



THE APPLICATION OF ETHNOGRAPHIC TECHNIQUES FOR COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Tourism generates massive income for Thailand. Using tourism as an economic goal has both positive and negative impacts on local community located in or near tourism destination. To mitigate negative impacts of tourism, local people should participate in its planning, management and operation. Participation of local people in the process of tourism development is to promote the community-based tourism (CBT) initiation. CBT is expected to lead to the balance of ecological conservation and development by concentrating on the quality of life of the local people. It is a new tourism phenomenon in Thai rural society that endeavours for community self reliant practice. Operating CBT, community members are associated with and cannot be separated from the tourism activities and touristic process, as active rather than passive actors. Given that tourism activities are hardly distinguished from their local way of life and CBT is associated with participation towards empowerment and local sociocultural realm, ethnographic technique is a considerable choice to conduct a CBT research. It enables in-depth and holistic view in relation to the impact of power and the processes of globalization on local socioculture and the findings can be used for further tourism development towards sustainability

KEYWORDS: Community-based tourism, local participation, research method, ethnography, Thailand

Introduction

Tourism in Thailand has been considered as a growth industry and a source of national income and socioeconomic development. Tourism accounts for THB 825.6 billion or 7.3% of GDP in 2012 and is expected to grow to THB 1,698.4 billion or 8.7% of GDP by

2023 (World Travel and Tourism Council 2013). In respect to the correlation of National Economic and Social Development Plans (NESDP) and tourism, Plan 6 (1987-1991) considered tourism as a source of economic generation whereas Plan 8 (1997-2001) promoted human development and strengthened



local communities (National Economic and Social Development 2017). This leads to a transformational phenomenon towards CBT and sustainable tourism. The recently emerged Plan 12 (2017-2021) emphasizes the human capital as a center of the national development and highlights the communities' potentiality. The importance of participation of all stakeholders in tourism development is likewise advocated in the National Tourism Policy (2017-2021) inscribed in the fifth strategy (National News Bureau of Thailand 2016). Therefore, these national directions encourage community-led tourism development that requires participation as its foundation in order to excel towards local empowerment and sustainability.

Community-based Tourism in the Globalized Era

Typically, in tourism studies, the notion of a traditional community, embracing geographical boundaries, is applied. Tourists visit tourism places or destinations (Beeton 2006) and enter into a cultural setting. The attractiveness of the specific place and its unique cultural setting encourage tourists to visit it; this is typically recognised as tourism in community. In so doing, they are essentially visiting other people's homes. Most tourism scholars (such as Seetanah 2011; Beeton 2006) indicated that tourism is a tool for development in marginal or peripheral communities. However, developing a tourism

destination is not straightforward; it is not only time-consuming but also a continuing process. Therefore, local people are heart of tourism development towards successful tourism operations and sustainability.

"Tourism owned and/or managed by communities and intended to deliver wider community benefit, benefiting a wider group than those employed in the initiative." (Goodwin & Santilli 2009, p. 4) is known as community-based tourism (CBT). It is small-scale and problem-focused operations at the specific place and has sought to elevate the quality of life of local people, at the same time, enhance their surrounding natural environment.

Scheyvens (2003, p. 10) infused that "members of local community have a high degree of control over the activities taking place, and a significant proportion of the economic benefits accrue to them." Therefore, CBT promotes empowerment of local people via the participatory approach.

In addition, the power of communities can be formulated through the association of sources of power in the period of globalization. These ideas have long been mentioned by many academia (such as Bushell & Staiff 2013; Staiff, Bushell & Watson 2013; Staiff & Bushell 2012; Cohen & Cohen 2012; Hitchcock, King & Parnwell eds. 2009; Bushell & Eagles eds. 2007; Bushell & Staiff 2003; Cohen 2008, 1979; Bauman 2000, 1998).



