

COMMODIFICATION OF CULTURE AND HUMAN RELATIONS

Commodification of culture and human interactions refers to the fact that values are allocated based on monetary worth assigned by different individual and that culture and human interactions are being treated as commodity. Such complexities are partly caused by tourism.

With the increasing affluence brought about by higher economic status, and also, the hectic schedule of industrialised cities, more and more people are yearning to travel away from home to get away from the hustle and bustle of their life, according to Cohen's five typologies of tourists. Under the five typologies of tourists, each mode of tourists bears different expectations on their travel experience. Some travel just to get away from their normal daily routine, while others travel to get a taste of the Other cultures. It is this onset of tourism that leads to the commodification of culture and human interactions when locals, in their attempt to cater to the different expectations of tourists, alter their cultures to make it 'relevant' to the tourists.

The film on "Cannibal Tours" by Dennis O'Rourke depicts the commodification of human interactions through the behaviour of tourists during their travel along the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea. It is not surprising to see the tourists equipped with their essential "weapon"-camera, during their overseas vacation. There, they began taking photos with the natives, requesting them to stand at a certain place, ordering them to do certain expressions and poses. The transactions will end with the tourists paying a certain amount of money to the locals. Even though some locals may be more than willing to receive such offer, others react to this with disdain. The commodification of human relations is highlighted through such photography of the locals, whereby the tourists assign monetary values to the interactions with the locals by payments. This action also introduce the element of power inequality between tourists and the natives, whereby the tourists are viewed as the one with monetary power, and the power to 'control' the locals, even to the extent that the locals in the attempt to meet the tourists' expectations, will alter certain elements of their cultures of rituals just to cater to the tourists' likings. Through such example, the notion of "re-colonisation" can be seen whereby the whites (tourists) are seen as the wealthy and powerful group, whereas the locals are seen as the powerless with little wealth, that they have to rely on the money gained through tourism to keep their economy going.

On the other hand, the film also highlights the commodification of culture from the collection of admission fees when the tourists visit a 'sacred house' left behind by the ancestors, as well as the staging of a ritual performance for the tourists to earn quick bucks. Such performances are normally a very diluted and shorter version of the original ritual performed only at certain occasion. However, the increased frequency of the staging of such performances just for tourists with the mindset of making money seems to make the experience of the culture inauthentic. The act of paying to experience culture seems to be degrading culture itself, making it inauthentic as culture is being 'manufactured forcefully' according to the tourists' expectations for their consumption. However, culture should be live out as a

natural process, with people assigning meanings to their interactions as according to the perspective of symbolic interactionist. Hence, as can be seen, treating culture as a commodity makes it lost the original meanings it has to the locals.

The consequences of the commodification of culture and human relations can be detrimental to both the locals and their cultures. This can be seen in the unbalance display of power relationships as seen in the human interactions between tourists and locals, as well as the staging of culture whereby culture itself loses its original meanings to the locals when they try to (re)produce their system of beliefs to cater to tourists.

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