

# Perspectives on Paradise:

## Reconsidering the Development of Tourism in Southeast Asia through the Case of Nusa Lembongan, Indonesia

JONATHAN FAARBORG LEHMANN & ASMUS RUNGBY

Based on ethnographic fieldwork on the island of Nusa Lembongan, this paper explores how the emergence of tourist industries influences the local population. Although this kind of development can be found in most of Southeast Asia, this paper analyses ethnographic material from the small island of Nusa Lembongan to argue that the power relationship between foreign guests and local hosts is asymmetrical because it takes place within an unequal, capitalist world system. The morality, globality, and inequality of tourism is at the centre of attention. In this paper, then, we contribute to the ongoing debate on tourism and development by ethnographically situating global tourism in the context of Nusa Lembongan and by showing how the relationship between tourists and locals can be challenging for both sides. The paper argues against reductive econocentric accounts of the impact of tourism as conducive to economic growth and in favour of a more nuanced conceptual model which accounts for interpersonal misrecognition, inequality, and global economic structures.

**Keywords:** Tourism, inequality, World System, Southeast Asia, Nusa Lembongan

According to mainstream economics, the development of tourism on an island like Nusa Lembongan should be beneficial, as the inflow of capital from other parts of the world leads to better standards of living for Lembongans. In this perspective, tourism is believed to create better roads, better schools and in general builds an infrastructure that would never have been built otherwise. A superficial glance at Nusa Lembongan would seem to support this. The roads are indeed better. Electricity is more reliable. Roofs are no longer thatched but made of solid ceramics. But this is only part of the picture. To really understand the impact of tourism, we also have to look at how the benefits from it are distributed. The new houses made from concrete, for instance, are for tourists not locals. The only cars using the roads, indeed the only cars on the island, are trucks transporting tourists to and fro. The boats that bring in tourists to the island disturb the local wildlife and ruin the conditions for fishing and seaweed farming on which many Lembongans rely for subsistence. Consequently, most of the people living on Nusa Lembongan have turned to tourism in order to sustain themselves and in this way tourism has fundamentally changed the conditions of life on Nusa Lembongan.

To fully grasp the impact of tourism, a critical perspective on the inherent power relationship between the guests and hosts must be presented (for a general discussion of the relationship between hosts and guests see Smith, 1978). We argue that for a broader, more nuanced understanding of the relationship between guest and host, the power structures underlying this encounter must be taken into account. Analysing these structures, we rely on theoretical insights formed by Axel Honneth's ideas about morality and recognition (1994), Immanuel

Wallerstein's World System Analysis (1974), and lastly Michael Herzfeld's concept of inchoate intimacies of power (2015). In applying this theoretical framework to ethnographic findings, we show how tourism on Nusa Lembongan reflects the inequalities of global economic structures.

We make use of an ethnographic case observed during fieldwork on Nusa Lembongan from September 2015 until January 2016. Bent Flyvbjerg argues that case studies can effectively illustrate broader social dynamics (2006, pp. 26–27). Accordingly, we analyse a conflict between Ratih, a homestay owner, and a Spanish tourist to illustrate and exemplify social processes between guest and host in an environment of a recently established tourism industry. The conflict is particularly appropriate as an illustration of the impact of tourism on Nusa Lembongan because the dynamics under which it unfolds relate directly to the structural conditions under which tourism operates. Furthermore, combining ethnography with theoretical perspectives creates precisely the kind of knowledge needed in order to push the debate on tourism and development beyond schematic economic accounts.

### **Bali's little brother – changes and challenges**

Bali is, perhaps, the most studied island in anthropology – at least in Indonesia. The Hindu island in a Muslim sea, Bali differentiates itself in terms of religion and cultural practises (Hobart, Ramseyer, & Leemann, 2001, p. 32). Though it lies only a few kilometres to the east, Nusa Lembongan has not been studied in the same way. In fact, only a few ethnographic studies exist (see for example C. Kossmann, 2015, 2015; C. M. Kossmann, Behagel, & Bailey, 2016; Long & Wall, 1996). However, Nusa Lembongan is significant because of the fast pace of the rising

tourist industry and the small size of the island. The island covers only approximately eight square kilometres and has a population of around 4,000 people who are divided into two villages, Desa Lembongan and Desa Jungutbatu. Nusa Lembongan's combination of a rapidly developing tourism industry and its small size makes it particularly well suited to understand the changes and challenges which emerge from rapid restructuring of local conditions to fit the global tourism industry.

