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Culture by the Pound: An Anthropological Perspective on Tourism as Cultural Commoditization¹

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Tourism is now more than the travelers' game. A few years ago, we could lament the lack of serious research on tourism, but now, like the tourists themselves, social researchers are flocking to tourist centers. This is necessary since tourism is the largest scale movement of goods, services, and people that humanity has perhaps ever seen (Greenwood 1972). Economists and planners have been tracing the outlines of this industry and its peculiarities, and many anthropologists and sociologists have begun to chart the social effects of tourism on communities.

The literature generally points out that tourism provides a considerable stimulus to the local and national economy, but it also results in an increasingly unequal distribution of wealth. Tourism thus seems to exacerbate existing cleavages within the community. It is not, therefore, the development panacea that a few hasty planners proclaimed. This nascent critical literature is useful because it places tourism-related development in the analytical perspective from which a variety of different development strategies are being reviewed. The conclusion that tourism-related development tends to produce inequalities takes on added significance because it seems to parallel the inequalities produced by other development strategies, like enclave factories, capital formation schemes, and the "Green Revolution." This serves as a needed corrective to overly exuberant dreams of an El Dorado paved with tourism receipts.

Tourism is not a monolith. It is an exceedingly large-scale and diverse industry, operating in a variety of ways under differing circumstances. Necessarily this means that we must differentiate between types of tourism and the range of impacts tourism can have on local communities.

¹I am indebted to Pilar Fernandez-Cañadas de Greenwood for helpful substantive and editorial criticisms.

This case study concentrates on the promotion of "local color" as a part of tourism merchandising and its impact on one community.² For clarity and to avoid any possible misunderstanding on this point, my analysis is not a general indictment of the tourist industry, but considers only the use of "local color" in tourism. The pros and cons of other aspects of tourism are weighed elsewhere in this volume and in the literature generally.

Social researchers and moralists often speak cynically of the uses and abuses of "local color" by the tourism industry. Spokesmen for local cultures decry the vilification of their traditions by tourism. Planners, too, feel vaguely uncomfortable about this but are quick to point out how little we understand the potential impact of these practices. Lacking well-documented research into the implications of the use of local color in tourism, it is not surprising that neither planners nor local people can decide just how to approach the problem. This study attempts, in brief compass, to analyze the commoditization of local culture in the case of Fuenterrabia, Guipúzcoa, in the Spanish Basque country.

Can Culture be Considered a Commodity?

Logically, anything that is for sale must have been produced by combining the factors of production (land, labor, or capital). This offers no problem when the subject is razor blades, transistor radios, or hotel accommodations. It is not so clear when buyers are attracted to a place by some feature of local culture, such as the running of the bulls in Pamplona, an appearance of the Virgin Mary, or an exotic festival.

Economists and planners dealing with tourism have papered over this difficulty either by considering local culture a "natural resource" (that is, as part of the land factor) or simply by viewing local culture as part of the "come-on" and focusing their attention entirely on the number of hotel beds and the flow of liquor, gasoline, and souvenir purchases. Such a perspective is not very helpful because in ethnic tourism settings, local culture itself is being treated as a commodity *sui generis*.

A fundamental characteristic of the capitalist system is that anything that can be priced can be bought and sold. It can be treated as a commodity. This offers no analytical problem when local people are paid to perform for tourists. Like the symphony orchestra of economics textbook fame, they are being reimbursed for performing a service consumed on the spot. It is not so clear when activities of the host culture are treated as part of the "come-on" without their consent and are invaded by tourists who do not reimburse them for their "service." In this case, their activities are taken advantage of for profit, but they do

²By "local color" I mean the promotion of a commoditized version of local culture as part of the "come-on," a widespread practice with little understood consequences.

not profit, culturally. The onlookers often alter the meaning of the activities being carried on by local people. Under these circumstances, local culture is in effect being expropriated, and local people are being exploited.

