

Going tourist.  
Tourism and translation of local cultures

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### Introduction

Within the topic related to culture, tourism and sustainable development, this paper focuses on the notion of tourist translation of local cultures. In particular, it analyses some of the cultural processes tourism development can trigger in those territories the European Commission (2003) has defined as “no-traditional tourist destinations”. In this definition it is meant to include those places that: *(a)* were not interested by mainstream tourism in the past *(b)* remained peripheral compared to industrialised urban areas *(c)* are usually characterised by micro communities and sparse population. Most of these realities are often part of a protected area. That is why the considerations here made can be referred to eco-tourism<sup>1</sup> in general and in particular to that kind of tourism that looks to both natural and cultural patrimonies (that is to local heritage), in order to experiment with new models of fair development. In analysing the social changes this type of tourism requires, the article reviews theoretical concepts of authenticity and cultural sustainability, as to propose an ideal-typical process of intelligent tourist translation of local heritages.

Post-materialist values, along with the possibilities offered by the green economy, if on the one side have widely broaden the range of tourist choices, on the other one have given these places a chance to “go tourist”, that is to look for new possibilities of development related to tourism, by facing the challenge to valorise territorial intelligence as a possible way out from the crisis of traditional rural systems.

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<sup>1</sup> The term of eco-tourism is used in relation with the definition suggested by TIES (The International Ecotourism Society): «Ecotourism is responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people [...] [It] is about *uniting conservation, communities, and sustainable travel*. This means that those who implement and participate in ecotourism activities should follow the following ecotourism principles:

- Minimize impact.
- Build environmental and cultural awareness and respect.
- Provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts.
- Provide direct financial benefits for conservation.
- Provide financial benefits and empowerment for local people.
- Raise sensitivity to host countries' political, environmental, and social climate» ([www.ecotourism.org](http://www.ecotourism.org)).

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In fact, tourists' new demands and interest in living an experience of alternative travelling, particularly focused on the diversity of local cultures, are more likely to be satisfied in areas that have not been too contaminated by urban homologation. For these new shapes of tourism good services and wild natural landscapes are no longer enough. Tourists are more and more demanding and well prepared about the tourist experience they are going to live. That is why their demand requires a whole quality cultural program, widely integrated and able to go the monothematic perspective over (Jelinčić 2009). The turning point of this contribution is focused on local communities<sup>2</sup> response to such new scenarios.

If nowadays the input to move people around the world is not only represented by the location itself but also by the tangible and intangible sources they can find in a place, people living/investing in that place need eventually to transform those goods into "tourist goods", giving them a recognizable brand. As a matter of fact, to own a "typical" and specific patrimony it is not enough in order to become a tourist destination (Savoja 2009). Otherwise, each place *would* be a tourist one. Instead, we assume that even if each place *could* be a tourist one, only those who get to this voluntary choice can actually "go tourist".

Thanks to the possibilities tourist encounter can further, cultural difference can become an important source for social development because it comes to represent the value upon which tourist experience gains its social sense. So, on a sociological level, these possibilities can be translated into new processes of the "localness making". When a regional society decides to turn into a tourist destination it opens the scene to new and different social forces. Some of those are already within the system. They may be active, but they may also be latent ones. Some others, instead, are completely external and try to become part of the environment. In any case, the territory becomes like a social arena where different influences (that cannot be considered as native of the local system) play an important role. The ways the system metabolises these forces is now a central issue for a sociological theory of tourism more and more oriented in analysing development and social change.

In other words, tourism positions itself as a condition according to which local societies have to re-elaborate their own identities, also in relation with their social sense of place and belonging. As a matter of fact, that same site will have to be shared with new travelling communities that will consider it not only as a space for "ordinary way of life" but also for "extra-ordinary" experience. In fact, as also Jean Remy (2000) underlines, the tourist dimension is tightly related to interstitial living and it is characterised by an exceptional and momentary rupture with daily rhythms.

According to such a perspective, the social identity of a territory is not to be considered as a starting point, but rather as an ongoing process which tourism may trigger. That is, the possibilities and the chances tourist market can offer are the basis from which a local community begins to re-think its social and cultural identity "touristically".

The essential requirement for tourist development is represented from a complete revision of the social organization of a region, which firstly aims to make all the latent resources evident

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<sup>2</sup> In this paper the concept of community is used according to its dynamic and relational meaning. As well as the notions of border, belonging and localness, also community is to be considered in its never-stopping social negotiations. Therefore, it is not to be considered like a "thing" nor like an object with an independent existence, but, rather, as a dimension that is articulated through actions, discourse and symbols (Abram S., Waldren J., Macleod D.V.L. – eds – 1997).

ones. Making it an ideal-typical one, it could be said that the process of tourist conversion of a locality could be articulated into three stages that work together as coexisting conditions:

- 1) The development of planning commitment from all the actors involved in the process (citizens, institutions, tourist operators, economic operators, volunteers)
- 2) The elaboration of tourist markers within the translation of culture. In this stage local goods function as territorial trademarks.
- 3) The implementation of the cooperation level among social actors for the recognition and the social confirmation of tourist trademarks.