Before the advent of tourism in the early 1990's, Lembongans relied on fishing and the production of salt in barter exchanges with Bali and the two neighbouring islands, Nusa Penida and Nusa Ceningan. Some 30 years ago, however, the industry of seaweed farming was introduced and gradually became the main occupation on the island. The money earned from exporting seaweed to the globalised world drastically changed the living conditions and the island saw an influx of modern technology. This process was reinforced by a decree from the independent Balinese administration which prohibited certain fishing practises in order to enhance the environmental conditions for the tourist industry. Since the 1990's, as more and more tourists flock to this little oasis, the demand for accommodation has increased. Thus, many Lembongan families seize the economic benefits of turning their homes into homestays or attempt to access the new tourist industry in other ways. Today, 10 large resorts and some 80 smaller homestays are spread out across the two villages.

### **Privileged tourists**

"Without tourism I would still be farming seaweed like my parents did and I am happy that I don't", Dewa, a surfing instructor in his early twenties living on Nusa Lembongan replied when asked about the current development of Nusa Lembongan. Typical of Lembongan youth, Dewa has foregone former Lembongan livelihoods of fishing or seaweed farming to work in tourism.

As on many similar islands in Southeast Asia,

tourism introduces new economic possibilities (Oakes & Minca, 2004, p. 282). As a consequence of the island's emerging tourist industry, more than half of the Lembongans today rely on arriving tourists. Accordingly, tourism is the main driver of the Lembongan economy.

Our analysis interrogates the new social hierarchy between tourists and Lembongans to gain a deeper understanding of this development. This hierarchy is apparent in the words of Dewa as he elaborated on the privileges of tourists, "Tourist aren't privileged because they can come here and enjoy life, they are privileged because they can *leave*" (emphasis added). Here, Dewa points out the unequal relationship between himself and the tourists. While the tourists always have the economic means to leave whenever they want, he has no choice but to stay and provide service for the arriving tourists. Tourist privilege, for Dewa, consists of the ability to opt out of tourism service relationships. Overlooking this difference between Dewa and the tourists whose patronage he relies on obscures the social experiences of tourism on Nusa Lembongan. The asymmetry of the relationship between guest and host is a fundamental aspect of life on Nusa Lembongan as our ensuing ethnographic example illustrates.

### **The conflict**

Ratih and Made Swandana, both native-born Lembongans, have recently turned part of their home into a homestay for visiting tourists. Like Dewa, they have transitioned from producing seaweed into taking part in the tourist industry. The entire household, the couple and Made's parents, take part in the general management of the homestay. They often lamented the unfairness involved in the relationship between tourists and Lembongans. Yet, as many Lembongan families now rely on this very livelihood strategy, the competition for tourist patronage is fierce and the Swandanas took out loans to rebuild their home according to tourist sensibilities. Consequently, they had little choice but to host as

many tourists as possible or default on their loans.

The conflict in question took place between Ratih and a Spanish tourist on an unusually hot morning in the homestay's verdant garden. Like any respectable Lembongan family, the Swandana's family shrine takes up most of the space in their garden and the actual conflict played out in sight of this Holy ground. The Spanish tourist was looking for time to relax and recharge his batteries. As such, he booked his stay at the Swandanas' homestay through the *Airbnb* app on his phone, which has become the popular choice for booking low cost accommodation throughout Southeast Asia. Unfortunately, as the Spanish tourist loudly informed Ratih, he had a terrible night because the air conditioning in his room broke down. The small fan that was being used as a replacement also kept stopping because of the frequent local electricity outages typical on Nusa Lembongan. Tired and frustrated from lack of sleep because of the heavy humid heat, he felt misled by the profile on *Airbnb*, which promised an air-conditioned room. The tourist approached Ratih as she was sitting on her adjacent veranda doing daily chores. He then proceeded to shout at her, accusing her of trying to cheat him and demanded a refund. Feeling unfairly treated, Ratih responded equally forcefully.

To Ratih and her family, it is no small gesture to return the money as their economy hinges on amounts like this. However, as Ratih is anxious to avoid a negative review on her *Airbnb* page, she pushes the button on the webpage that she believes will return the money. Unfortunately, Ratih, struggling with the English language of the app, presses an incorrect button. When the Spanish tourist discovers that the money has not been returned to his account, he once again accuses Ratih of cheating him. From his perspective, the situation is outrageous; he has recently travelled several thousand miles, paid a considerable amount of money, and, perhaps more importantly, this holiday is his only chance to relax before he must return to "everyday life". This, in combination with the Indonesian morn-

ing heat and his lack of sleep is a vicious cocktail, and he reacts by making insulting remarks about the homestay, the island, and what he perceives to be Ratih's lack of professionalism. The unfairness of having his few days in paradise ruined by an unprofessional homestay owner is simply too much for him and he runs off to find the local police officer.

