THE SEMIOTICS OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL AUTHENTICITY: HOW CULTURES CHANGE TO FIT THEIR MEDIA IMAGE

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[Editor's note: This article breaks in style and presentation with those usually published in the Journal of Natal and Zulu History. However historians today have to deal increasingly with questions of cultural authenticity, performance, heritage and tourism, and consequently it was felt that this article, produced within the context of cultural and media studies, would be of interest to readers of this journal.]

This study examines the relationship between media constructions of First and indigenous peoples, and the 'performative primitives' who are employed in 'cultural' villages in the South African province of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN).

Issues of representation, cultural policy, and ways of staging authenticity interact via three key discourses, and their associated social practices:

i) media (mainly cinema, TV, coffee table books, curio stores, pamphlets and brochures, and now the World Wide Web);

ii) manifestations of heritage and history; and

iii) cultural tourism and responses to it (spontaneous, economic, developmental).

Specifically, I examine the ways in which these three discourses intersect via media and cultural tourism, reconstituting both modern and customary narratives into 'history'. In other words,

i) how the marketing of cultural villages, authenticity and indigenous artifacts replicate common sense discourses about Same (Europe) and Other (Africa) (cf. eg. Kohn 1994; Hamilton 1992); and

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1 I am indebted to the German Association for Semiotic Studies for a grant to participate in its conference. Research assistance for this paper and related projects has been provided by CMS research students: Jeffrey Sehume and Anthea Simoes have contributed substantially during field trips; Arnold Shepperson with discussion on theory and semiotics; and further field assistance from Lisa Linton. This project has been funded by the Natal University Research Fund.

2 The term is Dean MacCannell's (1990), which he developed with regard to the negative effects of cultural tourism in Papua New Guinea.
how western stereotypes about ‘people’ as ‘ primitives’ impact
conservation and development policies.

Cultural tourism commodifies the encounter between tourists and
indigenous people, and is a growing sector of all economies. This activity
involves both: a) formal entrepreneurial responses via tourism capital; and b)
under-resourced and remote villages, where such activities are little more
than ad hoc survival strategies. As such, the social and cultural impacts of
cultural tourism need to be studied to develop policy and strategies that
locate the staging of ‘authenticity’ within an educational framework.
‘Performers’ themselves need to engage the perceptions and anticipations of
visitors who might bring with them all manner of stereotypes to the
encounter.

The idea of pursuing cultural tourism arose from my field observation
in the Kalahari (1994-1999) with regard to San responses to tourists
(Tomaselli 1999a; 1999b; Simoes 1999; Sehume 1999). Analysis of
conservation and identity is also of importance with regard to the way that
cultural tourism is promoted within the semiotics of eco-tourism (cf. Draper
1998; Draper and Maré 1999). I return to these points below.

SELF AND SEMIOTICS: THE NATURE OF THE TOURIST ENCOUNTER

My methodological framework is an extension of anthropological and
media semiotics. 3 Irving Goffman’s (1990) theory of social performance and
social roles is applied to explain field observation and the spatial architecture
of living museums and similar cultural sites. Anthropological theory
developing Goffman’s presentation of self in everyday life is applied to the
discourses and practices of cultural tourism in ‘exotic places’. 4

Peirce developed the idea of the phaneron as the possibility for
context/text/mental interpretants (See Phaneroscopic Table). The phaneron
is ‘the collective total of all that is in any or any sense present to the mind,
regardless of whether it corresponds to any real thing or not’ (Peirce in
Hartshorne 1.284). This abstraction is an effective conceptual starting point
within which it is possible to accommodate the potential cultural
indeterminacies which exist within native populations in Africa, South

3 My framework is a visual anthropological semiotics which proceeds from American philosopher, CS
methods’ (semiotics) is both transdisciplinary and incorporates context. Other contributors to this research
have drawn further on Foucauldian perspectives in terms of discourse and questions of identity and identity
formation (Simoes (1999) and Sehume (1999)).

4 Such theories have been developed by Dean MacCannell (1989) himself a film-maker and visual
anthropologist, and Valene Smith (1978), among others.

5 Comparable starting points could be Immanuel Kant’s ‘schemata’, Donald Davidson’s (1980)
America, North America and in the Pacific Rim (and, for that matter, between and within these societies and the industrial North).

