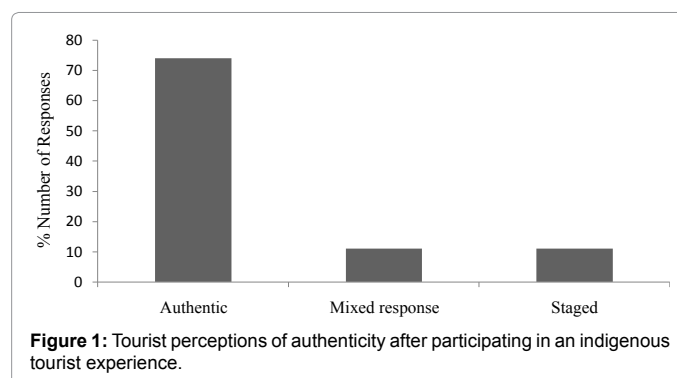
rather than understanding it from within the cultural contexts of its production [26]. Even, though tourists tend to have their presupposed original culture, Cohen postulates that they are able to accept a product of tourism as authentic, if in their opinion, it comes close enough to the actual experience [18]. On a broader perspective, while visitors' perception on the authenticity of Aboriginal cultural portrayal is important in the determining the future development of indigenous tourism, there has to be an appreciation of the unsuitability for public scrutiny of some Aboriginal cultural materials. According to articles 11, 14, 15 and 31 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, Indigenous people have a right to keep secret their sacred and ritual knowledge in accordance with their customary laws. Their right to decide on how their cultural heritage is portrayed must be respected at all times [27]. Hence, balancing visitor expectations of authentic cultural portrayal, and the need for the Aboriginal people to keep their sacred information secret, will almost always result in contested ethos of cultural authenticity. These contested views were evident from the responses we obtained from indigenous tourism operators, as discussed in the section below.

Indigenous tourism operator's perspectives on authenticity

The indigenous tourism operators expressed similar views on dealing with visitors; that is they strive to maintain the originality of their cultural performances. Although, they are aware of the visitors' expectations to experience the realities of their culture, they are at the same time weary of possible exploitation and objectification of their presenters for financial gain. For this reason, operators have built their tourism business models around less controversial cultural activities, such as bush walks and historical presentations. The following statement from one of the managers of the station confirms the community's attitude towards indigenous tourism.

"Although we are an incorporated business entity, our first priority is to advance our cultural identify rather than work to improve the business bottom line through commodification and/or modernization of our culture".

In other words this group of indigenous tourism operators is keen to avoid what Kessing described as the "new-colonial theater of alienation, whereby people are forced to represent themselves in the guise of their culturally pristine ancestors, to be consumed". This however, leads to the question of who should hold the power to decide what is traditional, and therefore authentic cultural performance. Taylor [26] argues that, if the concept of authenticity is to have any legitimate place in the discussion of culture, its definition must rest with the people who make up that culture. The implication of this statement is that visitors lack the factual basis upon which they can make judgments on authenticity. Although in actual fact, this does not stop them from forming their own ideas of authenticity and using these to form authenticity judgments.

At least five tourism operators from different indigenous corporations alluded to the visitors' suspicious inquisitiveness of their cultural performances and presentations. One operator commented that "you sometimes feel as if they are questioning our genuineness". This inquisitiveness by tourists is perhaps an intuitive way of gauging both the traditionality and aboriginality of the performances, against their perceived ideas of authenticity. In the case of Australia, and for that matter in Far North Queensland, the visitors' ideas of the authentic past could be residing within the impressions of the pre-British Aboriginal Australia, the 'primitive other'. A similar mindset was reported by Mkono [28] in her study of tourists' construction of Zimbwabeanness

and Africanness in relation to two Victoria Falls restaurants. The study demonstrated that, whereas tourists were concerned about authenticity of cultural presentations in restaurant experiences, their construction of what constitutes real African culture were extremely fluid and differed significantly with that of the local people. Our results show shifting positions between visitors and operators, within the authentic-inauthentic spectrum. To a certain extent, this seemed to be dictated by the motivations of the performances/presentations and the visitors' expectations.

The shifting positions in perception, within the authentic-inauthentic spectrum, between visitors and indigenous tourism operators, calls for the exploration of how contemporary socio-economic processes of commodification, corporatization and globalisation have affected cultural portrayal, and hence authenticity. Indeed, in some cases, indigenous tourism presentations and performances have been blamed for upsetting the natural equilibrium of destination cultures, exaggerating certain elements of ordinary life and silencing others [29,30]. Consequently, the authenticity of cultural tourism comes into question as touristic activities become associated with economic and social power, with tourists and local people's cultural identity, expectations and experiences becoming intertwined in complex relationships that blur boundaries and autonomy [31]. Helu-Thaman's [32] assertion, that where tourism is concerned, commercial profitability would probably take precedence over cultural considerations, is quite persuasive. We found evidence of this in this study, where one of the businesses we visited was working to modernize its display of culture and explained the difficulty in maintaining cultural authenticity while simultaneously working to increase visitor numbers. A common theme throughout all of the interviews with the tourism operators was the necessity to tailor the experience to the audience. [26].