Moreover, CBT revolves around how power is constructed and exercised, the ethnographic technique is hence offered for an effective results towards in-depth meaning about the distinctive nature of each communities studied. Hawkins (2014, p. ix) also noticed that based on sociology and anthropology, the understanding of cultural, social and economic transformations that include globalization is necessary.

Ethnographic methods in CBT Fieldwork

Differentiating between qualitative and quantitative research methods for the more appropriate contributes neither the compass to generate good research nor to obtain more reliable results. The usefulness of each way for the research obstacles and aims are the most important issue for the applied method (Jennings 2010; O'Leary 2010, 2004, Punch 1998 in Silverman & Seale 2005).

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preparatory in character and depended on representations of the phenomenon under study (Yin 2012; Finn et al. 2000; Ryan 1995). Compiling a great pact of rich information is the key to the qualitative method. This method is notified by the holistic-inductive model that manifests multiplex realities, a real-world-setting grounding, an individual epistemology, a combining aspect, an emergent research pattern, non-random participant choice, textual data origins, and subjective analysis (Jennings 2010; Finn et al. 2000; Robson 1995). This is commonly called the 'bottom-up approach' that concentrates on experiential research-based results and utilises more research-then-theory than theory-then-research (Dooley 2001).

Ethnography is a 'multi-method or a family of methods' (O'Reilly 2012). Informal (open-ended or non-structured) and formal interviews, observations, journals, archival records, diaries, field notes, jottings, photos, video recordings and tape recordings have been employed to justify values, attitudes and practices of communities' members. This method engaged the multi-method to prevent the limitation of reliance upon one form of methodology and to provide more comprehensive research findings. Yet, it carefully and selectively embraced each technique based heavily on the researcher's five senses. To gather reliable stories, the researcher need to strategically establish the research triangulation with the aim of sharpening the findings in order to avoid bias,



explore misunderstood or unrecognised information and confirm credibility (Arksey & Knight 1999). The researcher also needs to thoroughly exercised the tactic of triangulation by re-examining the assembled stories among insiders and cross-checking them with scholars, researchers, developers, government officers, local investors, reports, local newspapers or local research. Daily life was observed in relation to the etic perspective to reaffirm the claimed stories, beliefs and norms. Meanwhile, the data analysis and synthesis were progressively performed throughout all of the stages of the field trip.

Ethnographic method tempts to find new proportions and critique existent theories and concepts that have been represented in the field and remain unapproachable by using techniques such as a survey. Intense and rich information is awaited from this fieldwork, while an ideological framework has been set up to guide and inform the review of literature and empirical studies. However, the recognized senses serve not to form an inner emotional and/or spiritual relationship with the participants, but rather to receive in-depth data to help in meaning what participants think, and what the researcher perceives accurately answers to the participants' perceptions. This position is verified by Geertz (1983, p.58) when he notices "The ethnographer does not, and, in my opinion, largely cannot, perceive what his informants perceive. What he (sic) perceives, and

that uncertainly enough, is what they [his informants] perceive 'with' - or 'by means of', or 'through'... whatever the word should be. I have tried to get at this most intimate of notions, not by imaging myself someone else, a rice peasant or a tribal sheikh, but by searching out and analyzing the symbolic forms - words, images, institutions, behaviors - in terms of which, in each place, people actually represented themselves to themselves and to one another". The method is valued as a tool enabling the researcher to reveal and interpret the complex context of social phenomena as well as understanding other people's life aspects such as social networks, kinship ties and face-to-face social relations of a clearly-defined geographical locality (Blackshaw 2010).

Applying the ethnographic technique must be aware of the mixing of emic¹ and etic² perspectives (Jenning 2010) so that the researcher can scrutinise the in-depth exploration of villagers' values, norms, beliefs and practices of daily lives, such as their cultures, while gathering the richness of the symbolic (to see things), which can be fully described (interpret meaning from within a culture) and tell the truth about the social world (Blackshaw 2010;

¹ A description of a behaviour or belief in terms that is meaningful (consciously or unconsciously) to the actor.

² A description of a behaviour or belief by an observer that can be applied to other cultures.



