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Research Article

"Meaning Making and Identity Transmission through Myths, Legends and Folk tales: The Case of Cultural Tourism in Meghalaya"

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Abstract

Tourism based on myths, legends and folk tales which is regarded as a subset of Cultural tourism has received less attention as compared to cultural events based on documented history. Journeying to places based on their literary association is highly researched; this paper however, explores the relationship between tourism and myths, legends and folk tales. It seeks to explore the link between myths, legends and folk tales of the Hynñiew Treps/Khasis, a tribal/indigenous community of Meghalaya in North-East India and tourism. This present piece of research aims to study the extent to which myths, legends and folk tales are considered by the Hynñiew Treps of Meghalaya to contribute to meaning making and identity transmission to tourists visiting the place. The Hynñiew Treps of Meghalaya are a story telling people and have a strong oral tradition and practices. The study was based on an in-depth interview method to a sample of local stakeholders comprising village and provincial heads, members of village council, tourism practitioners, and members of cultural organizations, state government officials from tourism and culture department. The results showed 50% participants are only moderately aware about myths, legends and folk tales, although at the same time they tend to assign a market value to this type of oral tradition which is associated with cultural tourism. It is then suggested that the valuing of oral traditions such as myths, legends and folk tales as a tourist resource should therefore be re-assessed to allow local people, to integrate this form of popular cultural expression as their own rather than being for others (visitors). This in turn leads us to the need to rethink current culture development dynamics.

Key words: myths, legends, folk tales, culture, tourism

Introduction

Although folklore tourism is regarded as a subset of cultural tourism, it has received less attention as compared to heritage events based on documented history. Journeying to places based on their literary association is highly researched, e.g Gettysburg Storyscape, Grimm Fairytale route etc (Chronis, 2005). This paper however, explores the relationship between tourism and folklorism. This present piece of research aims to study the extent to which myths, legends and folk tales are considered by the Hynñiew Treps of Meghalaya to contribute to meaning making and identity transmission to tourists visiting the place. Similar studies considering myths, legends and folk tales as a source of differentiation were undertaken, Razak (2012) opines that folklore such as myths, legends and folk tales has the power to enhance the destination image; differentiates it as a tourist destination and improves attractiveness (Pérez-Aranda, Guerreiro, & Mendes, 2015) prompting a sense of imagination and escapism, such as in the case of Robinhood festival (Everett & Parakoottathil, 2016). Myths, legends and folk tales generates place narratives which impacts consumption experience (Pérez-Aranda, Guerreiro, & Mendes, 2015). The area of study under consideration is that of the ethnic community of Meghalaya i.e the 'Hynñiew Treps' which means 'seven huts' 'seven families', a common term used to describe the Khasi tribe of Meghalaya which constitute Khynriams, Pnars, Bhois, Wars, Marams, Lyngngams and Nongtrais. Meghalaya is

one of the eight states in the North-Eastern region of India that was carved out of Assam in 1972 as an autonomous state with 11 districts: consisting of the united Khasi and Jaintia Hills that comprise six districts and the Garo Hills that comprise five districts. The Hynñiew Treps reside in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya, which is in North-Eastern India.

They have a rich cultural heritage and are a great storytelling people and their stories resonate from their sense of conviction to instill in the minds of proceeding generations about moral values. The story telling behaviour of Hynñiew Treps stem from their extensive exploration of the land. Based on their extensive exploration across the Khasi land that the ancestors were able to designate names of hills, rivers, stones, sand, wind, animals and plants. It is interesting to note that in Ri Hynñiew Trep most of the landforms and living creatures has a story connected to it. The major reason as asserted by various scholars is that the stories which are connected to various landforms (rivers, hills, rocks, canyons etc) last forever for as long as the civilization still exists. Therefore, stories are not created from superstitious beliefs, but are knitted on the basis of things that existed and personified in the form of stories perse (Nongkhlaw, 2008). The study participants were chosen on the basis of their close association with tourism and cultural activities and have high chances of having strong interference in the development of policies with impact in social, cultural and economic fields.

