Achieving Development Through Tourism: The Case for Ethiopia

by

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What is in writing is inherited
What is in speech is forgotten
-Memiré Wallé
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Preface

The production of this study on sustainable tourism in Ethiopia coincides with a rising global discourse about balancing the shallow representation of the social, economic and political state of Africa. At the forefront of this dialogue is a generation of young and animated citizens of 54 nations who are declaring that they will write, demonstrate, speak and dance their own stories, in spite of the distorted sagas that are imparted on their behalf. Their actions, which follow previous generations’ respective battles for self-determination, are stripping bare the recognizable narratives of abjectness that for too long have acted as ready-made pitfalls to many a well-meaning interlocutor.

The issue of a new age for Africa was raised among students, entrepreneurs and politicians at the African Business Conference at Harvard Business School earlier this year. Dr. Nkosana Moyo, a candid Zimbabwean, who is acting chairman of the Mandela Institute of Development Studies, commended the effort while advising the young adults a dose of caution to minimize the occasionally contrived enthusiasm. He did so not to refute the waves of change occurring for the people by the people, but rather to highlight the need for shrewd awareness about understanding of the substance and implications of this change.

Significantly, he remarked that Africa is the only continent that is attempting to move forward into development according to an institutional framework that is entirely foreign to it. He linked this phenomenon with the current generational gap between parents who know their countries intimately well and their offspring whose knowledge of home is rich but secondary, and perhaps circumscribed to the cultural peripheries of an urban upbringing. In essence, the onus is on the children to go into the deepest recesses of their respective countries, whether conceptually or physically, and situate the transition towards a better place based on the majority population’s technologies, which, in fact, exist.

Perhaps I took his challenge to this generation quite literally by delving into a topic: tourism, that zeros in on a rural setting in my home country, Ethiopia; all of which led to my reconsideration of ideas of what development should be and whose prerogative it is to decide on a definition, a process. This marks the beginning of an exploration into what it means to create a healthy distance enough to speak about issues facing a particular community in an African country. To do so without falling prey to the aforementioned bleak and prejudiced narratives and, on the other hand, to consider the glories of the same community without rendering it a static spectacle of tradition is the challenge that lies ahead.
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Introduction

“Our [goal] to become one of the top five tourist destinations in Africa by 2020 indicates our aspiration to make tourism one of our engines of growth.”

-Tadelech Dalecho

This dream, articulated by the Ethiopian Minister of Culture and Tourism at the Berlin International Economic Congress of 2012, reflects a commitment first declared in the national government’s Plan for Accelerated Growth and Sustainable Development to End Poverty in Ethiopia (PASDEP). The recognition of the mutually reinforcing interests of two separate worlds, tourism and development, took root as early as the 1970s with developing countries in mind. International development organizations, such as the World Bank and UNESCO, lent their support through financing, research and designation of World Heritage Sites. Academics who had once been skeptical, the most notable of them Emmanuel de Kadt, investigated and concluded that if “undertaken consciously and methodically…tourism can make a substantial contribution to the economic and social development of many countries.”

In this thesis I will provide a critical analysis of the implications behind the grand merger through a detailed case study of a unique community tourism project.

The project in question, an adventurous traveler’s gem, is located sixty kilometers outside the buzzing tourist hub of Ethiopia, Zagwe; down a winding maze carved onto the side of a steep mountain range. Here lies the boundary between noise and absolute silence, running water from a faucet and a groundwater stream, rolling asphalt highway and infinite fields of smallholder farms. This is the concourse into a seemingly non-descript parish of approximately 300 families who co-own a campsite.

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1 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qgiQ5BrAxcY
Tadelech Dalecho, Minister of Culture and Tourism in Ethiopia (accessed January 18, 2013)
3 All names of places and individuals have been changed.
that serves as a moment of repose on a jagged trekking route along the basalt escarpment of the Ethiopian highlands. The route is comprised of 11 such campsites that shelter the tourist at night before she resumes her journey with her guide the next day. As proprietors, the community members delegate a four-person council to manage the campsite, which, in turn, coordinates with a tour agency and a guiding enterprise to bring a trekking expedition to life. Together, these stakeholders comprise the project that goes under the name DESTA.