According to such a development path, tourism works as an engine, aiming to favour a process of internal branding (Wagner, Peters, Schuckert 2009). It generates a sort of «reflexive circle»; whereas the brand is a new interpretation of pre-existing local identity, the new identity is itself modified and modifiable along the time just because of the brand (Vardanega 2009).

## **1. Tourist translation of local heritage**

How a local heritage is translated touristically? What does “going tourist” mean?

Firstly, these processes have to do with the necessity of translating own culture and its elements (to be meant in a sociological and anthropological sense) into a specific code that acquires its tourist gist when it comes to show a trans-cultural and dialogical character. To translate a local culture, in fact, does not only mean to re-elaborate local elements in other people's language. Rather it means to enlighten their logics through others' languages (Geertz 1983). That helps in keeping the inner sense of things notwithstanding the required changing. Despite the awareness of cultural identity both guests' and hosts' communities might have been elaborating on their own, tourist encounter inevitably brings to the creation of a new identitarian sense as the product of that encounter itself. That generates a cultural transfer according to which the signification and the image of a territory can be considered co-constructed. Thanks to this co-construction that eventually turns into interpretation and translation, the comprehension of local cultures can be facilitated.

Even if at different levels and giving it a different value, all the members of a small society, since belonging to the social circle living in the same territory, can recognise the meaning and the value of the heritage that have been accumulated and elaborated along local history. So to speak in simmelian terms, the sense of belonging to a specific place is also based on the mutual sharing of several «assumptions» through which «one can look at another as through a veil» (Simmel 1908). In other words, when a subject's identity is in front of another subject belonging to the same social circle, it does not need to be so explicit and dialogical because much part of it is understandable just because those two identities "are part of the same particular world". They interpret their culture using the same symbols and those symbols do not need to be translated for them. The assumptions Simmel refers to certainly relate to rules, values, languages, but we could also consider the making of heritage as part of the same

process. If contemporary tourists increasingly require experiencing local "worlds" in their "authentic" happening as a way of responsible tourism, then local cultures need to remove "their veil" and to work out how to make those patrimonies less inevitable and automatic, that is more evident and clear for the people outside the circle.

What goods have to "go tourist"? How could it be possible to make them so? Whose responsibility is for those development actions? Sooner or later, if they want to challenge tourism opportunities, local actors will have to face those questions and others too. According to such a perspective, heritage rather than being an ascriptive quality of the tourist offer is instead a pure convention related to the actual circumstances and to relations making.

When we speak about the transformation of local cultures and their tourist translation, here the debate becomes very vivid. In fact, many anthropologists have often seen in tourism a risk of deculturation and defunctionalization. It has been said that economic interests related to tourist promotion have often the best of cultural values, eventually causing a misunderstanding of patrimonies and their folklorisation. As to say that when a local culture becomes a tourist one it becomes less "authentic". The translation of culture in fact would cause a shift from what Lindholm (2008) calls the "really real" to what Mac Cannel has defined the "staged authenticity" (1973). But if we go back to Simmel once again, and to the importance he gives to representations in the relation me-other for the shaping of sociality, then we have to assume that the re-coding should not necessarily be meant as a demystification. The tourist copy of reality, when rightly interpreted, could communicate much clearer messages than reality itself does. Trying to explain how to intend the concept of "staged authenticity", even MacCannell tells the reader that sometimes «mystification is required to create a sense of "real reality"».

Is there a possible way out from this inevitable ambiguity? According to a deconstructionist approach the solution could be in eliminating the category of authenticity because it gives no information at all. In fact, at the same time nothing is authentic (being constantly changing) and everything is authentic, being the product of a social construction.

Notwithstanding, some different and more interesting solutions can be found by reading the indications Achille Ardigò (1991) gives about the valorisation of local cultures. According to his approach, a dialogical translation of local cultures and traditions can be possible avoiding the risk of faking them when it responds to two main conditions:

1. an appropriate hermeneutics which aims to re-interpret a certain patrimony or a cultural deposit in a philologically right way and which also wants to grasp the inner and original sense of those cultures and traditions to be revisited
2. the insert of those tradition in a human and social contemporary scenario. All that aims to look for solutions to some problems related to both contemporary human condition and to the relation single individuals and small groups have with the social system and the environment.