Tourism, Identity and Culture (myths, legends and folk tales): Conceptual Development
Folklore and its various expressions, such as myths, legends and folk tales are approached in numerable ways although it is mostly presented as Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) or living heritage conceived from the three conceptual frameworks of folk, nation and tradition. (Henriques & Custódio, 2008). The interest that tourists show on our living heritage can revitalize them, since they have very high risks of being forgotten by the younger generation. Moreover, the economic benefits derived from tourism may help conservation of heritage (UNWTO, 2001). According to the Organisation for Economic and Co-operation Development (2009) culture is an important element of the tourism product, which exclusively distinguishes it in a crowded global marketplace. Similar positive assessments can be found everywhere which is, usually based on UN World Tourism Organization estimates that cultural tourism accounts for 40% of international tourism (Richards, 2007). Tourism and culture is therefore an extremely powerful economic engine. According to Europa Nostra (2005) "more than 50% of tourist activity in Europe is driven by cultural heritage thereby, making culture and tourism interdependent and a powerful combination that can strengthen the attractiveness and competitiveness of destinations, regions and countries. Heritage tourism was a very popular buzzword during the 1990's, used by destination promoters around the world by packaging of an identity for sale (Palmer, 1999). As Smith (1991: 16) argues, heritage attractions are "sacred centres', objects of spiritual and historical pilgrimage, that reveal the uniqueness of their nation's 'moral geography".

Cultural identity communicates the past and the present tradition and history of a people thereby enabling them to be identified as a distinctive group (Palmer, 1999). Indigenous communities and traditions, such as ethnic groups and minority cultures are one of the typologies of cultural tourism product that can be developed and oral traditions and folklore play an important role (Smith, 2001). According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation UNESCO (2003) the various things that binds a group together are, tradition or a way of life and the country they originate from. These things come in various forms such as objects that can be held and buildings that can be explored, or songs that can be sung and stories that can be told. These things form part of a heritage, and this heritage requires active effort on our part in order to safeguard it." According to Csapó (2012) folklore/folk culture is part of cultural heritage and heritage tourism. Traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors such as oral traditions which include myths, legends and folk tales are part of our cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2003). Intangible cultural heritage (ICH), is made up of all immaterial manifestations of culture and represents the variety of living heritage of a human race as well as the most important vehicle of cultural diversity (Lenzerini, 2011). The local people play a vital role in keeping their Intangible Cultural Heritage alive and passing it on to future generations. Moreover, since ICH constitute oral traditions and other immaterial culture, appropriate conservation and management is vital to prevent

exhaustion/extinction (Peil, 2005). Cultural heritage does not end at monuments and collections of objects but also includes traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to future generations, such as performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge, oral traditions/folk narrative such as myths, legends and folk tales and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts. From the available literature, it can be deduced that cultural heritage has at least three different and intertwined meanings. The first meaning considers cultural heritage from the material objects perspective such as monuments, buildings, collection of objects. The second one considers cultural heritage from the arts perspective such as performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, songs, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts. The third meaning considers cultural heritage from the inheritance perspective such as traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, oral traditions, stories (myths, legends and folk tales).

Literature suggest that heritage tourism is that growing phenomena built upon a foundation of motivations to consume spaces rich in cultural performances, practices, cultures and landscapes (Halewood and Hannam 2001; Lowenthal 1985; Urry, 1991). It is a paradox of modernity that in their quest for modern spaces and experiences yet they also yearn for something older, more authentic, or traditional (Appadurai 1981; Cohen 1988; Edensor 2002; Gold and Gold 1995; Halewood and Hannam 2001; Lowenthal 1985: Urry 1991). The relationship between folklore and tourism, places it in mercantilisation/touristification process that accords post-modern and globalised society we live in (Henriques & Custódio). However, as an economic activity, tourism must appropriate culture, namely living heritage in a context where Economics, Culture and Space are symbiotic of each other (Santagata, 2004). In the quest for genuine experiences, tourists explore possibilities for deeper and more meaningful experiences thereby engaging in 'volunteer tourism' or 'creative tourism'. (ETC, 2006: 5), it is important to note that oral traditions has high risk of being forgotten by the local community, if not retained and documented appropriately. But, in post-modernity, it's not only the memory that is in a losing risk, identity is too. Recognising identity as a non neutral and evolutionary process, Aas, Ladkin and Fletcher (2005: 29) point out that "The development of identity … is not always smooth, well ordered, and without disruption". Folklore, as a body of expressive culture, invokes in tourists a sense of belonging to a particular local/regional community and to a particular place; which according to Henriques & Custódio (2008) is an element of the spirit of place.