This partnership is predicated on drawing together the expertise and specific knowledge of each of the stakeholders, be it the tour agent’s broad international network of connections into a market, the guides’ comprehensive knowledge of the terrain and regional history, or the community’s embodiment of a traditional way of life. From the nascent stages of the project, the founders, Tsegaye Tafesse and Dave Clarkson, imagined that this rhythmic collaboration that capitalized on the locale’s cultural and natural bounty held great prospects for the communities. Through co-ownership of the land and participation in the actualization of the product, the community could derive a tangible source of income to supplement the livelihoods it garnered from its primary mode of production: agriculture.

Tourism, inasmuch as it serves development, has three main functions. Primarily, it serves as a critical source of foreign exchange that a developing country can use to self-finance the provision of social services. Second, as an industry based on visual and visceral experiences, it represents an opportunity to brand the country, selling a narrative according to the attractions that make the product. Third, it has the potential to provide employment for those who need either a job or supplementary income. This thesis will analyze the latter two functions through a case study of Estaysh, one of the 11 communities that DESTA partners with.

The investigation focuses on the question, to what extent and to what end has the vision that the Estaysh community articulated for its own development been achieved through the DESTA project? By considering the stakeholders in the partnership as independently acting entities, the study aims to elaborate the dynamics of a process in which the tourist, as the customer, is the top priority while the
residents of the community, as the long-term beneficiaries, are also a top priority. Therefore the following two questions: How much tangible negotiating power does the community have in the decision-making process of the product? Does such a project earnestly present a new paradigm of self-sufficient development or does it merely rearrange roles only to reassert the same paternalistic relationship between an external agent of development and a recipient beholden to a version of development that is irrelevant to the her reality?

With regard to tourism’s distinct opportunity to (re)present a country and a chosen narrative, it is a worthwhile task to inquire: How do the voices authority represent the culture and the people who live it? This is a particularly important question in a partnership such as DESTA’s, not least because their slogan is “Experience the Real Ethiopia.” These questions are supported by Maria Eriksson Baaz’s critical reading of the power asymmetries innate in development through partnership. Due to the language barrier between the community members and the tourist, the role of representation is designated to the two other stakeholders, the tour agency – through marketing – and the guiding enterprise – through guiding and educating. Over the course of this thesis, I problematize this issue to investigate how the community’s interests are compromised in this production of icons and spectacles that interpret their culture and environment. Furthermore, I consider the impact of the alternative tourism market in codifying and narrating this anthropocentric tourism product.

In the first chapter, I make a thorough analysis of the conceptualization of Responsible Tourism (RT) and Pro-Poor Tourism (PPT) that is used as a basis of tourism education at Leeds Metropolitan University in the UK. I make the argument that despite the attempts to ameliorate the harms caused by the tourism industry, no amount of control can curb the capacity for irrevocable destruction of resources of some of the processes and activities inherent to tourism. In the second chapter, I analyze TESFA as an alternative process and product and demonstrate how the issues raised in Chapter 1 are manifest on the ground. In Chapter 3, I propose a set of strategies that support an embrace of business, rather than development, as the key to
the success of communities engaged in tourism services. The overarching argument of this thesis follows that rather than attempting the robust expansion of the tourism industry, concentrating on diversifying the tourism services presently available, as TESFA has done, and tailoring these to a high-end market, would provide the economic bounty intended as the principal goal of the undertaking.
Methodology

This thesis began as an inductive study in the summer of 2011 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Having read acclaiming reviews, I followed up an interest in a tour operation that espoused a novel approach to community benefit, namely DESTA. I began by visiting the DESTA Tours and NGO offices, speaking with the manager of the former and the booking coordinator of the latter. After preliminary discussions with both, I interviewed both persons individually. Before long I was returning to the Tours office a few times a week, collecting information from archival material. In these early stages I consulted the two entities’ websites, periodicals that had covered the project (Wanderlust, Irish Times, the Guardian, Outside etc.) and studied formal documents including the federal laws concerning tourism businesses and conference papers about community-based tourism.