Cultural portrayal and visitor participation in cultural activities

Despite the threat posed by capitalism and globalization to cultural authenticity, there are still certain aspects of indigenous culture which are never shared. The prolonged survival of the community and the preservation of their culture depend on their ability to keep some elements of their culture private [10]. The Aboriginal people are sharing over 500,000-year old secrets; information which is easily marketable and which people can use for personal commercial gains. Indigenous people have a right to protect traditional knowledge and sacred cultural material [27]. In this study, the indigenous operators stressed the importance of protecting sites that would be inappropriate to share with outsiders or a specific gender. Some of the operators explained that they do not share cultural information pertaining to the use of medicinal plants in their territories as doing so would compromise their cultural intellectual property rights.

All the cultural performer/presenters were indigenous. However, some of them had been brought up outside the indigenous cultural set up. This means that they had little cultural exposure when they were growing up; reasons of which are outside the scope of this paper. One performer explained that he had just returned to the country (country is used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to describe family origins and associations with particular parts of Australia) and was trying to get involved and to learn as much about his people's culture as possible. Another respondent said that she uses dancing and music as a way of learning and sharing her people's culture. Clearly, these performers had minimal understanding of their own culture, but were very eager to learn and reconnect with it. Opinion is divided

as to whether such presenters can portray real authentic culture. For example, Nauta argues that the dilemma of artificiality and authenticity can be solved by pretending one believes in the performance one gives. In other words, even those events that are the most natural are deeply performative events in which authenticity is constructed and constituted [33,34].

Approximately 98% of visitors tried their hands in performing one cultural activity or another. We sought to establish whether this was merely a courteous response to the invitation by indigenous presenters/performers to do so, or they were deliberate efforts geared towards enriching their experiences. 90% of those who performed a cultural activity of one form or another (e.g. throwing spears and boomerangs, playing the Didgeridoo, joining in dancing, colour painting and so on), said that they had planned to do so during their visit. All the respondents said that performing cultural activities improved their appreciation of the culture.

Souvenirs and other cultural goods can be used to showcase and express culture and are useful in authenticating the perception on traditionality. Among study participants who had not yet taken part in an indigenous tourist experience, a clear pattern in preference existed. Local food and drink, artifacts, and artwork were selected almost three times more frequently than the other options (Figure 2) (p<0.0001). CDs and DVDs were barely selected at all. One respondent stated that they would only purchase artifacts and artwork if the pieces came with documentation certifying the item was created by an Aboriginal artist. It could therefore be said that, the tourists were looking for provenance from the artefacts, to judge their authenticity. Photos, books, CDs and DVDs have no real cultural heritage or significance so their "authenticity" is not obvious.

Indigenous art should be considered based on its quality, the degree to which it follows tradition, the ethnicity of the artist, and the reason for the piece's creation [35]. Ideally, the indigenous tourist experience allows the visitor to interface directly with the artist or community that produced the piece and thus obtains answers to these questions, thereby increasing the tourist's confidence in the item's authenticity.

Two of the business operations allowed their guides to exercise personal discretion about how much of their culture they are willing to share. The rest of the groups required the guides to obtain approval for all cultural presentations from the elders. For some businesses, the presentations are scripted in order to ensure their consistency, accuracy, and sensitivity. These scripts must be approved by a group of elders. Through this process, they can neatly package their culture into an easily digestible format that does not offend tribal members nor overwhelm their visitors [36]. Tribal acceptance has been cited as one of the critical factors for sustainable and successful cultural tourism [10]. This approval process gives the community a voice in the tourist

Figure 2: Souvenir selection of respondents who had not participated in an indigenous tourism experience.

venture so they can ensure their culture is being presented sensitively.

The impact of tourism on indigenous culture

Tourism poses a significant threat to a society's culture as a result of its ability to modify traditions. This phenomenon has been extensively documented in previous literature [14,15]. It poses the same ability to recreate history and customs as early forms of imperial exploitation and, therefore, presents a brand new host of challenges to communities in terms of maintaining power and identity [37]. All the indigenous tourism operators interviewed for this study claimed not to have experienced any negative repercussions from tourism and to have actually benefited from the influx of visitors. In fact, responses on the whole were largely positive about tourism's impact on their culture. Several groups stressed that entering the tourism market has forced them to relearn their stories. The need to pass down stories from one generation to the next has also been revived since their children must learn their ancestral history if they too are to be successful in the tourism trade. One survey participant, who had not been exposed to the aboriginal culture as he grew up remarked that It was only through her job at indigenous tourism business that she was able to learn the stories and traditions of her heritage. Today, her goal is to become a tour guide since this will provide her with the opportunity to continue learning about her heritage. Literature often cites rituals as bearing the brunt of tourisms negative impacts. When adapted for touristic displays, rituals frequently are shortened, embellished, or, in some instances, completely invented in order to meet public demand [38]. When this happens, the rituals can become divorced from their original cultural significance [14]. Cultures can also become crushed by the sheer number of tourists that flock to popular destinations [39]. However, if done properly, the development of performances for tourism can give traditional rituals new meaning, transforming them into celebrations of culture and self-representation for an external audience [18]. If done properly, these celebrations of culture can have extremely positive impacts.

