SHORT REPORT

A snapshot of tourism in Greenland

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In the twenty-first century people are looking for exotic places to visit, places that they consider to be the last frontiers. Tourists are sometimes led to believe that these places are untouched by the globalisation of the world’s economy. Outsiders visiting an indigenous community in Greenland are led through the ‘front area’ where Inuit in traditional clothing greet them and perform a drum dance for a short time. Unknown to the tourist the drum dancer may be insulting the intruders as he sings in his native language. This may be a form of resistance as the Inuit are suffering from western policies as well as an extremely high level of suicide and alcoholism. The tourist who sees housing, dog sleds, and a drum dance comes away with a ‘snapshot’ of what indigenous culture is like. Once tourists leave, the community’s ‘back area’ — those parts that only insiders experience — becomes accessible once again.

Keywords: heritage tourism; resistance; Greenland

Heritage can matter

The transformation of the world’s political economy over the past century has endangered many communities and has threatened tangible and intangible forms of heritage that are important for providing a sense of place and identity. At the turn of this century there were 21,000,000 refugees who had fled their native lands to other countries to escape violence. In addition, there are also millions of people who are displaced because of natural disasters (Oliver-Smith 2006, p. 45). The World Bank reports that development projects displace approximately 10,000,000 people a year. Many of these people suffer as their basic human and environmental rights are being violated. Ethnic nationalism, globalised forms of development, energy development, and urban renewal also threaten the heritage of millions of people (Oliver-Smith 2006, p. 46).

Smith and Eadington (1992, p. 9) point out that in many undeveloped areas around the world there are winners and losers associated with heritage tourism development. The winners are outsiders who often alienate people, masking inequalities existing in the present day community. I am thinking about multinational corporations that come to exotic places, develop hotels, and dictate how the local heritage is constructed. Democracy is not in play and the local community has very little input into how their heritage should be marketed. While some members of the community may see the development of heritage from the outside as a boost to the local...
economy, others can easily become alienated and disenfranchised and resist the imposed heritage in a variety of ways. In this case I show how outsiders have influenced the message that visitors receive in an Inuit village. While the tour of the village is scripted by a European corporation, the use of the Inuit language may veil a form of resistance.

Resistance in the arctic

We have all experienced places where an outside corporation controls a place’s heritage as it dictates the tourist experience. I want to explain one experience I had in an exotic place—Kulusuk, Greenland. Today, about 56,000 people live in Greenland, and the ‘backside’, or the eastern portion of the island where Kulusuk is located, contains about 4000 people. The region has a stark beauty with a rugged terrain, glaciers, and icebergs within eyesight. The tundra blooms in the spring and the summer. Only narrow portions of the coast are habitable as the Greenland Icecap, which covers more than 85% of the world’s largest island, is a short distance from the village of about 300 people (Goldbach 2000, p. 261). Visiting Greenland is what Smith (1989, p. 4) describes as a form of ethnic tourism where visitors search for exotic people to view native customs and rituals as well as purchase native wares and curios.

There were several migrations to Greenland, the first starting at about 4500 years ago and the second migration occurred about 2500 years ago. About 1000 years ago three different cultures arrived in Greenland, all about the same time. The Dorset people arrived about the eighth-ninth century AD and settled in the north and northeastern portion of Greenland. The Thule people arrived in about the tenth century and settled on the eastern and western coasts. The current native inhabitants of Greenland are descendants of the Thule immigration. The Norse people were part of the third wave of immigration to Greenland. Eric the Red arrived in southern Greenland c. AD 985, and settlers from Iceland and Norway followed (Nuttall 1994, pp. 2–3). He committed one of history’s greatest hoaxes by naming the island Greenland, despite its cold climate and with the majority of its landmass covered with ice. Church records of a wedding in 1408 are the last documentation of Norse people living on the island.

In 1721, the Danish re-established European trading posts on the west coast of Greenland. In 1979 Greenland was declared an autonomous nation within the Kingdom of Denmark, named Kalaallit Nunaat (meaning Land of the People), with its own national flag and Prime Minister. Denmark still subsidises most of Greenland’s economy and almost everything found in Greenland supermarkets and stores is from Denmark (Nuttall 1994).