With regards to field research, I was able to visit one of the DESTA communities in the northern highlands of Ethiopia for the first time in December 2012. A previous visit was not possible because the campsites stop operating in June and resume in September to accommodate the season of heavy rain that spans those months. Thus, I planned my itinerary through DESTA Tours and arranged to stay at one campsite, Estays, and conduct interviews with the residents of the community over the course of 6 days. Due to the limited time and funds available to conduct the primary research, I did not trek from one campsite to the next, rather choosing to collect as much information from one campsite and its correspondent community. During the course of my stay, I was accompanied by a guide from the DESTA Guiding Enterprise. Due to his relationship with the employees and residents, I was able to access great deal of access to information and help that proved critical for my research.

Over the course of the six days, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 23 residents, 7 tourists, 3 guides and 7 employees of the campsite. The resident is defined as a member of a household that belongs to the general assembly that holds a stake in the ownership of the plot of land the campsite is constructed on. I interviewed
only one member of each household, asking to speak to the head of the household upon knocking on each door. Of the residents interviewed, 16 were men and 9 were women. Each tourist, including those that came in a group, was interviewed individually.

I stayed in a guest tukul at the Estaysh campsite. During that time, I carefully observed the interaction between the campsite employees and in relation to the guides as well as with the tourists. Mealtimes were a particularly high point of interaction. While the kitchen was off limits for me to observe the women’s activities, I listened attentively to gain a sense of understanding of their daily routine. I spoke extensively to the four council members who meet at the campsite every morning. Upon return to Addis Ababa, I interviewed the manager the tour agency upon return to Addis Ababa.

According to the guidelines stipulated by the Wesleyan Institutional Review Board (IRB), I did not audio or video record any of the interviews. I handwrote the responses to the questions then later transcribed them onto Microsoft Word documents. Similarly, no names of the residents, employees or tourists were logged into the data collection. Each interviewee signed and dated a consent form that detailed what the interview questions would be comprised of. The consent form also provided the contact information of the researcher, the thesis advisor as well as the chair of the IRB. All names of cities, parishes, individuals, organizations, agencies and enterprises have been re-named to protect their identities and ameliorate any unforeseen consequences of the information provided in the following study.

The generalizability of this study is limited to the Estaysh parish due to the cross-sectional design of data collection from 1 of 11 communities, which was the only feasible way to do it given the time and financial constraints. However, through the use of secondary sources, including other studies of the project and verbal testimonies of individuals who have an extensive knowledge of its history, I have filled the many gaps in the data. By measuring and evaluating the TESFA project according to the standards and goals that each stakeholder has set for the project, I have attempted to assure a high level of measurement validity.
CHAPTER 1 | Marking the Intellectual Territory of Responsible Tourism

The United Nations made use of the euphoric state of global unity occasioned by the turn of the millennium to impress upon all peoples their responsibility to carry out the ultimate goal of the Millennium Development Goals: the elimination of poverty by 2015. It was in this spirit of cooperation that the design for Responsible Tourism (RT) came together. From the UN Commission on Sustainable Development in 1999 to the conception of the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism at the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) meeting in Santiago, Chile in 1999, the core idea was to “maximize the potential of tourism for eradicating poverty by developing appropriate strategies in cooperation with all major groups, and indigenous and local communities.” In 2002, about two dozen tourism professionals, tour operators and entrepreneurs, national park and NGO representatives, from 20 different countries, formalized the Cape Town Declaration on Responsible Tourism in Destinations. It was a declaration of the goals of Responsible Tourism, namely: to minimize economic, environmental and social impacts and to bring tangible economic benefits to local communities by involving them in tourism activities.

As such, to its advocates, Responsible Tourism (RT) is characterized by its aspiration to “[make] better places for people to live in and better places for people to visit.” As an approach to the industry, rather than a niche, its purpose is to make “all forms of tourism...more responsible” through active participation in collective management of the resources that render any given destination alluring. This call for mutually accountable stakeholders, including “planning authorities, tourism

5 The Cape Town Declaration on Responsible Tourism in Destinations
businesses, tourists and local communities\textsuperscript{8} – as well as governments – provides for the autonomy to prioritize tourism’s benefits to a destination.

