

MANAGING THE LOCAL-TO-GLOBAL DYNAMICS OF WORLD HERITAGE INTERPRETATION AND APPROPRIATION

The global expansion of world heritage sites coincides with the growth of leisure and tourism as major forms of economic and socio-cultural development. Year after year, the tourism and travel industries proudly present statistics showing steady increases in international tourist arrivals and receipts, and a growing contribution to the world total GNP. Given the pervasiveness and local particularity of heritage, it is not surprising that heritage tourism is among those niches growing most rapidly. Such special interest tourism is being developed, both as a primary objective and as a by-product of other leisure activities, by a wide variety of actors. The management of world heritage sites as sustainable tourism destinations is seldom straightforward. Through an Indonesian case study, this paper critically analyzes some of the key issues at stake in the management of world heritage tourism.

The central part of the island of Java is home to three world heritage sites, while four others are on UNESCO's tentative list. The region's internationally acclaimed and protected temples and palaces draw large crowds of domestic and foreign visitors, and offer a lucrative source of income for both the government and tourism service providers. In 2006, when I was doing fieldwork on local tour guide practices around these monuments, a severe earthquake and several volcanic eruptions of Mt. Merapi struck the area. Many lives and homes were lost and some historical buildings badly damaged. In addition, the number of tourists drastically dropped. The ensuing crisis intensified existing conflicts over heritage appropriation and interpretation on local, national, regional, and global levels. Why, for instance, did the main complex of the Prambanan temples have to remain closed until international UNESCO experts showed up to assess the damage? Moreover, how to defend the pumping of large sums of overseas money into the restoration of "dead" pre-Islamic heritage when thousands of families had lost their houses?

Based on extensive fieldwork, I use this particular Indonesian case study to explore ethnographically how translocal processes increasingly influence the local

meanings and management of heritage – both in times of stability and of turmoil – but also how these “foreign” elements are incorporated and strategically (mis)used by locals in the heritage narratives told and sold to tourists (be they domestic or international). An in-depth analysis of the empirical findings leads to a broader reflection on the dynamic interplay between the externally imaged (represented) and locally imagined value and management of world heritage in Indonesia and beyond. Heritage interpretation and appropriation seem enmeshed in complex webs of meaning, variously cherished and expressed by shareholders at different levels. While much of the theorizing on world heritage management has relied upon inherited or borrowed (Euro-American) conceptions and assumptions about what should be valued and privileged, this paper illustrates that the significance of heritage – be it natural or cultural, tangible or intangible – is characterized by ever-changing pluriversality. This complexity needs to be taken into account when developing sustainable tourism management strategies.

Keywords: Anthropology, interpretation, appropriation, culture, Indonesia



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