A majority of the eastern Greenland families are engaged in some form of subsistence hunting, although seal skin exports collapsed when North American and European anti-sealing laws began in the 1970s and 1980s. The high rate of unemployment and seasonal depression has led to high levels of alcoholism, suicide and domestic violence (Nuttall 1994, pp. 20–22). Alcohol consumption per capita is double that of Denmark, and suicides account for over 10% of all deaths, an astonishing number that makes it the highest rate in the world. While this area appears to have been converted to Christianity at the turn of the twentieth century, many of the native traditions, including shamanism and belief in the spirit world, are still part of the dress, song, and material culture of the Greenlandic Inuit (Nuttall 1994, p. 5).
Several years ago I visited the villages of Kulusuk and Tasiilaq, spending 4 July in the latter village. Kulusuk harbour is open only a few months out of the year and fragments of broken sheets of ice still floated in the harbour. The villages anticipated new cargo to stock the empty shelves and freezers in the only grocery store (Figure 1). While most tourists to this region stay for the day and return to Iceland or Denmark, we remained for a week to observe the everyday "non-tourist" life of the village. I was in search of authenticity in the back regions of the village. Dean MacCannell (1976, pp. 94–95) expands upon Erving Goffman’s (1959) work to write about back regions and front regions. Front regions are places where hosts and visitors meet. Back regions are places that are not necessarily for public viewing. These areas may seem to be more intimate, real, and authentic to outsiders (Boissevain 1996, p. 8).

Walking through the village I saw the local Inuit in tee-shirts and blue jeans in 50-degree farenheit temperatures going about their daily chores. A few intoxicated men leaned on a building that served as the local bar. With the doors wide open I heard the jukebox blaring hard rock music, although I could not identify the tune. A woman retrieved water from the communal pump, and several men worked on repairing a sled, perhaps getting ready for a winter hunt. Several dozen huskies howled endlessly, until they finally tired. These seemed like the daily routines of the community. I felt like I had entered the back region of this Inuit village, although I did not venture into the bar.

Then a Scandinavian Airlines propeller plane arrived from Iceland. I noticed the lady at the pump hurried back to her house and closed the door. Someone pulled the plug for the jukebox, and the men hanging outside the bar went inside. The men

Figure 1. The village of Kulusuk in July. The roadway through the village leads through the town and to the point where the drum dancing exhibition occurs. Photograph by Paul A. Shackel.
working on their sleds quickly disappeared and one changed into traditional clothing. About 50 Japanese tourists walked with their guide through the coastal edge of Kulusuk, which suddenly and mysteriously became deserted. This trail passed a few houses with sleds, toys, and some debris in the front yards, giving the tourists the impression that they were passing through the back region. Most of the villagers went inside their houses, some looking through windows at the procession, although a few children stood around and watched the invasion of their village. When the Japanese tourist reached a peninsular or the front area of the community with their Scandinavian Airlines tour guide an Inuit drum dancer greeted them.

The songs associated with drum dancing have been recorded throughout northern Canada as well as from both northern and eastern Greenland (Figure 2). The songs are performed at social gatherings, for shamanistic ritual, and for ‘drum-fights’, or song duels. A drum fight occurs when a dancer is paired with a song cousin, with whom he would exchange mocking songs. The song duel could also serve as a court of law and the winner was decided by the largest applause from a gathering; ‘such song contests were sometimes followed by fistfights or other competitive games’ (Encyclopedia of Music in Canada 2010). One Drum Dance song is translated into English and is in the Ammassalik Museum:

Drum-Song Against an Angry Husband

My enemy calls me a cannibal
he says I feed on human flesh
my friends, that’s not true
my enemy calls me a thief
he says I stole his dear wife
my friends, I did not steal her
and it was not wrong to do so
for I am a better singer
and he did not have songs to keep her
only now does he sing to her
who cried in her tent all alone
My friends, she is my wife now.

(East Greenland 2010)

Most courtrooms in Greenland have a drum hanging on its walls – a symbol of its traditional role in settling disputes. A drum dancer logo hangs in Greenland’s National Library, signifying the power of legends and storytelling (East Greenland 2010).

According to the Encyclopedia of Music in Canada (2010), ‘From the 1970s on drum dances have been social celebrations. ... Shamanistic associations with drum dancing are no longer maintained, although the vocabulary of song texts includes ancient words and phrases associated with the shaman.’ The shaman could cast spells and communicate with the spirit world. However, Christianisation of the area put an end to the public use of shamanism.

Drum dances are often described in the tourism literature as a representation of something else, like a whale hunt, or the celebration of a gathering. The themes are often palpable to the modern tourist. Matthew Kurtz (2010) provides a description
found in the tourist literature about the drum dance several decades ago. The literature states,

One of the most fascinating aspects of the trip is the exhibition of native dancing. This exotic ritual is performed to the saturnine beat of skin tom toms ... Each motion is representative of an event and the dances portray experiences from the life in the villages or of the family. Some are triumphant demonstrations of a successful hunt, while others somberly depict a great tragedy. (Barrer quoted in Kurtz 2010, p. 159)

The description helps to paint a stereotype of Inuit life and some of the other original functions of the drum dance for shamanistic purposes, or the 'drum fights', are rarely acknowledged in the tourism literature.