Despite the sincere urgency to mitigate harm and shift the focus of financial gain to underprivileged beneficiaries, it would be unbecoming of a scholar to take for granted these claims as self-evident. Hence in this chapter, I aim to investigate how RT proposes to overcome the traditional challenges faced by mainstream tourism. By spelling out the ambiguities in the concepts and convictions that set RT apart from other forms of tourism, I will consider the extent to which the framework entails a truly novel and effective mechanism of alleviating poverty for its target communities. While the proponents of RT attribute the shortcomings of packages and practices to an improper or remiss implementation of the RT framework, I make the argument that inevitabilities in clashing interests that exist within the framework itself pose the greatest challenges to RT’s actualization.

Following the signing of the Cape Town Declaration in 2002, the idea of Responsible Tourism (RT) gained traction within circles of international development professionals, conscious consumers and, to a degree, tourism practitioners. One man in particular, Harold Goodwin, appears at the forefront of the Responsible Tourism movement. As a signatory of the Cape Town Declaration, founder of the International Center for Responsible Tourism (ICRT) and a professor in the Responsible Tourism Management MSc program at Leeds University, he has played a pivotal role in expanding the field in a few directions.

In his capacity as an educator, Goodwin has helped establish it as the standard of a holistic and practical education in this novel iteration of sustainable tourism. The MSc and PhD Responsible Tourism Management Program, the only certified program in RT, endeavors to train a new generation of enlightened and high-skilled tourism professionals who can “contribute to enabling our society and our species to meet the challenges we confront.”\textsuperscript{9} In doing so, these students are learning how to

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid
navigate the complex network of linkages between the private sector, the government, and destination communities that allow RT to take place.

As chairman of the ICRT, one of a few research branches of RT, Goodwin has been prolifically documenting the implementation of the RT framework as well as evaluating where it has fallen short, where it has thrived. Along with the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), the ICRT shares the task of producing the literature that tourism practitioners, governments, tour operators and entrepreneurs alike, use to establish and maintain their responsible packages. Most importantly, the center is one-third of the Pro-Poor Tourism Partnership, a collaborative research initiative with two other development institutes.\(^\text{10}\)

In this partnership, Goodwin has become a key authority in defining, evaluating and pushing the agenda of Pro-Poor Tourism (PPT). With regard to the concept itself, it is the subset of RT that “focuses more on countries of the [global] South”\(^\text{11}\) and “is about changing the distribution of benefits from tourism in favor of the poor.”\(^\text{12}\) Through it, the aim is to increase the participation, and therefore benefit, of “the poor” through cultural tourism, as it “is a way of capitalizing on the assets of the poor, which may otherwise be limited.”\(^\text{13}\) The principle of multiple stakeholders is ever more crucial here because the local communities in question have little access to the market to sell the tourism package. While RT contributes significantly to this chapter, PPT will be the focus due to its relevance to the case of Ethiopia.

Due to Goodwin’s pivotal role in the production of knowledge of RT, as well as his unequivocal support for PPT as a beaconing opportunity for poverty alleviation


\(^{13}\) Ashley et al. “Pro-Poor Tourism Strategies”, p.15
in developing countries, an analysis of his work poses a juncture to help us understand the relationship between RT, PPT, and the mainstream tourism industry, as well as the different niche tourisms. He is not only active on the conceptualization side of RT and PPT, but also on the side of practice. He and one of his former students in the Masters in RT program founded responsibletravel.com, the largest online market for travellers in search of a responsible vacation off the beaten path. In doing so, they facilitated the missing link between the intended consumer demographic and a marketplace that exclusively peddles tailored and responsible travel packages.