The concrete encounter of a subject in a phaneron means that what is experienced will incorporate the accumulated consequences of previous differences of experience. The relevant differences are ontological: the history constructed by one section of society will refer to a world not quite the same as that constructed by someone from another part. These constructions are manifested in media, tourism and all kinds of representation. The tendency on the part of viewers of films and TV, for example, to visit cultural sites, TV and film locations and sets (real and reconstructed, which invent plausible reconstructions of the ‘authenticity’ of the Other), people (performative primitives), offers one locus for the commodification of difference. Cultural tourism assumes secondness, trades on myth, and replicates the sense of ‘being-there’.

Third and Fourth World peoples have been argued to be quintessentially the ‘Other’ to the historical ‘Same’ of Europe (Mudimbe 1988). This relationship was predicated upon religious, evolutionary or rationalist differences assumed to define Europeans (the Same) in contradistinction to Africans (the Other). This asymmetrical encounter between Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa has spanned five centuries. The practices in which these differences were made manifest pretty well replicate Europe’s historical consciousness. Over the period of the encounter these practices ranged from and progressed through missionary contact, colonisation, interactions with anthropologists, archaeologists and ethnographic film-makers, through to cultural tourism of the post-colonial era.

SAME AND OTHER; FRONT AND BACK STAGE

Most cultural tourism occurs front stage, the public spaces where the meeting of hosts and guests/tourists is designed to occur. Back stage is where the hosts and performers live, retire, and conduct their own social, leisure and symbolic lives. Cultural and historical villages provide access to the back stages, the previously off-limits areas where spontaneous social intimacy pervades, and where culturally organic activities occur beyond the conventional tourist routes. Kagga Kamma, for example, initially in the late 1980s and early 1990s, gave tourists the impression that what is actually front stage, is really the back, culturally mysterious, region. Front and back were, however, later separated as the San family asked for their living area to be moved out of sight and away from tourist access.
In Shakaland, front and back stages have been artificially joined. The workers and performers live primarily front stage, and tourists are guided through this area at scheduled times. When one couple from Richards Bay asked a guide where the Zulus in Shakaland lived, their response was ‘So, they really do live like this!’ Their preconception of ‘tribal’ people living in primitive affluence was reinforced by the presence at Shakaland of a TV and film set. The meshing of front stage and back stage, however, creates tensions as tourists are unaware of which indigenous dwellings are off-limits, and guides and performers sometimes disagree on cultural conduct. For example, one female Zulu guide in January 1999 was heatedly engaged, in Zulu, by the man playing the role of the ‘chief’. She had failed to ensure that tourists respected gender roles by taking up separate seating arrangements in one of the public areas. What was for her a form of resistance to ‘tradition’ was, for the chief, a transgression of the rhetorical order.

**Movie-Induced Tourism**

Even in the remotest parts of the Kalahari, some Ju/'hoansi villages have (re)constituted cultural sites and performances in cooperation with safari companies in order to earn income. This post-modern thrust towards the internationalisation of cultural tourism has direct relations to film and TV imaging, and coffee table books. One of the unanticipated effects of ‘The Gods Must Be Crazy’ films, for example, was to draw tourists to Bushmanland, often outside of any systematic tourist infrastructure. In contrast, ‘The Sound of Music’ and ‘The Salzburg Connection’ are deliberately mobilised by tourist businesses to attract visitors to Salzburg (Luger 1992).

The ‘Shaka Zulu’ TV series (1981) is used to attract day-trippers and overnights to Shakaland and other KwaZulu-Natal historical and cultural sites. Shakaland was built as the set for the TV series, and then used by the Rural TV network (Burton 1994). The set was subsequently marketed as a tourist destination by a company initially called Films Ltd. The shift into tourism occurred because of a ‘post-Shaka Zulu’ slump in the local film industry. The Shakaland ‘experience’ was promoted also as an educational and conservation site.¹

¹This integration of front and back stages, though restricted and managed in group visitor schedules and tourist access, is partially distinct from Colonial Williamsburg, USA, which historically is a real town in which both normal and tourist functions interact.

²‘Shaka Zulu’ was one of the most successful ever cable TV releases in the USA. ‘John Ross’ and ‘Ipi Tombi’ were also filmed at Shakaland, and pictures of performers in Shakaland are reprinted in a variety of tourist and coffee table books and pamphlets on ‘the Zulu’ in especially English and German. Other Key tourism-inducing films are likely to be ‘Zulu’ (1964), ‘Zulu Dawn’ (1980), and the ‘Shaka Zulu’ (1981) TV series.
Research on movie-induced tourism published in the *Annals of Tourism Research* suggests that huge increases can be expected at the locations and sites associated with successful films (Riley et al 1998). This form of tourism is directed at objects or features which are extraordinary and thus distinguish the ‘site/sight’ of the gaze from others, then the properties of a movie location - whether scenic, historical, or literary - qualify as icons for tourists to gaze upon (Riley et al 1998:920).

