

Same route, different tourists: methodological issues in tourism research

Introduction

In this paper I examine one particular case of anthropological research in tourism, which involves working with subsequent groups of tourists who explore the same cultural route. This fieldwork situation poses a challenge for me, as the anthropological researcher. There is a similar tourist- setting (borrowing from the same cultural theme), the same cultural and physical landscape, a standard team of tourist professionals (the hosts: tourist guides, professionals and locals) but different informants coming from a number of European destinations and diverse socio-cultural contexts. The field-site, in the particular case I consider, is Cyprus, known also as the birthplace of Aphrodite, and the cultural route followed by the tourists is one carefully designed by the Cyprus' authorities to unite a number of known localities, nature sites, museums associated with this ancient Goddess.

My overall research is concerned with the ideologies and practices involved in the promotion of cultural tourism in Cyprus. In this paper, however, I focus on the methodological parameters and my methodological subjectivity related to this kind of multi-sited research. Here the anthropologist has no other alternative but to follow successive groups of tourists who are in constant motion in space. The major challenge of this approach is to compare the hosts' and guests' expectations through the tourist experience, which unravels itself in the same space, but in different sites, always involving a constantly renewable pool of protagonists. My position as an anthropologist was therefore complicated by the divergent view of my informants, the tourists engaging with the tourist spectacle on short-term basis and the tourist professionals through a long term and continuous engagement. My position as a researcher of tourism in this multi-sited and always sifting (in terms of its composition) setting was half-way in between the open and the closed kind of experience I described above.

In the following section I describe the concept of the Aphrodite Cultural Routes and discuss the selective incorporation of some sites in the routes. I also refer to the way Aphrodite is acting as the emblem of Cyprus and especially as the emblem of cultural tourism. In the section that follows I discuss the experience of three levels of engagement with the Aphrodite's route, which have shaped my understanding of the particular fieldwork situation: a short-term involvement that represents the experience of my tourist respondents, a long-term involvement that represents the viewpoint of the tourist professionals and my own personal engagement which involved the point of view of both tourists and tourist professionals and the fact that I was doing anthropology at home.

Aphrodite's Route

Aphrodite's Cultural Route is the first thematic project promoted by the Cyprus Tourism Organisation within the framework of the Strategic Plan for Tourism Development up to the year 2010 (the revised one will be up to the year 2013). The methodology used for the development of Aphrodite's Cultural Route was based on the model developed by the Council of Europe for creating transnational cultural routes. The project combines cultural, educational and touristic activities. According to the officials of CTO, the project's objectives go beyond setting up a physical route linking sites related to Aphrodite; it is an invitation to visitors to wander through layers of history and culture following in the footsteps of the worship of the Great Cypriot Goddess. Visitors are able to follow this ancient trail at the primary sites, which are

linked to nature sites and museums where artefacts relating to Aphrodite have been signposted with the special logo of the route, inspired by a Roman coin of the 7th century which was found at the Sanctuary of Aphrodite in Palaepaphos.

Cypriot archaeological sites dedicated to the cult of Aphrodite include, among others, the World Heritage Site Sanctuary of Aphrodite in Palaepaphos (Kouklia), the Temple of Aphrodite in Amathus (near Lemesos) and the Temple of Astarte (East and West) in Kition (Larnaka). The three sacred sites mentioned constitute the core of Aphrodite's Cultural Routes. These sites are selectively incorporated in the routes while some others are not. The politics of representation involved in this selection may act for the promotion of cultural tourism or for the preservation of a myth that is related to national identity, which for some is considered to be Greek and some others Cypriot. This selection also reminds us that "the components of the "myth" of the nation are clearly products of a highly selective filtering process" (Brown and Hamilakis 2003: 8) and that "what matters is myth, not in the sense of fiction but as an exclusive notion that serves as a means to a particular end" (Guldea 1994: 340-341). However, this transmits us to issues of authenticity because the process of selecting the cultural elements to be shown could be seen as some kind of a "fake culture" (Stanton cited in Smith ed. 1989: 252). This selection might also be explained by the fact that CTO's Aphrodite's Cultural Route aims to reclaim the overused and exploited image of Aphrodite and to give her back her lost dignity by linking her directly to archaeological evidence, while embracing the elements of myth and popular culture that have become a very real part of her legacy.