Furthermore, responsibletravel.com completes the chain of validation that legitimizes the practice of RT. The aforementioned research institutes produce the field of knowledge to standardize what qualifies as responsible and sustainable tourism. The RT Management Program at Leeds University uses this knowledge as a basis to train future tourism professionals, be they entrepreneurs, conservationists or policy reformers. Practitioners in the industry employ these students and use the knowledge to implement projects that are sound with the logic. Responsibletravel.com identifies the resulting packages of these projects and makes them readily available to the eager consumer. By purchasing the package, the consumer simultaneously endorses RT practice and provides the capital for these projects to remain in business. Given that RT is not necessarily accountable to any federal, statutory or international mandate, this circuit provides it with the authority it needs to practice and to grow.

On the ground, the stakeholders that put RT in practice are brought into a loosely-defined partnership that is predicated on a set of principles that meet their individual interests in any given tourism project, whether it is a luxury spa on the Dalmatian coast or a trekking tour in the Andes. In this purportedly win-win scenario, the “wholesale” tour operator in London benefits from an expanded base of tourists for having fulfilled the customers’ growing demand for an ethical practice in the destination community. The government wields its influence to provide access for RT practitioners to enter more remote areas, conceptually or geographically, relieving
itself of a little pressure in creating employment. In exchange for the community’s agreement to host tourists in their home environment, the locals become benefactors of job opportunity, a culturally conscious tourist demographic, and surplus profit for larger community benefit. The entrepreneur, in turn, benefits from an edge in a market inundated with identical tourism products, reduced long-term costs in maintaining the unsullied quality of a destination, and an amicable relationship with government.

Specifically in the case of a developing country, the resulting tourism package is at once a development project, a business venture and a charitable cause. So how is PPT defined as a practice? Because it is a malleable framework, rather than a theory or a specific dogma, it is an inconclusive task to analyze it through the affirmations by which it defines itself. Therefore, the more explicit ways that PPT is firmly established, is by the territory that it delimits itself to – where it is defined as against other forms of tourism. In its nascent stages, “academics as well as practitioners were overtly keen to push it into the CBT [community-based tourism] corner.” After all, the purpose of both is to generate benefits for the destination communities. Whereas it was external forces attempting to bleed CBT and PPT into a single form, RT, as an overarching framework, took it upon itself to differentiate its principles from those of ecotourism.

The argument against ecotourism, made quite vocally by Goodwin himself, is vast and its angles numerous. First, in his inaugural speech as a professor of the Management Theory MSc and PhD programs, he expressed his concern and irritation that the ecotourism adage, “take only photographs, leave only footprints” is exploitative because

When an area is protected for conservation and tourism, the traditional activities of local communities are criminalized. Local people generally lose access to

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fodder, thatching grass, honey and game – hunters become poachers, criminalized. [They] lose out when a protected area is created.\textsuperscript{16}

Presumably, he is referring to ecotourism’s prioritization of natural ecosystem’s “intrinsic right to existence rather than to serve the purposes of humankind…the ‘bio-centric’ view.”\textsuperscript{17} As such, the local communities are expected to surrender their right of use because their activities are deemed even more harmful than the “respectful” tourists who only take photographs.

Goodwin’s sentiment that ecotourism’s adage is “a license to exploit”\textsuperscript{18} is due to a concern that its focus on preservation (i.e. non-intervention) of the environment is mutually exclusive of the community’s use of their collective resource. In addition, he states that this niche tourism “is predicated on the assumption that these special environments are for free, that there is no reason to make a contribution to their maintenance nor to compensate the local people for their loss of access to natural resources.”\textsuperscript{19} Therefore, if the local people’s resources are being used, they should at least get compensation to make up for the shortfall of the benefits they would have derived from their own use of the resources.

Notably, he does not assume that ecotourism is alone in expropriating access rights to a natural resource. In fact, he acknowledges, “the tourism industry is about renting out other people’s environments – the problem is that the rent is collected by the industry and the costs are borne collectively”\textsuperscript{20} by the community and the industry. Logically, his frustration with ecotourism is that the costs to a local community farming a plot of land in Hwange National Park to put food on the table are much more immediate than, say, crowds of tourists inundating the environs of the Eiffel Tower, a collective resource indeed, but arguably not one that Paris’s residents rely on for their (literal) daily bread. However, in keeping with his language of “the
commons,” it leads one to wonder whether by “other people’s environments,” Goodwin’s use of the possessive refers to the people’s collective access to or collective ownership of the resource.