Experiencing identity through tourism

Folklore as an expression of culture could be seen through the "other" and hence, there's a threat (Henriques & Custódio, 2008). "The mobilization of traditional practices in a tourism context often results in the presentation of apparently compromised, essentially limited, and highly commoditized forms of culture (MacCannell 1976, Wang 1999)". Berman (1970) suggests that authentic tourism experiences are associated with identity, autonomy, individuality, self development, and self-realization. Ryan (2000) says tourist experiences are essentially individualistic. McIntosh and Prentice (1999) believe tourists can experience the creation and reaffirmation of identity by using insights gathered about a different culture to understand their own place in time and space. Lowenthal (1985) claims, visits to places associated with the past affirm identity through memory but with the pain removed. For Wang (1999) identity is created and reaffirmed through visiting places associated with the past through insights into the emergence of a culture pertinent to one's own understanding of his/her place in time and space. Laenen (1989) asserts that the main reason for the massive interest in heritage and escape to the past is a present moral, social, and cultural identity crisis in what Venkatesh (1992) called a consumer society. The latter suggests a postmodern society constantly searches for stimulation through events and images. This constant stimulation eventually leads to identity confusion (Kellner 1995).

Considering the importance of identity maintenance, Steiner and Reisinger (2006: 304) underline the role of heritage as a history component, determinant to the perception of the spirit of the place: "It seems that people look to the past to identify and understand themselves." This is consistent with the constructivist approach which works from the premise that "tourists are indeed in search of authenticity; however, what they quest for is

not objective authenticity but symbolic authenticity" (Culler, 1981; Wang, 1999, p. 217). Symbolic authenticity rejects a binary understanding of authenticity, and instead attends to the ways authenticity can be a judgment (Moscardo & Pearce, 1999), emergent (Cohen, 1988), contextual (Salamone, 1997), and can give rise to pluralistic interpretations (Bruner, 1994; Rickly- Boyd, 2012b). Bruner's (1994) work at the boyhood home of Abraham Lincoln is particularly illustrative of a constructivist approach, as it uncovers multiple meanings of the concept at work by both tourists and staff at this site _ originality, genuineness, historical verisimilitude, and authority. In their comparison of literary tourism sites, Fawcett and Cormack (2001) focus on the use of staging to convey disparate histories related to the fictional story of Anne of Green Gables (similar cases in DeLyser, 2003; Halewood & Hannam, 2001; Salamone, 1997). Moreover, a constructivist perspective extends beyond perceptions to attend to touristic motivations and meaning-making processes (Bruner, 1994; Budruk, White, Woodrich, & Van Riper, 2008; DeLyser, 1999; Rickly-Boyd, 2012b;) and the ways broader cultural perceptions of what is "authentic" can emerge over time (Cohen, 1988). A useful illustration of emergent authenticity can be found in Disneyland Park in California, which has come to be recognized as the original, and thereby authentic, fantasy theme park of Walt Disney. But the historical world of possibilities is constituted by both heritage and destiny. The former is one's personal history of experience, learning, an education, with heritage as the primary source of unique possibilities. In contrast, destiny is communal history. It can only be the source of unique possibilities when people engage with it authentically. Otherwise, it will reveal only shared possibilities, which will impede authenticity".

Method

The present case study is based on a mixed questionnaire administered to local stakeholders comprising of Provincial Chiefs, village durbar heads, members of village council, tourism practitioners, members of cultural organizations, state government officials from tourism and culture department. Face to face, in-depth interview method was used to understand study participants. It encompasses different steps: ascertaining the awareness level of the locals toward the heritage of the Hynñiew Trep, different perspective of myths, legends and folk tales as a cultural tourism product and finally analysis of the different factors to promote the folk tales and traditions in the perspective of tourism valorization of the traditions/products for the tourists and residents and the funding of these activities.

Results

A total of 100 local stakeholders comprising village heads, members of village council, tourism practitioners, and members of cultural organizations, state government officials from tourism and culture department were interviewed. Firstly, the researcher tried to find out their awareness about the oral traditions such as myths, legends and folk tales among local stakeholders. Out of a total of 100 responses, 50% are moderately aware, 47% fully aware and 3% respondents said they are not aware. This is an outcome of the lack of in-depth knowledge of the cultural identity about the myths, legends and folk tales.