Aphrodite has acted for a long time as the emblem of Cyprus. She remains, however, a contested symbol; for example, one can find a variety of logos based on the figure or the symbols of Aphrodite. A lot of festivities, organisations, shops, products chose to use Aphrodite as their brand (i.e. Paphos Aphrodite Festival, Aphrodite's Rally, Aphrodite delights, Aphrodite shoes etc) and this probably creates contradictory images to the one CTO wants to promote. For touristic purposes, the Aphrodite Goddess used to act as an embodiment of Cyprus as the island of love. Currently, CTO is reconsidering the 'sun and sea product' and attempting to focus on the 'sun and sea plus', the plus meaning culture. This is why they have initiated a new logo, which added culture into the equation by introducing Aphrodite. The initiative is considered a major part of cultural tourism which is one of the priorities of the Cyprus authorities, even though we have to say that their practices are not demonstrating this prioritisation. Little has been done to develop and promote the sites related to the Ancient Goddess.

Despite the efforts of the Scientific Committee and the Cyprus Tourism Organisation to present Aphrodite in a certain way, sometimes contradicted notions in the way it is interpreted and experienced by the visitors, especially by those who are individual tourists, who do not come to Cyprus via a tour operator, accompanied by a professional guide, are noticeable. What I felt while doing my fieldwork is a general disappointment by individual tourists when visiting most of the archaeological sites that are promoted through these itineraries. The whole picture is not that attractive, especially without a narrative which wakes up your imagination and romanticism. I spent a lot of time hearing individual tourists, especially younger ones, saying that it is just a place full of "stones" without any kind of interpretation. However, I must say that individual tourists reflecting on this topic mentioned that they came to Cyprus mostly for sun and sea purposes and they were not really interested in cultural tourism. They just wanted to spend one day doing sight-seeing. On the other hand, I noticed that a smaller percentage of individual tourists, especially older people, were using special guide books on

Cyprus and they were trying to imagine the rituals taking place for the worship of Aphrodite; the itineraries are in various points virtual and this leaves room for fantasy. The various groups that I followed expressed much more interest, especially the ones taking place either early in the morning or late in the afternoon that the weather was not very hot and the whole atmosphere is much more fresh and romantic.

Three levels of engagement:

During the course of my fieldwork I experienced three levels of engagement with the Aphrodite's route, which have shaped my understanding of the particular fieldwork situation. First, a short-term involvement that represents the experience of my tourist respondents, second, a long-term engagement that represents the viewpoint of the tourism professionals; and third, my own personal engagement which involved the points of view of both tourists and tourist professionals relating with Aphrodite's route.

The tourists' short term engagement with the tourist spectacle was described to mean a more or less a complete, or closed experience. The tourists perceive the narrative of the tour of the landscape like a story with a beginning and an end. The visitor "reads" the narrative and feels fulfilled. He or she embodies the landscape, the space and accepts it. The guide explains, the tourist follows, learns, enjoys and goes home pleased. Such groups of tourists, though usually European and middle-class, "rather than being joined by class or culture, they are bound by temporary need and the intensity of shared experiences" (Malkki: 1997). They gradually disengage with the tourist spectacle when they leave. At first, they talk about a feeling of fulfilment and, after returning to their countries, attempt to share their experiences with their friends and family. This process operates as a kind of closure. What I noticed from some e-mails that I exchanged with some visitors after leaving Cyprus is that some of them even forget the whole experience very soon and they just remember that when they visited Cyprus they followed some cultural routes dedicated to Aphrodite. This usually happens with "passive consumers" (Larsen, Urry, Axhausen 2007: 259) who are just passively following the guide. Of course, tourists are not monolithic, and neither is the meaning of the site. Not all tourists merely accept but interpret, and frequently question or challenge the guides' narrative (Bruner 2005: 95), but since the guide is responsible to answer the question, they come to a conclusion and feel better and satisfied.

The long term engagement or involvement refers to the tourist professionals-especially the guides or even the locals and their continuous engagement with the sites related to Aphrodite. In my case, the tourist professionals, the CTO's staff and the Aphrodite's Scientific Committee are the authors of the narrative of Cyprus' cultural tourism. The guides are the protagonists, which are caught up in a circle of an engaging and re-engaging with multi-sites and the supporting narrative, the narrative of the experience. Without the narrative, the experience of Aphrodite's Cultural Routes is very hard to maintain. Some sites of the routes are only archaeological remains and are not accompanied by textual interpretation or audiovisual media. They can be interesting to archaeologists but not to the unspecialised visitor. The guides try to fill this gap by attempting "to give meaning to stones", to attract tourists' interest, and at this point, the narratives they use, entail mythology, which alerts the imagination of the tourist. In Dahles' words it is "the discourses developed between guides and tourists" that are constructing parts of the tourist spectacle "as a tourist attraction" (Dahles cited in Boissevain ed. 1996:2).