The drum dancer in Kulusuk performed several songs for about 20 minutes with several of the village's children sitting and watching the performance (Figures 3 and 4). Drum dances make for some striking images, with dynamic poses and traditional costumes. Songs are accompanied by the rhythmic beat of a membrane-covered frame drum. The act was well photographed by the tourists and it served as the 'snap shot' experience of Kulusuk. The tourists left their real world to experience what they perceive to be exotic.

I asked a Danish worker who lived in the community and knew English as well as Greenlandic if she knew the words in any of the songs. She replied by saying that she believed there were a few bad words and insults about the visitors in at least one of the songs. Not knowing they were a target of an insult the tourists politely applauded and then retraced their steps back to the plane, taking a few more snapshots of the Inuit housing, the beautiful stark scenery, and a few Inuit children they bribed with candy to pose for photos. As the propellers cranked up the villagers
Figure 3. Drum dancer in Kulusuk, Greenland. Photograph by Ville Miettinen, July 2006.

Figure 4. Drum dancer surrounded by village children in Kulusuk, Greenland. Photograph by Paul A. Shackel.
returned to their daily chores – in blue jeans and tee-shirts. The jukebox at the bar was plugged in and the men went back to their stations standing outside the bar. The women were once again retrieving water for their households and the repairs to the sleds continued.

What we probably observed was some form of covert resistance. Those in the community involved in the tourist industry depend on the good will of the visitor, so they are reluctant to confront them directly. However, being invaded by people from the outside, even for a short time, the community’s rights, customs, and daily activities are compromised. They defended themselves through the drum dance. ‘Examples of covert, low-key resistance are sulking, grumbling, obstruction, gossip, ridicule, and surreptitious insults directed by the weak at the more powerful’ (Boissevain 1996, p. 14). The daily struggles of the weak against the powerful avoid direct defiance and yet if the signals and meaning are clear the resistance can be understood (Scott 1985).

The visitors left Greenland without seeing the back region of Kulusuk – including the overwhelming poverty, unemployment, and the high rate of alcoholism. They did not experience the daily routines of life or the struggle of the Inuit to survive under western influence. They had left Greenland thinking they had an authentic experience. If the drum dancer really did curse the visitors it may have had something to do with the change in traditional life, and having to accommodate the intruders. It is clear that westerners have changed the lifestyles of the community in many ways and the banning of seal fur imports into the United States served a devastating blow to the Inuit economy. The presentation of heritage through the performance of the drum dance comes with a small twist of mockery from the local community.

Conclusion

About 12% of all global economic activity is related to tourism, and this industry has immense power to shape the heritage of any place. Many visitors see the arctic region as peripheral to the international economy, and the world’s heritage with minimal global significance. Yet indigenous people are attracting tourists and the numbers have increased significantly over the past decade (Kurtz 2010).

The question that often arises in these communities is: which heritage is best to preserve and how to minimise the impact of tourism on traditional communities. Some of the problems associated with tourism are the loss of resources, access, rights, and privacy as well as the denigration of local culture (Butler 1992, p. 33). What I saw in Kulusuk was a type of cultural fiction that, when revealed, showed some of the disturbances and uncertainties that a community has about itself and its place in the world. The tourist experience was dictated by an outside corporation and the tourists left believing that they had experienced an authentic activity in an Inuit village. The focus was on the exotic, and the residents complied with traditional costume and song – for some cash.

The Scandinavian Airlines guide served as a form of authority, dictating what was worth viewing and experiencing. The guide created a ‘snap shot’ of specific memories. At the same time the experience is seen as genuine and the activity seen as authentic (Urry 1990). The recovery, celebration, and interpretation of the past are necessary components of sustaining local identity and a sense of place, although heritage can be easily contested by local people through various forms of resistance.
Notes on contributor

Paul Shackel is Professor and Chair of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Maryland and founding Director of the Center for Heritage Resource Studies. He is interested in the ways material items are used by individuals and groups in order to create social relations and group identity. His publications include *Culture Change and the New Technology* (Plenum 1996), *Archaeology and Created Memory: Public History in a National Park* (Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishing, 2000), *Memory in Black and White: Race, Commemoration, and the Post-Bellum Landscape* (AltaMira, 2003), *They Worked Regular*: *Craft, Labor, Family and the Archaeology of an Industrial Community* (with Matthew Palus, Tennessee, 2006), and *An Archaeology of American Labor and Working Class Life* (Florida, 2009).

References