Table 1. Awareness about myths, legends and folk tales

	Not aware	Moderately aware	Fully aware
Awareness about myths, legends and folk tales	3%	50%	47%

The touristic experience of participants was assessed and 94% said they have experienced such places connected to myths, legends and folk tales, while 6% are yet to visit any such places, mostly due to old age and financial reasons. While trying to understand the locals' perspective about Meghalaya as a cultural tourist destination, about 99% strongly agreed that Meghalaya is highly appealing as a cultural tourist destination and

only 1% disagreed. To understand the study participants, opinion about culture (myths, legends and folk tales) as a tourism product, respondents were asked if myths, legends and folk tales

Table 2: visit to places connected to myths, legends and folk tales enhances the attraction's image, about 94% agree and only 6% out of hundred were not sure. Furthermore, about 94% agree that myths, legends and folk tales have the potential to develop cultural tourism. When we try to understand the associations to myths, legends and folk tales based on an open question, the locals tend to relate myths, legends and folk tales to the cultural identity (ethnography, tradition) and to the ambience/atmosphere provided. 92% of the total responses have also attributed myths, legends and folk tales as important element of cultural tourism that adds meaning to their experiences.
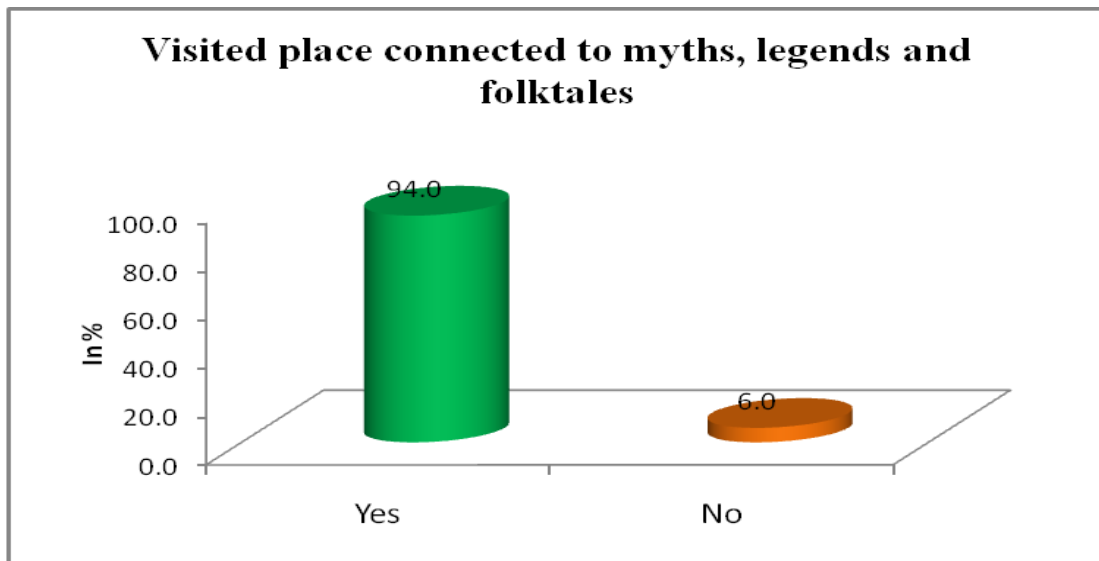

Table 2: total respondents to have visit places connected to myths, legends and folk takes

In a second step, focused on myths, legends and folk tales, we tried to understand the importance locals give to the myths, legends and folk tales as a cultural tourism dynamic and product for tourist to opt from by the different destination users: residents, national tourists and foreign tourists and 85% respondents strongly agree that myths, legends and folk tales does act as a cultural tourism dynamic to opt from. From the data analysis we can state that linking myths, legends and folk tales to tourism can help uphold the otherwise forgotten oral tradition. When we try to understand the contribution of the myths, legends and folk tales to the valuing of the traditions and the cultural tourism experience, locals tend to see the cultural tourism (myths, legends and folk tales) as a vehicle to revitalize and valorise the traditions at first instance, with almost 89% references of "Important or Much Important" at this point. Similarly, it is implicit that myths, legends and folk tales has an economic value related to cultural tourism, to tourist product and to the valuing of the tourist experience. Aiming at the necessary action and support, the final step of the case study tries to understand which will be the funding responsibility for the development of myths, legends and folk tales, interestingly they seem to have receptivity towards Syiems (Khasi, provincial chief), Dolois (Jaintia, princely chief), and Rangbah Shnongs (village durbar heads) with 61%. Since, the Dorbar Hima or the state council is the supreme authority in the political structure of the Hynñiew Trep, Meghalaya; hence their role is vital in the development of cultural tourism.