The guides continuously embody the narrative through repetitive performances of guiding. "Embodiment, like identity formation, is a process; bodies like identities are

never finished” (Moore and Visweswaran 1998: 77); they are on the making, they always change the tour according to the tourists’ feedback; as a result, there is an incomplete process. They can not mechanically repeat the narrative, they continuously revise it because the tourists are leaving and they are replaced by others, with different interests and expectations. This can be both tiring for the guides but also very exciting. They never stop thinking, aiming at making the tourists happy. As Bruner argues, “tourism performances manipulate the past to serve the expectations of the tourists and to perform their master narratives about their destinations, stories already known before they begin their trip” (Bruner 2005:76) either via brochures or other media tools, signs, symbols or even souvenirs. In a similar manner, the guides working for the Aphrodite’s route were adapting their narratives according to the groups’ interests. When the group had older educated people, the guide focused on the archaeological point of view, when the group had a lot of teenagers, especially during school excursions, the guide persisted on the aspect of myth and love. Many guides expressed themselves as feeling proud of their job, because they feel like being a part of a continuity of tradition or as their performance is just a job, but also a statement of their historical or national identity.

Following successive groups of tourists to these cultural routes in Lefkosia, Larnaka, Lemesos and Pafos was like a series of “repetitive cultural performances” (Theodossopoulos, in press). This element of constant repetition, as Theodossopoulos argues, contributes in the further incorporation of the repetitive performance in the protagonist’s life and system of beliefs. Time after time, and through recurring repetition, the guides come to identify with the narrative they have to support and persuasively demonstrate. Their interpretation of the archaeological evidence of the worship of the Cypriot (Kyprida) Aphrodite in Cyprus, is gradually enriched by new, and more confidently enacted performances of guiding. The route itself, as it is re-experienced continually provides the landscape for the embodiment of the performed narratives, a process which is by definition open and incomplete, despite the attempt of the guides to remain faithful to the orthodoxy of the “correct” interpretation.

Talking to some locals at the various sites of the routes, I realised that the roles of tourist and guide-interpreter are not fixed and static. Locals inhabitants may become interpreters, too. Even so, they can more easily exaggerate or falsify history or local tale in order to sell a bizarre product, or to attract the interest of the visitor, as Zarkia (Zarkia cited in Boissevain ed. 1996:161) notes. On the other hand, guides represent the “real”, specialist interpretation, and can not easily escape from it. I see the locals as representing the informal, unauthorised part of the performance, and the guides as representing the formal, authorised one. Therefore, subjectivities, motives and impact on group change accordingly. What I understood while doing part of my fieldwork agrees with Bruner, saying that “although individuals construct their own meanings, recurring patterns and generalisations clearly emerged” (Bruner 2005: 166). Even though some visitors were challenging the guides by asking different questions on Aphrodite’s worship in Cyprus, most of them just followed the guide and listened to the narrative, without having any doubts about it and by the end of the tour they were feeling fulfilled.

Regarding locals, I would argue that they desire their cities to be promoted as part of Cyprus’ cultural tourism and they insist on better organisation and promotion of the Aphrodite’s cultural routes. Visitors who are usually interested in this specific segment of tourism in Cyprus and especially at Paphos area, go sight-seeing in groups with specialised guides, they are not noisy, they do not cause any damages and most

importantly they do not use the areas (mostly archaeological sites) that are used by locals; therefore, I noticed that they are always welcomed by the locals. The local authorities and the people that have been interviewed for the purposes of this paper revealed proudness and they feel very lucky for having sites related to Aphrodite close to their communities. They stressed their desire to show this “culture” to everyone interested. Most of the locals I interviewed did not mention the profits of tourism when it comes to Aphrodite. My fieldwork experience encourages me to agree with Cohen (1988) saying that “by marketing their culture, people (re)discover their own history and traditions and begin to realise their own worth”, something that I have never realised as a native in Cyprus. During the same process, self-consciousness is increased among hosts (Nogues Pedregal cited in Boissevain ed. 1996:56) and the host-guest or we-they relationship diminishes. Even though the Routes were initiated and designed by a Scientific Committee constituted by the elites of Cyprus’ culture, the locals still feel it as their own culture, their own project.