In this way, the concept of authenticity of culture can set free from that crystallising and monolithic dimension and gets to represent the result of a reflexive activity of graft of the respect for historical social memory on "alive and contemporary" human and social stances. In other words, it reveals its relational dimension more clearly than a notion based instead on an objective nature.

Within the frame of some contemporary trends in leisure consumption, micro-local "vital world" wield a particular appeal and express their highest potentiality when they become like a «symbolic unit, able to represent specific social relations» (Savoja 2008) and to re-activate face to face modalities of encounter and dialogue. So, in order to realize the tourist identity of a place, not only its patrimony of material and immaterial goods is needed, but also its socio-relational capital, as the most appropriate basis for the making of different atmospheres from destination to destination (Savelli 1992).

### **3. Cultural sustainability and authenticity.**

Going back to the debate about the role of authenticity in tourism development, some proposals could be done in order to suggest new perspectives for social research in the field of territorial valorisation. Sustainability and authenticity might match at some point, getting to the proposal of a path of "sustainable staging of authenticity". It could be said that local cultures and traditions could avoid to fall into the risk of demystification when their tourist staging is the result of a symmetric relation between local stances and tourist desires. That is, when tourists' demands and natives' socio-cultural-economic needs are set on the same level. When both hosts' and guests' requests can be mediated. In other words, when tourist translation is not subjected to the pure economical and instrumental goal.

Trying to think about what an ideal typical process could be, it could be said that a sustainable path of tourist staging of reality can be reached and obtained when several conditions are respected. That is:

1. when the functionalization of the patrimony keeps on having part of its original sense and when its reason for being does not depend only on the market's sake.
2. when the economical aspect represents only a "natural" fall on of a path which is primarily oriented toward the rescue of historical and social memory
3. the valorisation acquires a value in terms of re-embedness of identitarian processes of «ecological defence and intelligent conservation of those habitats that are culturally rich» (Ardigò 1991).

Furthermore, it should be clear that such a process cannot be left to the case, that is, it cannot be totally spontaneous nor a top-directed and top-managed one. Instead it is tidily linked to its organizational dimension, in terms of social construction and participation. "To organize a territory and its tourist valorisation in a social way" means to mediate the different actions brought up by different social groups, from civil society to policy makers, from private entrepreneurs to producers, from institutions to cultural operators. In other words, it means to support a process of multilevel governance. In this sense, local identity configures itself as the product of a symmetrical relation between citizens and institutions, between single actors and the system.

If it is true that the experiences related to local tourist development have been configuring themselves like an institution of services aiming to foster «cultural accessibility» (Savelli 1992) and if it is true that tourist systems shape themselves by redefining social life borders,

then it is clear that local communities have to re-organize their working toward this goal without submit or delegate to others a space of action that cannot belong but to themselves (Pardi 1992).

This organizational level should find its pivot in some adequate cultural policies and could come to work as social mediation when it is able to regulate single subjects' actions with the functions of systemic control. In other words, organization is a means thanks to whom local identity represents the product of a symmetrical relation among citizens and institutions, among single actors and the system.

On the other hand, the miss of this organizational dimension can bring two opposed risks. The first one can happen when the process is a strict spontaneous one which is only spread in the bottom and limited to private initiative. It is represented by localism, to be meant as the closure of a local society to global stances and to intercultural dialogue. The second one can happen when, on the contrary, the process is only left to institutional initiatives. In this case a patrimony risks to loose its being reason and its social sense.

### **Some conclusions.**

So that a cultural-tourist politics is pursued adequately and in a sustainable way, some important resources are needed:

- a strong inter-subjective motivation and enthusiasm able to re-adopt and to cultivate also those traditions that have lost their spontaneous continuity in socializing practices and in social memory between one generation and the following;

- a good amount of creativity, and hermeneutic capability able to find the new social sense of traditions without losing their old reason of being;

- a collective subject who commits itself with communication both inside and outside the local community, able to valorise those elements of local cultures that have been rescued.

Only when accorded to the above requirements, a model of tourism development can be considered as both sustainable and intelligent because it is the only one able to make local subjects as the real actors of the process, beside their role as producers and promoters. In this way, the valorisation of local patrimonies can be considered as productive of territorial intelligence because it aims to renew and capitalise social relations and networks both within and outside the local border.

Then, it can be said that a patrimony is translated both touristically and responsibly (that is in an intelligent way) when it is ready to satisfy the requirements due to tourist encounter; first of all a socio-cultural change based on dialogue, both within the community (that is going to dispute about its heritage re-construction), and on the border between inside and outside, that is on the tourist scene.

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