Considering that he had just expressed that the local people were entitled to the asset because of their immediate use of and need for it, and ostensibly that they have used it over the course of generations, it is tempting to conclude that he means the latter. However, in essence, the commons are “public access goods, which are generally free or priced as merit goods, to allow, and indeed encourage, access rather than to reduce and manage the use of the resource.” Essentially, due to the designation of the resource as a common good, external entities, such as the tourism industry, are equally entitled as the locals to derive utility from it. The only condition he posits is that these entities take responsibility for the management of the resource and compensate the locals for any conflict of interests. Enter Responsible Tourism. RT engenders this logic of “collaborative management, which recognizes that environmental planning can only succeed with the support and participation of all stakeholders” by all of the partners that bring a tourism product to fruition. These stakeholders would include tour operators, the local community, government, development organizations etc.

With regard to ownership, specifically in the realm of PPT, Goodwin and his colleagues suggest “the devolution of tenure rights over assets” as a tactic by which the private sector will be enticed to invest in a PPT project. This counsel stems from the conviction that the private sector “particularly tour operators and lodge operators/investors – play a number of important roles (including product development, marketing, investment and operation” in the realization of a PPT initiative. Be that as it may, this appropriation of legal rights of an asset by any entity that is not the local community means that the asset is no longer a public access good.

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21 Ibid
22 Janet Cochrane and Xavier Font, “Unit 1. Protected Areas: The Basics” in Natural Resources and Environmental Management (Leeds: Leeds Metropolitan University), p.16
23 Ashley et al. “Pro-Poor Tourism Strategies”, p.17
24 Ashley et al. “Pro-Poor Tourism Strategies”, p.9
but rather a private one. That is to say, handing over the rights to a resource to a private entity makes a PPT project equally capable, as in ecotourism, of depriving the local community of its use of the resource. The proponents of PPT, however, do not see ownership as a necessary pre-condition for the local community's sustained benefit from the tourism service. The analysis in the next chapter elaborates an argument to the contrary.

RT is also critical of ecotourism’s intentions from the perspective of the tourist. Based on consumer reports, Goodwin demonstrates that although they would choose a holiday with a company that has a functional Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) policy, it is highly unlikely that “travelers and holiday makers would be prepared to pay a premium for a more sustainable holiday. [But] the RT trend is not about paying more…the case for RT is about enabling the consumer to realize their aspirations.” Therefore, according to the logic, ecotourism’s exclusivity by price deems it an already defunct stratagem because it is not accessible to the average tourist. That is, this niche product does respond to the customers’ high demand for holidays that are affordable and responsible. Conversely, RT is posed as a populist movement that accommodates not just the wealthy tourist but also, and especially, the average Joe.

With regards to pricing, it is important to note that RT does not intend to win over customer loyalty by providing irresistible bargains. In fact, RT's advocates insist that in order for the multi-stakeholder partnership to work, everyone's financial interests must be maintained. Rather, what it does is shift the force that ties down the pivotal motion of competition from price to responsibility, from money to morals. That is, “RT [offers] a form of non-price competition, which unlike price competition [does] not destroy the margins, and create[s] the idea that there [is] a distinctive way to travel increasing consumer loyalty.” Consequentially, rather than compromise the

need for all stakeholders to be compensated for their work, RT encourages the consumer to purchase based on how dedicated a service provider has proven itself in carrying out its ethical and responsible policy.

From the above, one can infer that maintaining just compensation for labor incurred is another mutual interest among the multiple stakeholders. Especially with regard to the local community, PPT practitioners are adamant that if “the poor” are to participate in the realization of a project, it has to be acknowledged that “their time is not for free: time spent in training or in labor in developing a community lodge is time not spent securing food.”27 As such, “Unless the costs [of diverting time away from their primary livelihood] were outweighed by the benefits [of engaging in tourism as a livelihood], then the intervention could not be described as pro-poor.”28

In so many words, Goodwin is demonstrating that “the poor” garnering net benefits is a condition of being a pro-poor tourism project.