I will now turn my attention to a third level of engagement, one that involves interacting with tourist and tourism professionals simultaneously. As an anthropologist, I found myself in a very interesting positionality working with the two kinds of informants mentioned above. This proved to be a unique experience: I was moving in a field site with various sites, in a fluid and flexible space. My informants were part of a group which is moving in space following a route that unites different sites. Marcus (1995:97) characterised a similar practice as “multi-sited ethnography”, as the one designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact drives the argument of the ethnography”. Even though my ethnography was multi-sited, this project did not involve the degree of habitation within a community. According to Marcus, multi-sited ethnography arises in response to empirical changes in the world and therefore to transformed locations of cultural production. Multi-sited fieldwork is usually used for studying people in their home countries and abroad, e.g. labour migration (Lewellen 2002). In my case, the study is being held in one country, Cyprus, but in many sites.

I followed the tours with the guides and tourists, in order to write a text after the tours, at the end of the ethnographic process. I had to share the experience of the tour and at the same time, as a native, I was part of the experience. The experience of the two groups (tourists, professionals and locals) and of the landscape had a direct impact on me and on the writing of the text afterwards. As Coffey (1999) believes, “fieldwork research and textual practice construct, reproduce and implicate selves, relationships and personal identities and therefore we can not separate the researcher from the social and intellectual context of fieldwork”. I had the respondents’ effect because of my close involvement to them, while at the same time I was identifying with the route. I was trying to link all the sites and to marry all those groups of respondents in order to write a new text, which must be as much representative of the whole experience as possible. This was a different and complex procedure but also very interesting and challenging to me and most importantly, I felt that without my text the stories and the experience of those groups would be lost; “the process of textualisation is one of the major ways in which anthropologists assign meaning to their experiences and give them value” (Moore 1994: 118).

What added more interest and at the same time complexity in my positionality is that I am practicing what many anthropologists understand as “anthropology at home”. If we

consider the definition of anthropology at home as doing anthropology in your home country, from a geographical perspective, I have to accept that I am doing anthropology at home. On the other hand, my subjectivity as an anthropologist at home is not the one which might be expected. I follow groups of foreigners in other cities of Cyprus, in which I don't maintain any links or friendship or personal associations, and the sites included in Aphrodite's routes are not, strictly speaking, my home. Even though I am working for the Cyprus Tourism Organisation, a semi-governmental organisation, the Aphrodite Cultural Routes are not under my responsibilities as a tourist officer and never were. Hence, while doing anthropology at home, having European informants of about the same class with me, I can not totally agree with Nakhleh (1991) arguing that as an insider you do not "experience the traditional problem, which confronts all outsider anthropologists of acquiring a new role that is within the comprehension of the community being studied".

However, what I experienced as an interesting twist during my fieldwork was the recognition of my Cypriot identity by both tourists and professional informants. My Cypriot identity encouraged both groups to share with me their problems and expectations from the touristic product in general, and communicate with me their short or long term identification with the route. Their diverging points of views complicated my own engagement as a researcher committed to represent both groups, and added complexity in the process of ethnography making. All these considerations have led me to appreciate anthropological research in multi-sited tourism as a particularly challenging kind of research.

Conclusion:

During the course of my fieldwork, I followed successive groups of tourists who came to Cyprus to visit the Aphrodite's Cultural Routes, which is consisted of a number of known localities, nature sites, museums associated with the ancient Goddess and her connection with the island. My fieldwork experience focused on a similar tourist setting, including the same physical landscape, and the same team of tourist professionals, but different informants coming from various European countries and diverse socio-cultural contexts. Aphrodite's route unravel itself to me as a constant, open-ended encounter where tourists, guides, local people and myself, as the anthropologist were attempting to come to terms with the same landscape, but diverge levels of engagement and points of view. I had to acknowledge first the short-term engagement of the tourists, who see the narrative of the tour like a story with a beginning and an end; second, the long-term engagement of the professionals and locals (especially the guides), who continuously adapt their narrative according to the interests and expectations of the tourists, and whose engagement with the route remains an open and continuous process, and finally, my own dissimilar points of view. This was for me the biggest challenge of my fieldwork; as I soon realised I was becoming part of the fieldwork experience itself. I was, thus, forced to incorporate the tourists' complete experience with the professionals' open and incomplete engagement into a unique anthropological experience, which was neither complete, nor incomplete, but one that attempted to bridge different subjectivities and points of view. Complicated as such can be any tourism research in multi-sited settings.

I would like to stress that with this paper I do not represent the Cyprus Tourism Organisation or anyone else but my self.

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