We already know from worldwide experience that local culture—be it New Guinea aboriginal art and rituals, Eskimo sculpture (Carpenter 1972, 1973), Balinese dancing, bullfights, voodoo ceremonies, gypsy dancing, or peasant markets—is altered and often destroyed by the treatment of it as a tourist attraction. It is made meaningless to the people who once believed in it by means of a process that can be understood anthropologically. I think we have the social science tools to understand the fragility of local culture and the humanist's responsibility to put these tools to use.

Anthropological Definitions of Culture and Public Ritual

To develop this view of local culture as a commodity, working definitions of culture and public ritual are needed. I will follow Clifford Geertz's views here. For Geertz, *culture* is an integrated system of meanings by means of which the nature of reality is established and maintained. His concept of culture emphasizes the authenticity and the moral tone it imparts to life experiences, as he calls attention to the fundamental importance of systems of meaning in human life. By implication, anything that falsifies, disorganizes, or challenges the participants' belief in the authenticity of their culture threatens it with collapse. *Public rituals* can be viewed as dramatic enactments, commentaries on, and summations of the meanings basic to a particular culture. They serve to reaffirm, further develop, and elaborate those aspects of reality that hold a particular group of people together in a common culture (Geertz 1957, 1966, 1972).

As can be seen, the anthropological view of culture is far different from the economists' and planners' views of culture as a "come-on," a "natural resource," or as a "service." The anthropological perspective enables us to understand why the commoditization of local culture in the tourism industry is so fundamentally destructive and why the sale of "culture by the pound," as it were, needs to be examined by everyone involved in tourism.

The *Alarde* of Fuenterrabia

To analyze the process of cultural commoditization, I will use the specific case of a major public ritual in Fuenterrabia: the *Alarde*. Fuenterrabia's *Alarde* is a public ritual *par excellence*. It involves almost all the men, women, and children in the town during the preparations for it and includes a staggering number of them in the actual enactment.

The *Alarde* is essentially a ritual recreation of Fuenterrabia's victory over the French in the siege of 1638 A.D. This town was important from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries as a walled citadel standing almost on the border between Spain and France, where the Spanish and French crowns contested the rights to control the territory in the northeast corner of Spain. As a result, Fuenterrabia was besieged an immense number of times. Most famous was the siege of 1638, which lasted sixty-nine days and which the town successfully withstood, leading to the rout of the French army. Following this victory the town was accorded a number of privileges by the Spanish crown and was given an important honorific title to add to its official name.

But the *Alarde* does much more than simply commemorate a battle. Fuenterrabia is made up of the citadel, a fishermen's ward, and five local wards, each with a corporate identity and responsibilities. The walled city and the six wards of the town each send a contingent of children who play Basque flutes and drums, and march, dressed in the white shirt and pants, red sandals, sash, and beret symbolizing the Basques. They also send a contingent of men armed with shotguns. From among their young women, each ward elects a *cantinera* (water carrier) who is supposed to be the best flower of young womanhood in the ward. She dresses in a military style uniform and carries a canteen. Various nonlocalized occupational groups are also represented. There is a contingent of *hacheros* (woodchoppers) dressed in sheepskin cloaks, with huge black beards and tall black fur hats. The mayor and the town council dress in military uniform and ride on horseback, leading the procession.

After an early Mass, the groups form in the square outside the citadel gates. Each contingent of children marches through the gates and up the two-block street to the plaza where the somber fortress of Charles the Fifth is located, to the cheers and smiles of hundreds of relatives who crowd the streets and the overhanging balconies. The martial music is played with great fervor. The continual passing of each group, all playing a different tune, and the endless drumming have a profound effect on the bystanders.