Principally, among these benefits, increased tourism can help indigenous groups overcome negative stereotypes held by members of society. Several tourist respondents admitted to having negative preconceived images. One person interviewed said that he frequently sees Aborigines drunk in the streets of Cairns so, therefore, he does not think they are nice people. Fortunately, tourism provides an avenue for communities to correct these misconceptions and demonstrate that the alcoholics seen in the larger towns are not representative of the overall population. As a result of their experiences with indigenous programs, tourists will hopefully lose any preconceived negative opinions and, instead, will leave with a more accurate picture of the group's history and current situation [10]. Many of the programs offered by the tour operators included in this study included a large educational component. These programs are crucial in this process of eliminating racial stereotypes. In addition, sharing their culture can also have a positive impact on the indigenous tourism operators. Positive responses to their programs can help them to gain a greater appreciation for their own culture; empowering them in the face of widespread ignorant negative stereotyping [10].

The ownership of the indigenous tourism businesses plays a significant role in the ability of each group to mitigate tourism's cultural impacts. Two of the businesses studied were not fully owned by Aboriginal groups, even though their staff is predominantly aboriginal. When an outside group assumes control of an indigenous tourism operation, the indigenous groups represented often receive very little financial compensation for the display of their culture [10]. An employee explained that performers enter into an agreement with
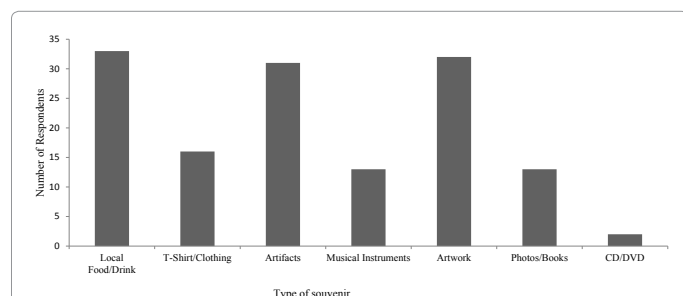
the parent corporation to be for regular wage increment. A survey participant from another Aboriginal group professed that they did not want a business model where millions of dollars come through the gate but very little makes it back to the community. Instead, the independent indigenous tour operators see visitors as a way to make money while still remaining on their ancestral lands and continuing to engage in their traditional practices and belief systems [38]. They want their tourism venture to be a source of pride for the entire community and to be something of which the younger generation can aspire to be a part. Their primary economic goal is to reach and sustain a level of income where they can generate jobs for their community. In the end, the independent indigenous tourism operators envision their tourism ventures as a way to reduce their dependency on government assistance and, eventually, become totally self-sufficient. As one participant stated, they do not expect tourism to have any negative impact on their culture as long as they retain control of the venture. The problems previously mentioned in the preexisting literature are the result of a top down approach where outside groups attempt to transform Aboriginal experiences to meet market demand [2]. As long as they can remain independent, the indigenous tourism providers feel confident that they can enrich their community and preserve their culture through the presentation of an authentic Aboriginal cultural experience.

Conclusion

This study has found that the vast majority of tourists considered their indigenous cultural experiences to be authentic. Tourists consider personal interaction with Aboriginal people a critical component of an authentic indigenous tourism experience. In addition, there was a marked preference for purchasing souvenirs directly from the communities that produced them. In considering how to appeal to the widest possible audience, indigenous tourism operators have to consider how they will meet a range of tourist desires while maintaining a high level of authenticity regardless of visitor interests. The operators have a cultural obligation to protect certain segments of their culture from public display to ensure cultural sensitivity in their presentation. Lastly, contrary to the many potential negative cultural impacts of tourism cited in current literature, tour operators are positive about the effect tourism has had on their culture so far. It is currently helping them to strengthen their knowledge of their communities' stories and to share their culture with outsiders. That said, the overall success of the indigenous tourism subsector will be achieved if financial gains do not come at the expense of the culture from which the venture draws. The challenge for indigenous tourism operators then becomes how to strike a balance between fulfilling the visitors' desires and maintaining the integrity of their own cultural methods of representation.

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