Consequently, Goodwin highlights ecotourism’s exclusivity by price as proof of its minimal breadth and another indication of its lack of sway in substantially fighting poverty. “The contributions of a few eco-tourists and ecotourism operators are insignificant at the park or system level.”29 Here he elaborates by putting it in terms of one person’s decision whether to fly based on the environmental effects it will have: "My flight has more marginal utility to me than the insignificant consequence which my contribution to climate change is likely to have on me, during my lifetime. Individually I gain more than I lose, but collectively the species loses.”30 This is the reason why Goodwin thinks it is so important to engender collective responsibility, because in PPT, as in RT, “tourism [can] only make a significant contribution to the elimination of poverty where it [occurs] at a scale sufficient to

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28 Ibid
29 Goodwin, “Taking Responsibility for Tourism,” - speech
30 Ibid
impact on a significant number of households, and to contribute enough to household incomes to raise them out of poverty.”

By saying as much, Goodwin signals the mainstream industry’s capacity for breadth and scale, which ecotourism lacks. Through the broad networks and infrastructure that the mainstream industry is adept with, this alliance assures a comprehensive reach in combating the different manifestations of poverty. Implicit in this insistence on breadth is the understanding that poverty is a complex problem, which requires an equally complex and broad solution. In this way, the mainstream industry is put at the forefront of the RT movement. By definition, this alliance also severs RT from ecotourism, because in the latter, expansion is considered as an inevitable precursor to the destruction of environmental resources. As far as PPT is concerned, the difference between ecotourism and PPT boils down to the fact that “poverty is the core focus, rather than one element of (mainly environmental) sustainability.”

Having addressed the clearly demarcated border between PPT and ecotourism, we now turn our attention to the process of differentiation from community-based tourism (CBT). By Goodwin’s own definition, CBT is “tourism owned and/or managed by communities and intended to deliver wider community benefit, benefiting a wider group than those employed in the initiative.” Thus CBT is akin to PPT in that it is keen to maximize the local community’s benefit from tourism by involving them in the realization of the tourism product. However, as we have stipulated before, PPT does not hold as a necessary condition the ownership of the resource that is being put to tourism’s use.

Goodwin would also be quick to show that CBT, like ecotourism, is an alternative to mainstream tourism. This implies not only that its small scale makes it an equally tenuous ally in addressing the complexities of poverty, but also that it

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31 Goodwin, “Tourism, Local Economic Development and Poverty Reduction,” p.56
32 Harold Goodwin, Taking Responsibility for Tourism, p.37
33 Goodwin, “Tourism, Local Economic Development and Poverty Reduction,” p.56
34 Harold Goodwin and Rosa Santilli, “Community-Based Tourism: a success?” in Tourism and Sustainable Development (GTZ, 2007), p.4
seeks no cooperation with the bigger fish in the industry. In his own words, CBT has “abhorred engagement with the tourism industry and often lacked a market and commercial orientation.” Therefore, in addition to being a boutique product, practitioners of CBT defeat their own purpose of community benefit by not seeking an optimal place for it in the market. In essence, he is saying that far from being able to address comprehensive issues, its inherent limitations exacerbate its inability to meet the proposed objective.

Elsewhere, Ashley, Roe and Goodwin state that whereas CBT projects “increase local people’s involvement in tourism…PPT involves more than a community focus – it requires mechanisms to unlock opportunities for the poor at all levels and scales of operation.” This reference to the critical importance of scale signals that PPT endeavors to overcome the trap of limited reach that, according to Goodwin's own rhetoric, befell the niche tourisms such as CBT and ecotourism. Furthermore, PPT should be able to provide benefits and opportunities to “the poor” not just in these niche tourisms but also in the larger sphere of the tourism industry. Although an optimist like myself would take the “levels of operation” to mean that local communities would become active at every stage of the hierarchy of stakeholders, it is more likely that this means “maximizing the use of local labor, goods and services in the formal sector…expanding informal sector linkages…and creating a supportive policy framework and planning context that addresses needs of poor producers and residents within tourism.” This calls for a revisiting of the “net benefits” that PPT facilitates for the destination communities. As previously stated, net benefits indicate that the benefits to a local community outweigh the costs incurred by investment of their time or resources to the tourism initiative. So what are the resources? PPT recognizes the “economically poor” as “culturally rich [and that they have] assets – social, economic, cultural and spiritual.” These assets are