Then come the mayor and town councilmen on horseback, symbols of leadership, valor, and nobility. They pass amidst general cheers and then dismount and move to the balcony of the town hall, which overlooks the main street about halfway up to the plaza, to review the parade. Led by its *cantinera*, each ward's group of armed men then marches up the street and stops under the town hall balcony. After saluting, they fire a unison shotgun salvo with deafening effect. The trick is to fire as if only one huge gun has gone off, and the audience continually comments on how well or badly each ward does this. The men then march on to the plaza and form up there.

At the end of the parade, the mayor and town council rejoin the people, all now in the plaza. Together they fire a unison salvo that very nearly deafens all present. Everyone reloads and fires until he has run out of shells. With that the people begin to disperse. After rejoining their families, they walk down to the fishermen's ward for food and drink.

There are far too many elements in this ritual to permit a full commentary here. And, *Alardes* are not restricted to Fuenterrabia but are performed in many Basque and non-Basque towns. In each case, the details differ greatly (Caro Baroja, 1968).

A few basic points about Fuenterrabia *Alarde* should be made. The siege of Fuenterrabia was one in which wealthy and poor—men, women, and children, farmers, fishermen and merchants—withstood a ferocious attack together. The *Alarde* reproduces this solidarity by involving all occupational groups, men, women and children, in the activity. The guns, by ward and then together, speak with one unified voice of the solidarity between the inhabitants that allowed them to survive. It is a statement of collective valor and of the quality of all the people of Fuenterrabia. It is an affirmation of their existence and identity at a time when most of the people earn money outside Fuenterrabia. It is a closing of wounds of gossip and bad faith opened up during the year of town life. The mayor and town councilmen, often thought of as dishonest manipulators rather than as good men, are momentarily transformed into the embodiment of civic virtue and valor to the death. The fishermen and farmers, in much of their daily lives trying to free themselves of the rustic and working-class identity their trades give them, are for a moment the embodiment of the poor but free and noble Basques with whom they affirm an historical identity. Together these people, who most of the time are divided, vulnerable, and confused, are a single spirit capable of withstanding the onslaughts of the outside world as they once withstood the siege of 1638.

There is much more to it, but this suffices to provide the flavor of the event. What is most important is for whom the *Alarde* is performed. It is clearly not performed for outsiders; it is a ritual whose importance and meaning lies in the entire town's participation and in the intimacy with which its major symbols are understood by all the participants and onlookers (the latter often having spent months sewing costumes, directing marching practice, and teaching music to the children). *It is a performance for the participants*, not a show. It is an enactment of the "sacred history" of Fuenterrabia, a history by its very nature inaccessible to outsiders, even when equipped with a two-paragraph explanation courtesy of the Ministry of Information and Tourism. A few unrelated outsiders have always been present, especially members of the Spanish elite who have been summering in Fuenterrabia since the time of the monarchy (Greenwood 1972). They are welcome, for they share some

durable tie with the community. The presence of people who have no enduring relation to the community is much less welcome.

The *Alarde* is more than merely an interesting symbol of unity. As I am endeavoring to show in historical research on the Basques, the unique concept of Basque "collective nobility" is deeply involved here. By tradition, all people born in Guipúzcoa of Guipuzcoano parents were declared by that fact alone to have *limpieza de sangre* (no Moorish or Jewish blood), something that happened nowhere outside the Basque country. It gave rise to a unique situation: the Basques could assert that a cobbler, a farmer, a fisherman, a mayor, and a count were all equally noble. Though they recognized the differences in wealth and power, they asserted a common human equality by virtue of *limpieza de sangre* (Greenwood 1977).

Although the importance of *limpieza* is now gone, the equalitarian values arising from the idea live on in a Spain of stark class differences. To my mind, part of the importance of the *Alarde* is that it is the only occasion in which these ideas of equality and common destiny are given general expression. In this respect, the performance of the *Alarde* is a statement of their historical identity as Basques as well as an enactment of a particular moment in their history. The ritual is thus very important.

