Chapter 17

Isle of the Dead: A Study of Trunyan Cemetery (Bali)

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ABSTRACT

This essay aims to explain the phenomenon and effect on tourism of the Balinese cemetery in the village of Trunyan, where the dead are not buried. It is a narrative enquiry combined with critical theory largely grounded in the scholarship of dark tourism and communication theory, coupled with content analysis of the online community’s reviews from the TripAdvisor website. The study indicates that (1) connectedness to death suggests the existence of spirituality needed by people, at the same time indicating understanding of mortality; (2) social connections developed as a result of visiting Trunyan cemetery not only bring self-awareness and awareness of others, revolving around intrapersonal communication about spirituality and interpersonal communication among members of the online community, but also illustrate the development of dark tourism and conceptualise the role of tourists in building authentic experience as the essence of a death site’s brand image.

INTRODUCTION

The expression “Lonely in a crowd” indicates how the quality of relationships matters, and signifies a much deeper existence from postmodern perspectives where people seek for feelings shared by others. This aspect represents the roots of reciprocity as it was studied by ethnographers in non-western cultures (Malinowski, 1926). In this context, feeling of this calibre are driven by the so called dark tourism sites (Biran, Poria, & Oren, 2011; Stone & Sharpley, 2008). Although gaining in popularity, dark sites wake up a profound ethical discussion in public opinion (Tzanelli 2016). While a family of theories understand that dark sites express an emotional arousal which links community with pastime, addressing some of the existential questions of human existence (Lennon & Foley 2000; Raine 2013, Biran & Hyde, 2013; Cohen 2011; Podoshen 2013; Stone 2011); others claim beyond the quest for death, underlies a
sentiment of morbid voyeurism which is politically manipulated to perpetuate the legitimacy of elite, even in contexts of disasters and trauma (Bowman & Pezzullo, 2009; Hartmann 2014; Tzanelli 2016; Korstanje 2016). Likely, the Trunyan cemetery in Bali offers a fertile ground to overcome the limitations dark tourism literature shows. Despite this cemetery attracts both types of segments, overseas and domestic tourists, it is difficult to frame this space into the model of Seaton and Lennon (2004). As P. Stone (2006) puts it, dark tourism takes a wider spectrum which oscillates from battlefronts memorials which draws much attention from media, to cemeteries, where any intrusion is seen as a clear violation to private life. In this respect, B. Heidelberg (2015) dissects the case of Amityville US to understand many factors are involved at time of adopting dark tourism as the first option. Many communities, even, are far from the needs of reminding the event, and opted to silence it in the dust of oblivion. Korstanje has gathered substantial evidence during his fieldwork in Cromañón, Buenos Aires (Argentina) to confirm some communities see in tourism as an activity that very well may corrupt their memory of deads (Korstanje 2015), while in other cases, dark sites include the colloquially named perilous places, houses of horror, fields of fatality, tours of torment, and themed Thanatos, are theoretically on the dark tourism spectrum (Sharpley & Stone, 2009; Stone, 2006; Bowman & Pezzullo, 2009). Death tourism, which is defined as activities visiting unique and macabre sites such as cemeteries, appears not only to encourage human contemplation on death of the self (Stone, 2012; Korstanje and George, 2015), but also to revolve around how the death sites (those visited by tourists) serve as a distraction from one’s own mortality (Korstanje & George, 2015). Coupled with the conversation on social media (Sigala, Christou & Gretzel, 2012; Nikiforova, 2013) from a postmodern perspective, i.e. the phenomenon of an online community generating e-comments and e-word of mouth (e-WOM) (e.g. see Gretzel & Yoo, 2008; Yoo & Gretzel, 2008, 2010, 2011; Xiang and Gretzel, 2010), this phenomenon of death sites in particular and the surprisingly popular dark tourism in general, leads to question whether it is tourist-demand or attraction-driven (Stone, 2006; Wilkinson, 2010).

As this backdrop, the online comments into death sites in the online community not only indicate how the role of tourists in building shared values may (or may not) shape the brand image of death sites, but also signifies the intertwined relationships of spirituality and specific tourist typology from the postmodern perspective. This strengthens the conceptualisation of “secular tourists” that Korstanje and George (2015) coined in their study on philosophical issues in dark tourism. The secular tourist is considered as one who may seek for authentic life experience of social connectedness and the need for otherness, which in other domains of study is identified as human needs of spirituality (e.g. Krentzman, 2013). It also indicates the magnitude of good relationships which revolve around human interactions with death and lead to contemplation of self-awareness (i.e. to intrapersonal communication) and how the conversation about death in the online community (i.e. interpersonal communication) validate the sense of spirituality and its philosophical perspectives. For example, Krentzman (2013) examines the intertwined relationship of spirituality and religion, leading to how attributes such as belief, comfort, reflection, ethics, and awe fuel the content of the shared values under discussion. Arguably, it keeps people alive and gives validation to their lives, as well as serving self-awareness (e.g. Krentzman, 2013; Holt-Lunstad, Smith & Layton, 2010).

The structure of this essay is as follows. First, the literature of dark tourism, from the tourist’s and postmodern perspectives, and the purpose of life revolving around spirituality and religion are reviewed. Next, the research gap, the research methodology and an overview of the study context are outlined. The findings of the content analysis revolve around the presentation of death and its communication patterns; and how the presentation of death and religiosity emerge as commodification and affect tour-