Meanwhile, tears of frustration and humiliation run down Ratih's cheeks. She feels disempowered by the humiliation and embarrassed about not being able to master the app. She feels insulted by the harsh words from someone whom she had done everything in her power to help. Most of all she is tired of yet another tourist being unreasonable. This was but one of many conflicts we experienced in the field. In the end, the tourist never found the police officer and Ratih eventually found the correct button to return his money.

The conflict illustrates the widely different perspectives from which tourism is experienced and how the pristine island paradise, which the tourist delights in visiting, is experienced by the Lembongans working the tourist industry. Encounters like this one exemplify how people's different economic situations shape their interactions with each other. In the following, we will venture deeper into the relationship between guest and host.

### **Mutual misrecognition**

Axel Honneth argues that the very core of what it is to be a human being is to seek to be recognised as a full and valuable person (Honneth, 1994). When humans are not recognised as proper full persons, they experience a profound injustice (Honneth, 1994, p. 256). To be misrecognised is to feel dehumanised and, following Honneth, it is also morally wrong to misrecognize fellow human beings.

The conflict between the Spanish tourist and Ratih exemplifies this point. The disagreement is not just a simple misunderstanding. Rather, both parties of the conflict seem to be guilty of not recognizing the other's point of view. Ratih might have tried to understand and recognise the Spanish tour-

ist for wanting the room promised by the profile on her app. To the Spanish tourist, however, anger and frustration seems an adequate response in so far as he has sacrificed both time and money to come here. If Ratih had only shown some recognition of this, the situation might not have escalated as it did. Had she been able to recognise his situation from his perspective, he might actually have felt good in spite of the problem with the air-con. He might even have had a nice vacation on Nusa Lembongan and given Ratih and her family a sympathetic review.

In the light of Honneth's moral theory, on the other hand, the Spanish tourist is also at fault as he is unable to recognise the situation of Ratih and her family. Ratih is in a tight spot. She needs the income from the homestay and because of the Spanish tourist's reaction she not only gives up already earned money, but is forced to worry about diminished income as a consequence of the tourist reviewing her homestay poorly. This is a significant blow to her economy. When he also shames her for being unprofessional, it is adding insult to injury. The misrecognition is mutual even if neither of them had any deliberate intentions of hurting the other. However, the mutual misrecognition is based on a fundamentally asymmetrical relationship. The Spanish tourist and Ratih occupy unequal positions. As Dewa pointed out, the Spanish tourist can simply gather his things and leave, while Ratih is unable to move her business and life and needs his patronage. Her family's livelihood depends on the money she makes from guests to her family's homestay. The Spanish tourist fails to see this underlying inequality and disregards the fortunate position he holds.

### **Nusa Lembongan in the world system**

Nusa Lembongan is far from the only place that has been transformed by the huge economic power of tourism. Places like Nusa Lembongan are scattered all over Southeast Asia. The World Travel and Tourism Council reports that one in eleven jobs in the world is in tourism and this constitutes 10 % of the world GDP (WTTC, 2016). Tourism is not just big

business – it is enormous business. Furthermore, tourism is also a global phenomenon. In this light, there is nothing curious about a small island in the middle of the Javanese Sea being inhabited by tourists from all over the world.

One classical framework situated in the tradition of critical theory for addressing such globality is Immanuel Wallerstein's *World Systems Analysis* (1974). Capitalism, for Wallerstein, is a global economic system (2004, p. 17). Wallerstein clarifies how the production of global wealth disparities is a matter of systematically extracting resources from peripheral countries, be they minerals, labour or goods, and amassing them in economic centres in core countries (2004, p. 18). In this logic, the relative poverty on Nusa Lembongan compared to the wealth in the part of the world from which the tourists come is a product of the world system. Starting from the flexible definition of class suggested by Karl Marx as a group constituted in so far as its members are subject to similar economic conditions relative to other classes (1978, p. 608), we may productively combine this with Wallerstein's theoretical framework and think of classes not as segments of populations within particular nation states but rather as economic groups that cut across state borders. In their homelands, tourists may be part of many different classes, but relative to the locals on Nusa Lembongan it is more accurate to think of them as part of the same class with substantially greater economic resources than the locals.