But the *Alarde* has the misfortune of taking place during the tourist season. The local population of Fuenterrabia is swollen fourfold; innumerable tourists drive in and out of town during the day to visit the beach, to watch boat races, to eat, swim, and take pictures of farms, old houses, and the city walls. The *Alarde* is listed by the Spanish tourism ministry in a national festival calendar that is given wide circulation. Tourism developers, a group including local politicians and contractors plus large national companies that specialize in tourism-related construction, have added the *Alarde* to their list of advertisable features about Fuenterrabia. Posters and other publicity for the *Alarde* are circulated, as is anything else that makes the town attractive to the tourism consumer.

I do not wish to give the impression that the *Alarde* is singled out for this treatment. In fact, in the "come-on," the *Alarde* is relatively unimportant. It lasts only one day, and by comparison with tourist interest in the fortifications, the frequent boat races, and the other attractions of the town, the ritual is of only passing interest. The *Alarde* is simply part of the list of "local color" to attract tourist receipts; it is an offhand addition to the basic tourism package.

The Turning Point: The *Alarde* Goes Public

This offhanded treatment of the *Alarde* is not reflected in the effect its incorporation into the tourism package has had on the people of Fuenterr-

rabia. Though the *Alarde* is still a going concern, it is in trouble. It has suddenly become difficult to get the people to show and participate in it.

The turning point occurred while I worked in Fuenterrabia during the summer of 1969. The town streets are narrow and all the balconies along the street belong to private houses. The plaza must be cleared of people to make room for the military formations. Thus, there is very little room for onlookers in the narrow streets of the old citadel.

In 1969, the Spanish Ministry of Tourism and Public Information finished remodeling the old fortress of Charles the Fifth in the plaza and opened it as a part of their well-known chain of tourist *paradores* (hotel, restaurant, bar combination). It was personally inaugurated by Generalissimo Franco, an event commemorated on national television. Even a facsimile copy of Padre Moret's eyewitness account of the siege was published to add a note of "culture" to the occasion (Moret 1763). With the boost of national publicity, the municipal government felt obligated to resolve the problem of the onlookers. Not only should the people in the *parador* see the *Alarde*, but so should everyone else who wanted to. They declared that the *Alarde* should be given *twice in the same day* to allow everyone to see it.

In spite of the fact that the *Alarde* has not, to my knowledge, been given twice, the effect of the council's action was stunning. In service of simple pecuniary motives, it defined the *Alarde* as a *public show to be performed for outsiders* who, because of their economic importance in the town, had the *right* to see it.

The Aftermath: The Collapse of Cultural Meanings

There was a great consternation among the people of Fuenterrabia and a vaulting sense of discomfort. Soon this became the mask of cynicism that prefaces their attitudes toward the motives behind all business ventures in Fuenterrabia. Little was said publicly about it. But two summers later, I found that the town was having a great deal of difficulty in getting the participants to appear for the *Alarde*. No one actively or ideologically resisted, but in an event that depends entirely on voluntary compliance, the general lack of interest created serious organizational problems. In the space of two years, what was a vital and exciting ritual had become an obligation to be avoided. Recently the municipal government was considering payments to people for their participation in the *Alarde*. I do not doubt that they ultimately will have to pay them, just as the gypsies are paid to dance and sing and the symphony orchestra is paid to make music. The ritual has become a performance for money. The meaning is gone.

Conclusions: Culture by the Pound

This is undoubtedly a small event in a small place that few people will ever hear of, but its implications seem to be significant. The "local color" used to attract tourists to Fuenterrabia came to include a major ritual that the people had performed for themselves. Its meaning depended on their understanding of the whole system of beliefs reaffirmed by it through dramatic reenactment and commentary. It was not a performance for pay, but an affirmation of their belief in their own culture. It was Fuenterrabia commenting on itself for its own purposes.