O’Leary 2004, 2005; Silverman & Seale 2005; Geertz 1983).

However, O’Leary (2004) promoted that in an ethnographical approach, the researcher needs to be aware of a somewhat paradoxical dilemma in representing the reality of others. The author highlights the risk that the researcher has to interpret the perspective of people – the subject of the study – based on the understanding and the data interpretations of the researcher. In regards to the viewpoint of the researcher’s position, Geertz (1973, 1983) introduced the concepts of ‘thick description’. The cultural symbols, or how the villagers describe their feelings or thoughts of themselves and people in the community, are interpreted for the audience. In other words, there is a transformation from ‘experience-near’, such as cultural symbols or local knowledge, into ‘experience-distant’, such as theoretical concepts or a researcher’s account of reality (universal classifications).

For the researcher to bring the experience-near and experience-distant concepts into view simultaneously, Geertz proposed the task of a dialectic of ‘thick description’³ for broad

explanations and hermeneutic circles⁴. Accordingly, Geertz urged the researcher to be aware of the movement between the experience-near and experience-distant and the oscillation between parts and wholes.



Figure 1: Community back stage (a community shrine; an example of experience-near and experience-distant at fieldwork)

Source: Nantira Pookhao, taken at Mae Kampong, Chiang Mai in 2012

Participant observation and participation in the daily routines of the settings lay embedded in the ethnographic method (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw 2011). This can be defined as engaging in daily life or identifying community behaviours or practices; the researcher is required to normally act and blend with the local people. Trying to act normal and mix with the villagers and their way of life is the ticket to hearing fruitful stories. Typically, the role of a researcher disconnects him/her from the local people, particularly with his/her

³ In presenting the data, the researcher is continually in a selection process, and the description cannot cover all of the events observed in the field. Thus, a ‘thick description’ is a way of trying to reveal this selectivity. Consequently, the thicker the description, the more the data is revealed (Yin 2011).

⁴ The researcher is required to make detailed assumptions and enable the assumptions to explain the details.



distinct presence, carrying a camera or tape recorder, and/or wearing sunglasses. In so doing, the participants are likely to withdraw and refrain from revealing their truth, and commence expressing ideas according to the way they have been instructed – in this case, on how to be good CBT practitioners.

The roles of ethnographic methods towards CBT sustainability

Since ethnographic methods promote ensuring the truth of the participants' worldviews, tourism development applying this research technique could lead to the understanding of local sociocultural values, norms and behaviors. In so doing, the information gained from this methodology can be directed to the tailor made development within each tourism destination. Given that each local community has different culture, way of life, beliefs, values and norms, each community therefore engages with different problem in relation to tourism practices. For example, the beliefs towards sacred forests and cultural heritage are used to promote tourism sustainability as in the case of Karen or Pa Kaa Ka Yor people at Mae Klang Luang, Chiang Mai where the community is well known for CBT or in the case of Ban Bu Sai, Wang Nam Khiao, Nakhon Ratchasima and Mae Kampong, Mae On, Chiang Mai where local people ordain the trees in their community forests for the purpose of conservation and tourism.

This tailor made development approach can lead to sustainable tourism development.

Consequently, ethnographic techniques provide source of in-depth information that encourage researchers to understand unique characteristics, history, beliefs, values, norm, and way of life of people living in each tourism destination. Then, the findings can be applied for further effective CBT development.

Understanding local sociocultural aspects can also direct to the promotion of social cohesion. Pongsiri, Songkoon and Noipranorm (2013) credited that cultural beliefs, ritual, sacred ceremony brings harmonious and collective action into the community. Social cohesion is vital factor towards tourism sustainable development and the heart of CBT empowerment. If there is social segregation on ground, the participation towards empowerment cannot be achieved. In applying ethnographic methods, the researcher can understand local sociocultural aspects and use the information to promote social cohesion on ground. When the participation and empowerment are instituted with local communities, they can then use this strength to connect with the power bases as a development tool in the globalised era.