Table 3. Funding agency for development of myths, legends and folk tales
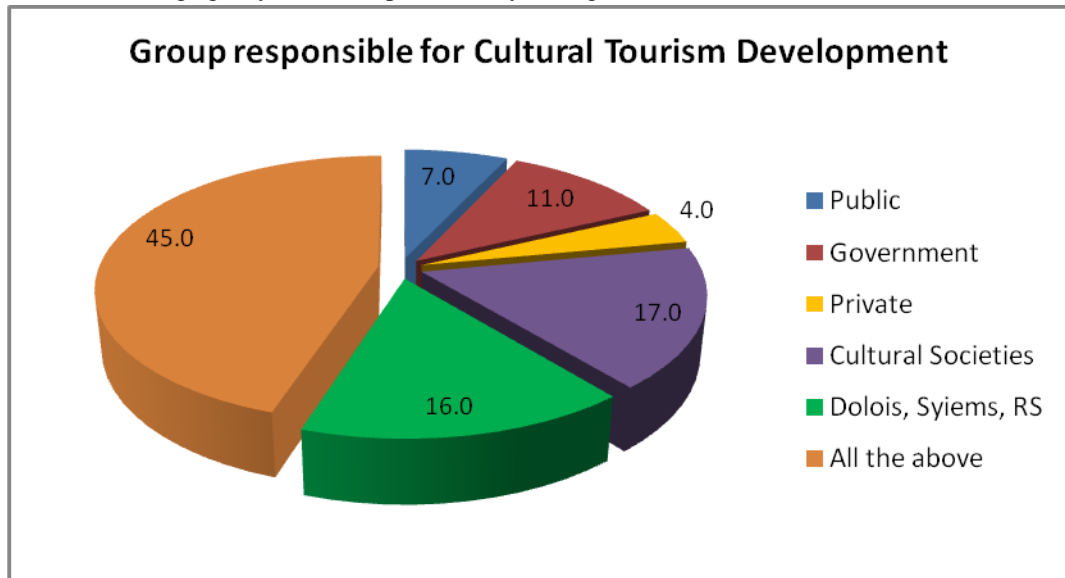
For improvement and promotion of the myths, legends and folk tales, in the opinion of the locals the best vehicle to do that is through social media and digital platforms, while suggesting to record and document such stories from the elderly population and incorporating such oral traditions as part of syllabus in primary school or secondary level too, so that the youths who are the future of the tribe are made aware about their rich heritage and culture..

Discussion and Conclusion

Folklore, as a body of expressive culture, has been developed as part of the 19th century ideology of romantic nationalism. It was linked with a sense of belonging and cohesion related to a particular local/regional community and to a particular place. In that perspective, it was an element of the spirit of place. However, in post-modernity, the tendency is to use folklore with consumption ends, a context in which we explore the relation between folklore such as myths, legends and folk tales and cultural tourism (Henriques & Custódio, 2008). Living heritage like arts and crafts, myths, legends and rituals having high risk of being forgotten by the younger generations may be revitalized by tourists who show interest in them. Moreover, the funds generated from tourism may help conserve heritage monuments (UNWTO, 2001). Findings unearthed that the locals have forgotten the legends of the place and the legends recorded in literature were so badly corrupt that original message has been altered (Mundean, 2017). This, has to do with two major aspects. The first one is the awareness level of locals about myths, legends and folk tales. It is surprising to note that more than half of the total responses are only moderately aware about their oral tradition and the main reason may be attributed to lack of interest to dig deep into one's heritage. Secondly, the locals have attributed tourism to be an important force for valorization of traditions, identity transmission to tourists despite not being fully aware about one's traditions (to a significant extent). This clearly indicates that the local stakeholders have a firm belief that tourism can valorize and revitalize traditions and linking myths, legends and folk tales to tourism can transmit the meaning and identity of their culture. Furthermore, linking it to tourism will not only promote knowledge about one's culture but also it will promote knowledge about identity to both tourists and the local stakeholders perse. In this context, the valorization of myths, legends and folk tales as a tourist resource should be reintegrated as a popular cultural expression of their own rather than just for touristic purposes. As per available

literature and in conclusion it is evident that only the local stakeholder's identification with its culture can produce touristic experiences with a greater authenticity.

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