By ordaining that the *Alarde* be a public event to attract outsiders into the town to spend money, the municipal government made it one more of Fuenterrabia's assets in the competitive tourism market. But this decision directly violated the *meaning* of the ritual, definitively destroying its authenticity and its power for the people. They reacted with consternation and then with indifference. They can still perform the outward forms of the ritual for money, but they cannot subscribe to the meanings it once held because it is no longer being performed by them for themselves.

I do not think this is a rare case by any means. Worldwide, we are seeing the transformation of cultures into "local color," making peoples' cultures extensions of the modern mass media (Carpenter 1972, 1973). Culture is being packaged, priced, and sold like building lots, rights-of-way, fast food, and room service, as the tourism industry inexorably extends its grasp. For the monied tourist, the tourism industry promises that the world is his/hers to use. All the "natural resources," including cultural traditions, have their price, and if you have the money in hand, it is your right to see whatever you wish.

As an analytical perspective has finally begun to develop with regard to the socioeconomic effects of mass tourism, it has become obvious that the increasing maldistribution of wealth and resultant social stratification are widespread results of touristic development. Various remedies are proposed as an attempt to counteract these problems. While these problems are serious and must be remedied, I am terribly concerned that the question of cultural commoditization involved in ethnic tourism has been blithely ignored, except for anecdotal accounts. The massive alterations in the distribution of wealth and power that are brought about by tourism are paralleled by equally massive and perhaps equally destructive alterations in local culture.

The culture brokers have appropriated facets of a lifestyle into the tourism package to help sales in the competitive market. This sets in motion a process of its own for which no one, not even planners, seem to feel in the least responsible. Treating culture as a natural resource or a commodity over which tourists have rights is not simply perverse, it is a

violation of the peoples' cultural rights. While some aspects of culture have wider ramifications than others, what must be remembered is that culture in its very essence is something that people believe in *implicitly*. By making it part of the tourism package, it is turned into an explicit and paid performance and no longer can be believed in the way it was before. Thus, commoditization of culture in effect robs people of the very meanings by which they organize their lives.

And because such a system of belief is implicit, the holders of it are hard pressed to understand what is happening to them. The people of Fuenterrabia only express confusion and concern about their *Alarde*; they know something is wrong and do not know exactly what it is or what to do about it. The *Alarde* is dying for them, and they are powerless to reverse the process. Making their culture a public performance took the municipal government a few minutes; with that act, a 350-year-old ritual died.

That is the final perversity. The commoditization of culture does not require the consent of the participants; it can be done by anyone. Once set in motion, the process seems irreversible and its very subtlety prevents the affected people from taking any clear-cut action to stop it. In the end, many of the venerated aspects of Basque culture are becoming commodities, like toothpaste, beer, and boat rides.

Perhaps this is the final logic of the capitalist development, of which tourism is an ideal example. The commoditization process does not stop with land, labor, and capital but ultimately includes the history, ethnic identity, and culture of the peoples of the world. Tourism simply packages the cultural realities of a people for sale along with their other resources. We know that no people anywhere can live without the meanings culture provides; thus tourism is forcing unprecedented cultural change on people already reeling from the blows of industrialization, urbanization, and inflation. The loss of meaning through cultural commoditization is a problem at least as serious as the unequal distribution of wealth that results from tourist development.

Epilogue

As this essay was going to press, I received word of the tragic consequences of the *Alarde* of 1976. The now "public" ritual became a major political event. In the context of the acute political tensions in the Basque country, the *Alarde* seemingly provides a means of political expression. Apparently the *Alarde* was celebrated this year amidst an atmosphere of considerable tension. Late in the evening in the fishermen's ward, a boisterous crowd confronted the police and a young worker from the

nearby town of Irún was killed. The sense of shock and anger was intense and will probably play a role in the political future of Fuenterrabia. Perhaps the debasement of the *Alarde* set the scene for this event, and perhaps not. However, it is certain that, given the magnitude of the potential consequences, we cannot afford to merely guess at the political implications of cultural commoditization.

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