The familiar and the strange in heritage and tourism encounters

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Abstract

Through our scholarly representations, as well as our teaching, anthropologists illustrate how our common human heritage includes a rich variety of social and cultural practices as well as other culturally relative markers of our diverse humankind. Through our research, some anthropologists endeavor to combat ethnocentrism, or to illuminate and better understand the effects of racism and other systems and structures of inequality, and through engaged anthropology, others seek to transform such systems and structures. Besides describing human diversity past and present, anthropologists increasingly illustrate the historical processes by which particular notions of “the familiar” and “the strange” are constructed, reproduced, and maintained in society. One of anthropology’s primordial goals is thus to challenge ideas that certain populations and their customs are “strange” by demonstrating in part how one’s own culture is historical and contingent, only one among many possible variations, and as such can appear “strange” to others. We join other scholars whose work is informed by social constructivism and an […]

Reference


DOI: 10.1086/699938

Available at:
http://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:109225

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

The Familiar and the Strange in Heritage and Tourism Encounters

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Key words: Heritage, tourism, strange, familiar

Through our scholarly representations, as well as our teaching, anthropologists illustrate how our common human heritage includes a rich variety of social and cultural practices as well as other culturally relative markers of our diverse humankind. Through our research, some anthropologists endeavor to combat ethnocentrism, or to illuminate and better understand the effects of racism and other systems and structures of inequality, and through engaged anthropology, others seek to transform such systems and structures. Besides describing human diversity past and present, anthropologists increasingly illustrate the historical processes by which particular notions of “the familiar” and “the strange” are constructed, reproduced, and maintained in society. One of anthropology’s primordial goals is thus to challenge ideas that certain populations and their customs are “strange” by demonstrating in part how one’s own culture is historical and contingent, only one among many possible variations, and as such can appear “strange” to others. We join other scholars whose work is informed by social constructivism and an emphasis on ontological dimensions of making meaning about the world (Anderson 1991; Pina-Cabral 2017). We are also attentive to the ways in which power is illustrated in hegemonic discourses about the familiar and the strange, especially in heritage and tourism encounters. Of course, anthropologists are not alone in disseminating and deconstructing representations associated with “strangeness” and “familiarity.” While they may make the familiar appear strange or the strange familiar as a strategy to unsettle common assumptions about the way we imagine the world to be, other social actors also transpose familiarity and strangeness for a range of goals and interests, generating different and more-or-less intended effects.

This special issue of the Journal of Anthropological Research explores diverse case studies of the familiar and the strange that are specifically connected to heritage-making and
tourism encounters, examining the processes that lead to their constitution, contestation, as well as their consequences “on the ground” and their implications for anthropological research at large. The representation and experience of present and past or intimacy and separation associated with heritage and tourism encounters are powerful ways of imagining familiarity and strangeness. While representations for heritage and tourism purposes can intentionally create and manage perspectives of alterity and recognition, experiencing them involves interpersonal encounters that can enable or hinder specific forms of intimacy and belonging, exclusion and otherness, and related processes of estrangement and familiarization. Through processes of “domestication” (Staszak 2015) and “ordering” (Franklin 2008), tourism and heritage-making contribute to experiencing and framing the exotic: a mechanism of decontextualization / recontextualization removes some objects or individuals from their local and familiar frame and transfers them to a new reference system, where they become strange and bizarre. This is reinforced by dynamics closely associated with tourism and heritage-making, such as “commodification,” “reification,” or “spectacularization.” The tourists’ expectation and experience of finding something strange and bizarre can itself become a familiar one, raising further questions about how processes of estrangement and familiarization operate and are simultaneously at play.

However, tourist attractions emphasizing sameness can also produce feelings of foreignness. Representations of heritage may result in narratives that encourage empathy and a common identification, but they can also generate controversies and reveal profound fractures in how the past is experienced and imagined. Difficult pasts, for instance, can bring to light the historical power dynamics that shape identity, and this in turn may clash with powerful actors who eschew negative depictions. On the other hand, the “other” can be made more understandable, recognizable, and familiar by emphasizing similarities, including being a member of the same humanity or coexisting in shared animated worlds. Beyond its use for anthropology, making the “familiar strange” and the “strange familiar” has broad implications. It has the potential to transform what we know about the world and our very experience of being and belonging in it. In the introduction to her book *Still Life* (2011), Henrietta Moore reflects extensively on self-other relations and imaginings in a global era, drawing our attention to different ways of configuring otherness and identity. We argue that there is a specificity to the way that tourism and heritage encounters involve the strange/familiar dyad in shaping such configurations. As Waterton and Watson advocate for the study of heritage, we can engage social, cultural and political contexts in ways that “oblige us to rework our understandings of relation to others” (2013:555).

This process of experiencing the familiar and the strange is rarely reflexively acknowledged in its historic and constructed dimensions—in people’s everyday lives, it often comes up as naturalized, for example, via taken-for-granted categorization of us/them, or the equation of nation and identity. Tourism and heritage play a big role in framing these representations. If they manage to do so successfully, we may argue that it is precisely also because there is otherwise little awareness of their constructed nature in everyday life. By examining tourism and heritage, we have a privileged lens to ex-
plore how their representations of strange/familiar come into being and are reaffirmed, appropriated, and contested. A historical and present-day examination can explore who and what is deemed “familiar,” and who or what is defined as “strange” or “other.” By carefully observing global processes such as tourism development, heritage-making, international migration, or nation-building we can determine how they contribute to constructing and diffusing representations that comprise these notions of “strangeness” and “familiarity.”