Thinking about the conflict from this perspective casts it in a different light. It is not only about mutual misrecognition. If the global world is figuratively divided into those who can and those who cannot leave Nusa Lembongan, then the guest's behaviour becomes less morally acceptable. In line with Dean MacCannell's argument that global tourism is a modern iteration of a leisure class relationship (2013), the tourist ought to have considered the asymmetry involved in the interaction. For MacCannell, Westerners, who might not be rich in terms of the economic stratifications of their home-

lands but nevertheless are much wealthier than the local people they meet on vacation when they go to Southeast Asia, can afford luxuries which are unavailable to them at home. Applying MacCannell's arguments in a Wallersteinian framework charts a paradox of the modern world system. Before the development of contemporary tourism infrastructures, the luxuries sought by the few rich people of the leisure class were things like gold and silk which could be imported and enjoyed at home. The luxuries of the new leisure classes are, in contrast, the white beaches and the warm weather of Southeast Asia, both of which are notoriously difficult to import. Curiously then, while the physical movement is reversed, in that we now move people to luxuries rather than moving luxuries to people, the social movement of luxury is the same. Failing to see this larger perspective involved in the relation between the guest and the host as embedded in the world system, like the Spanish tourist does, obscures an important power structure inherent to tourism in Southeast Asia.

### **Inchoate intimacies of power**

It is analytically useful to address the conflict between Ratih and the Spanish tourist because it allows us to unfold what Michael Herzfeld calls the *inchoate intimacies of power* (2015). These are the little details, invisible at first glance, which express the relations of power manifest in social reality (Herzfeld, 2015, p. 18). One thing is how the conflict is embedded in the world system, another is the *Airbnb* app itself. Developed by Westerners in their language and used by Western tourists to serve their ends. To a certain degree, the app helps Ratih and her family in managing the bookings of the homestay. However, because of her limited command of English, her interaction with it is less fluent. She understands the symbols that show when a tourist will arrive and leave but not the actual language of the app. Thus, an asymmetric power relation is also inscribed in the app; Ratih is forced to use a foreign language at home in order

to accommodate outsiders visiting her. According to Herzfeld, it is the anthropological sensibility towards this sort of detail that enables us to lift the veil of neutrality from the app (2015, p. 28). The app is a product of an unequal world and mirrors this inequality.

The inequality of the situation, however, does not end with the world system and the app. The very act of buying a night of accommodation is already embedded in invisible and asymmetric power relations. In his discussion of ideology, in the Marxist sense, Stuart Hall explains how ideological distortion can take the form of overemphasizing particular elements (1986, p. 33). As Hall argues, the distortion inherent in the assumption that trade is free is persuasive because commodity exchanges are, in themselves, free (1986, p. 34). However, the surrounding world that produces the commodity and the commodity exchangers is not free. In Hall's view, the distortion resides in neglecting the unequal conditions of trade, not in the freedom of isolated trades. Ratih's subsistence relies on being able to rent out rooms in her home. The tourist also needs a place to sleep, but the conditions for his participation in the exchange are quite different. Ratih must continue to attract members of his class, while neither the Spanish tourist nor his class have any real need of Ratih in particular. Even though the reimbursement of the tourist is a serious expense for her, she fulfilled the reimbursement because of the risk that bad reviews may jeopardize her and her family's livelihood. The Spanish tourist, by contrast, risks almost nothing. Thus, the particular relationship in our case is marked by the freedom of leisure on the one hand and stark necessity on the other.

### **Conclusion**

We should be wary of the tourism industry's gigantic economic impacts. People like Dewa and Ratih work hard to make the best of this new situation, but they do not have the massive resources of the foreign investment companies who build big resorts on the beachfront. Instead, they must make do with

smaller businesses and consequently they reap but a sliver of the rewards. This paper shows how the asymmetric power relationship between guest and host reflects the inequalities of the current world system. Furthermore, it shows how failing to recognise this underlying structure puts one at risk of behaving amorally.

The value of considering the impact of tourism on Nusa Lembongan through the trifocal theoretical lens of recognition, World Systems Theory and the inchoate intimacies of power is that it enables us to understand that economic growth and the rapid development of international tourism imports to Southeast Asian sites like Nusa Lembongan are intrinsically tied to issues of global inequality. In the current world system, the enormous growth of tourism may be inevitable, but the inherent imbalance of power involved in tourism of the kind we have examined calls for attention to be directed at the consequences for the people living in and from tourism. Future research into these aspects would benefit from this more nuanced and less econo-centric model of thought. Tracing the impact of tourism on ordinary life and showing how life is lived within the changing structures it imposes is a key responsibility for social science in general and tourism and development research in particular.

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**Jonathan Faarborg Lehmann** and **Asmus Rungby** co-authored this article. They study at the Institute of Anthropology at the University of Copenhagen.

**Email:** [Jonathanfaarborglehmann@gmail.com](mailto:Jonathanfaarborglehmann@gmail.com),  
[rungby@hotmail.com](mailto:rungby@hotmail.com)

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