Figure 2: Local participation **Source:** Nantira Pookhao, taken at Ban Busai, Nakhon Ratchasima in 2013

Also, applying ethnographic techniques offer in-depth knowledge about cultural identity, commodification and acculturation of local culture in a specific social setting of each CBT community. According to the theory of acculturation, when two cultures are in contact, the exchange takes place. The stronger culture will dominate the weaker culture and the new generation easily confronts with the cultural change. Murphy (2013) indicated that interacting with the tourists is the way young residents engage with their imagination of outside world. And in long term, the host community may start following the culture of the guests and may become culturally dependent on them (Sharpley 1994).

Cultural identity can both promote and exterminate the tourism destination in a form of cultural commodification. Cultural commodification benefits to local people and its destination (Cole 2007; Richards & Wilson 2006). Cultural performance in a form of

commodification is the opportunity to express local cultural collective to outsiders, regardless of who does perform the show (Kirtsoglou & Theodossopoulos 2004). It represents the back and front stage of tourism in which residents do not really use them. MacCannell (1973) and Cohen (1988) mentioned that in selling culture, the local perception of its value might be deducted and the intrinsic value is gone. MacCannell (1984) further identified that the residents in tourism community might perceive themselves as cultural representatives and especially perform for the outsiders.

Thus, ethnographic techniques are proposed for researchers in order to study the issues about cultural identity, cultural commodification and acculturation for using received research outcomes to promote local sociocultural sustainability at CBT destinations.



Figure 3: Baisrisukwan⁵ (A ceremony that does not usually practise in everyday life. It is used as a package to group tour.)

⁵ The rite of *Baisrisukwan* is to call the spirit to the body. It has been practiced since the time of Lord Buddha. A witch doctor (*Mor Kwan*) is the one who proceed the ceremony.



Source: Nantira Pookhao, taken at Ban Busai, Nakhon Ratchasima in 2013

In the globalised era that encompasses complexity, study about local socioculture to thoroughly comprehend this factor in order to promote sociocultural sustainability is difficult. It is therefore a hope of this article to introduce the research techniques that help the researchers to gain in-depth information in relation to local socioculture and socioecology. The rich data that gains from the fieldwork can be used as an analytical tool for tourism development towards sustainable tourism development.

Conclusion

Given that socioculture, including participation towards power, social cohesion and cultural identity are important factors for local communities to develop effective CBT towards sustainability, these factors need to be studied in-depth at each tourism destination in order to completely understand local phenomenon for applying with tourism development. Applying ethnographic methods can uncover the complexity of social factors and expose the reason behind its effective and ineffective development emerging from CBET operations. This

method enables the researcher to observe the relationship between local communities and the external agencies and how this relationship can catalyse and transform local communities towards sustainable tourism. Consequently, ethnographic method is recommended for researchers who need to receive in-depth data about the operations and development of CBT that associates with sociocultural realm in Thailand and elsewhere.

Recommendation

Given that ethnography is associated with local way of life, researchers are required to spend extensive period of fieldwork to collect the data and stay with local people. Therefore, the researchers are expected to prepare both of their body and mind.

Honest, easygoing, humble and heartfelt characteristics of researcher are likewise necessary for effective stay to mingle with local people. Once the researchers are accepted by local members, local members tend to willingly provide information. However, the received information from individual member is required to be reexamined to ensure the reliability. This can be done by applying data triangulation or observation.

Lastly, in choosing research methodology, it should comply with the aim and objectives of each research. This paper is to introduce the research techniques that associate with the way

Thais believe that everyone has their own natural spirit (*Kwan*), which would take care of them. Pongsiri, Songkoon, and Noipranorm (2013) suggested that *Baisrisukwan* is a tool to build community network, knowledge and local wisdom which creates harmony and collective action. Yet, the paradigm is shifted when the sacred ceremony becomes a source of money that has to practise too often.



researchers can receive in-depth information on ground for CBT development towards sustainability.

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