Storylines, themes, exciting sequences and human relationships induce tourism in addition to natural scenery attractions. Movie-induced cultural tourism thus operates at the level of ideology, which remakes the already familiar in terms of what the visitor already knows, prior to the actual encounter.

**ACADEMICS AS ANTHRO-TOURISTS**

Academics, missionaries, traders, explorers, writers, photographers and other western travellers historically have conducted themselves as the semiotic vanguard of western imperialism in their interactions with Africa and Africans. The nature of the encounter (being-there, firstness) failed to understand the legitimacy of difference (experience, secondness), which resulted in inappropriate conduct on the part of the Same, and often the destruction of the Other.

The western orientation of the Same’s forms of intelligibility (thirdness) underpinned the development of scientific disciplines concerned with studying the Other such as anthropology, ethnology and geography. Faced with cultures predicated on other kinds of world-views, the victorious ‘scientific’ order of knowledge responded through two, largely exclusive, avenues:

i) the world view and behaviour of the Other was treated as ‘priest-craft’ (Rorty 1980:328) and consequently something to be vanquished. The early history of contact between San and white (and black) settlers who they encountered, for example, is dominated by extermination. It is this same history of extermination, however, which offers the discursive allure for tourists to revisit their own lost innocence and forgotten authenticity, especially as far as Fourth World peoples like the San are concerned. Conversely,

ii) ‘science’ tried to ‘conserve’ the Other in museums, living museums such as Shakaland, and in film, photographs and video, in body through mumification and even in the field itself. This form of activity/doing, directed at remaking a familiar world, is described as ‘death by conservation’ (Gordon 1985). Part of the marketing strategy
used in cultural tourism to Africa, for example, is to foreground the ‘timeless’ pure and unspoiled ‘mystery’ of the Other. In Shakaland and Simunye, for example, tourists are repetitively exhorted by the Zulu guides to inhale smoke from burning herbs in order to commune with the ancestors. At Shakaland, tourists meet a sangoma (indigenous healer) in a smoke-filled hut. When we visited in January 1999, one of the guides explained that he was a ‘real warrior’—that although he grew up in Durban, he wears his warrior outfit there too. Tourists wanted their picture taken with the ‘chief’, and indicated to our researchers that they considered this an ‘authentic’ experience.

However,

iii) a third avenue characterised by post-modernity has collapsed the distinctions between science and priest-craft into a new third, a different form of intelligibility, in which a new final interpretant is generated. This reflexive order locates ethnography at the intersection of these previously opposed discourses. This particular language of conservation is embedded in the mystique of ‘priest-craft’, now labelled by both observers and observed as ‘indigenous knowledge’ (Makgoba 1999), and is evoked by the observers (mainly zoologists and botanists) for ‘scientific’ and development purposes (see Tomaselli 1999).

Though the final interpretant is still ‘named’ and appropriated by western scientific discourse, it now produces new public signs arising from different ways of thinking about the relations between emotional and active rhetorical discourses. While financial in motivation, this new form of intelligibility is ideologically explained in terms of conservation and restoration of the (perhaps romantically assumed) human dignity of the othered (exotic) societies from whom the primitive performers are drawn. Ethnography is then commodified via the language and semiotics of cultural tourism, thinly dressed up in the discourses of science: ‘conservation’, ‘development’ and ‘eco-tourism’.

Finally

iv) semiotic relations between living museums and their surrounding communities are instructive and contradictory. In the Zulu cultural villages, for example, the Zulu guides discuss traditional courtship rituals and explain that the bare breasts of the performing Zulu maidens are indicative of their being unmarried and virgins. Such forms of (undress and associated behavioural patterns, norms, and values are presented as timeless, uncomplicated and prevailing. This form of secondness prevails in guide talks, notwithstanding a civil
war-ravaged Zulu population, the highest incidence of HIV infection in the country, and the world’s highest incidence of rape and sexual assault. To take another example, near Shakaland, which presents itself as an ‘authentic Zulu village and hotel’, we found a square Zulu homestead with ‘Power Ranger’ written in large letters on its front wall. Access to this homestead required a 4X4, and its tenants indicated that Power Ranger referred to the TV Series, ‘Mighty Morphin Power Rangers’. Outside Simunye, in August 1999, we observed a room full of men watching soccer on a battery-powered TV set in a local trading store. These discursive contradictions abound in the vicinity of living museums, and these communities often have interpretations very different from the official PR, or what tourists are told by the tour guides.