The articles in this issue thus analyze how objects, practices, and narratives in tourism and heritage-making can produce the familiar as strange and the strange as familiar. Case studies from the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Colombia, Portugal, Switzerland, and Vanuatu (Figure 1) are explored in order to address such interrelated matters as the controversial processes of heritage-making, the different interpretative and embodied modalities of dealing with difference in tourism encounters, and the way in which these processes reinforce and reassert dominant ideas about the nation or challenge other hegemonic representations. Bringing together these different empirical insights and analyses, this special issue will shed new light on the complex articulations of the strange and the familiar in heritage and tourism, highlighting their multiple dimensions and implications, and stimulating further reflection on what is at stake in processes of estrangement and familiarization, both for anthropology and for the other actors that participate in them.

The familiar and the strange is explored in the context of the management of difficult and controversial heritage through several examples, such as the commemoration of the massacre of thousands of Haitians in the Dominican Republic (DeLugan 2018), how black Africans and slavery appear in representations of Portugal’s colonial past (Santos 2018), and the touristification of “narco-heritage” in the city of Medellín, Colombia (Naef 2018). As shown by DeLugan, the study of the historical and ongoing processes of modern nation-building is a perfect arena for examining how ideas of collective similitude and alterity are instrumental for generating borders (geographical and otherwise) or producing distance between those considered familiar and those considered strange. Newly organized public commemorations of a 1937 episode of state violence against Haitians respond in part to contemporary anti-Haitianism in the Dominican Republic, including constitutional reforms that recently rescinded the birthright citizenship of tens of thousands of Dominicans of Haitian descent. The new heritage and memory sites draw attention to the historicity of Haitian “otherness” that serves as contrast for Dominican identity. Relatedly, by analyzing three heritage and tourism sites in Portugal, Santos problematizes the Portuguese sense of history as pertaining to black African slavery and colonialism. Santos connects the benign representation of Portuguese colonialism in Africa to the absence of memorialization of black African slaves in Portugal. Santos sees a continuum of the making of heritage meaning that is inextricable from the present-day discrimination and racism experienced by people of African descent in Portugal. Naef explores the touristification of Colombian narco-violence, especially when associated with the surreal life of the Medellin cartel’s boss, Pablo Escobar, in order to establish how this dissonant heritage
Figure 1. Location of the study sites discussed in this special issue on the familiar and the strange in heritage and tourism encounters.
is perceived and represented, whether as the all-too-familiar story known to Colombians or the spectacular strangeness it constitutes for an increasing number of international tourists. Through an analysis of “narco-tours” or “Pablo tours” in Medellin, Naef examines the diverse and competing narratives diffused by tourism stakeholders in a city recovering from decades of violence.

This dichotomy of narratives and experiences is also studied in Cuba by comparing how tourists and local men and women interpret their informal interactions (Simoni 2018). Based on ethnographic research on intimate touristic encounters, Simoni looks at the way tourism and anthropology have participated to frame estrangement and familiarization. He poses the question of what may distinguish an anthropological perspective from others, such as those of tourists, using this debate as an entry point to address anthropological approaches to difference, inequality, and intimacy. Touristic images of paradise can also serve as appropriate examples of representations associated with the familiar and the strange. Wine-growing areas in California, South Africa, France, Portugal, Austria, China, and Switzerland (Picard, Moreira, and Loloum 2018) are depicted as an authentic Eden or idyllic nature, supplying tourists with a “magical place and elixir,” and thus creating a form of intimate materiality with a familiar, yet ontologically strange and distant realm. Through an exploration of global wine consumer culture, the authors argue that magic relies on the double principle of strangeness and familiarity. The value of wine is defined both by a specific place of strangeness—its provenance, whose properties are subsumed by the notion of terroir—and by familiar elements and environments associated with its consumption, as in wine shops or restaurants. In Vanuatu in the southwest Pacific (DeBlock 2018), images of paradise are also mobilized in a context of politicized revitalization of culture. Known as the Cannibal Isles throughout the nineteenth century, Vanuatu was subsequently represented throughout the twentieth century as a friendly place for the enjoyment of pristine culture and nature. DeBlock argues that while these images are associated with a tableau of a tribal utopia, unspoiled paradise, and “pristine nature,” the “Melanesian cannibal” nevertheless represents a dark figure of strangeness.

Collectively, the articles in this special issue, invite attention to the actors and interests that contribute to construction of the familiar and the strange.

NOTE
Previous versions of the articles in this special issue were presented in 2015 during the 114th annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Denver in a session entitled “Familiar Strange.” Special thanks to Adam Fleenor, MS, University of California, Merced for creating our map. The generosity and insight of our reviewers is much appreciated. We thank them for strengthening our special issue.

REFERENCES CITED