Conservation cannot be simply explained with the imagery of colonial puppetry, however (Draper 1998). The Magqubu Ntombela Foundation, for example, aims to attract foreign funding for community-based tourist projects around the game and wilderness reserves in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Dr Ian Player, Deputy Director of the Foundation, for example, defines cultural tourism in terms of the history of definitions of tourism:

‘eco-tourism’ is the latest of terms and my feeling is that eventually the word ‘spiritual-tourism’ will come in as a keyword … for me having taken out over 3 000 people personally, let alone having observed many thousands of tourists over the years, there is this spiritual aspect of Africa which I think should be the basis - and I'm not talking in conventional religious terms - of what we want people to come and experience.  

Player links this spirituality to a longing to return to roots, an essential firstness, indicated perhaps in Africa as the cradle of (a pre-firstness) mankind. This essentially spiritual sense of being-thereness, however, needs to be examined alongside other images of Africa (See eg. Cameron 1994). As V.G. Kiernan (1972:232) maintains, in the imperial age no other African people caught the western imagination more powerfully than the Zulu. This fascination, however, was a blend of admiration and repulsion. Part of the wider research project is to explore such contemporary western curiosity and the ways in which ‘performative primitives’ satisfy it in the nature of the encounter between observers and observed.

In terms of cultural tourism, Draper suggests that eco-tourism involves the management of boundaries. Tourists, he argues, can love something to death, a point also made by Robert Gordon. Where the San (‘Bushmen’) are

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3 Interview with Keyan Tomaselli and Malcolm Draper, 20 May 1999. Player is an internationally renowned conservationist, who offers a Jungian analysis meshed with Zulu indigenous conservation knowledge (Player **).
encountered by tourists as pre-historic evolutionary relics of evolution – "what we were" – the Zulu are presented as a pre-modern people living in a contemporary world (De la Harpe et al 1999). They are separated by both geographical and evolutionary boundaries. Boundaries need to be maintained for the protection of plants and animals, and people. This is possibly why the Kagga Kamma San requested a separation of front and back stages. And, as Vincent Sikhakana, assistant general manager of Simunye, put it, "tourists don't want to live like the Zulu; they only want to visit them". Simunye's experiment of locating some of the tourists within the Zulu umuzi (village), with its cattle kraal, chickens, smoke, and concrete baths filled with hot water on request by Zulu maidens, is not readily accepted by tourists. They prefer to stay across the river in the dedicated tourist rooms, which have running hot water and direct access to the pub and dining area. In semiotic terms, tourists prefer an experience in which they maintain their identity in the face of the Other, while doing what tourists normally do. They don't want to penetrate the thirdness of the Other, and neither do tour guides, as this takes too long, gets in the way of pre-planned travel schedules, and is often uncomfortable, particularly where pre-modern living conditions are replicated, as in parts of Simunye.

The converse also occurs. The Ntombela community itself, for example, wants to live in cement block housing, while accommodating tourists in 'authentic' grass beehive huts with dung floors. Anticipating tourist preferences, however, the community immediately built brick ablutions on hearing about their first foreign visitors, thus inauthentically representing the aesthetics of a 'traditional' umuzi. In this case, the historical Same came to find the Other, only to find that the Other had replicated the housing of the Same for themselves, while accommodating tourists in the housing of the Other, no longer used by the Same. The relation between the observed's encounter and their experience of the Same, resulted in a hybridity in which nothing is 'authentic' any more, even if it appears – or is presented – as such.

CONCLUSION

The relationship between tourism and media can only but intensify in our increasingly hyper-mediated world.

Sustaining culturally stereotypical tourist (and hence western) perspectives on the 'other', like colonialism and neo-colonialism, presents its own form of thirdness. Even if the observed don't really live in the ways in which they present themselves front stage, the asymmetrical power relation that has historically characterised Europe's relations with Africa will continue in terms of the semiotics of representation. The questions become:
who gets to make meaning, who gets to interpret meaning, and who gets to privilege meaning?

REFERENCES