35 Goodwin, “Tourism, Local Economic Development and Poverty Reduction,” p.56
36 Ashley et al. “Pro-Poor Tourism Strategies”, p.6
37 Ashley et al. “Pro-Poor Tourism Strategies”, p. 14
articulated in the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework. This framework stipulates that the local communities possess financial, human, natural, physical and social capital. These are most likely assets from which they already derive a source of income or self-sustenance. In the case of a project in rural Ethiopia, the farmland that a smallholder uses to put food on the table becomes an aesthetic and bankable asset that tourists enjoy looking at as they trek from one parish to the next. An asset, such as time, however, poses the problem of mutual exclusivity: any number of hours that a farmer is engaged in providing a service to a tourist is time not spent on the farm.

Thus, the argument is that the livelihood derived from tourism has to be worth the opportunity cost of not threshing, winnowing, planting, harvesting etc. PPT aims to strategize the net benefits by focusing them into “three core areas: increased economic benefits, positive non-economic impacts and policy/process reform.” The first is crucial, especially in the case of rural areas where a mode of production like agriculture garners resources but not necessarily income. The first strategy within economic benefits is ‘expanding business opportunities’ especially in the informal sector, which “often [provides] the greatest opportunities for the poor.” The statement that the informal sector is the space of greatest opportunity for the poor is taken for granted and not really explained.

In later pages, Ashley et al. assert that progress has yet to be made in “developing enterprises that supply the tourism industry itself (e.g. with food and materials).” The barriers to this are claimed to be “lack of credit, inappropriate social organization, insecure tenure etc.”, and the solution: training. However, by definition, the informal sector is not organized and does not have the same privileges as the formal sector in receiving sufficient capital. In fact, the informal sector operates on precarious legal ground, and the government, as an active stakeholder in

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39 Ashley et al. “Pro-Poor Tourism Strategies”, p. 14
40 Ibid
41 Ashley et al. “Pro-Poor Tourism Strategies”, p.16
42 Ibid
the tourism industry, would not support its expansion. Furthermore, although PPT had just been defined against CBT by highlighting that PPT requires *mechanisms* as opposed to dispersed, unfocused strategies to increase local people’s involvement, it does not go that much further than CBT in systematizing the local community to benefit from their own enterprises.

The second income-generating strategy is providing employment opportunities for people with sparse economic resources. Ashley, Roe and Goodwin make the argument that “unskilled jobs may be limited and low-paid by international standards, but they are much sought after by the poor.” With regard to the conviction that PPT “unlocks opportunities on every level,” two things have happened so far. First, in PPT, “the poor” do not hold any inalienable rights to the project, be it the physical territory or the product itself, (this was the first condition of difference with CBT), and so far, whether in the creation of enterprises or provision of employment, the opportunities that are available to “the poor” are at the very bottom of the division of labor. Thus, through PPT, the unlocked opportunities for the destination community entail an expansion in number rather than any increased entitlement in the project.

On that count, haven’t unskilled jobs always available to “the poor” in the tourism industry? Presumably, one of the benefits of running a tourism operation in a developing country is the vast availability of cheap labor; it is not as if any business would import low-wage labor when there is a ready source – that runs entirely against the logic of outsourcing. In other words, in the effort to differentiate PPT from CBT, it appears that the rhetoric of “unlocking opportunities” is shifting to the territory of mainstream tourism, as it has always been: business-as-usual. Thus far, this is not a contradiction within the logic of RT *per se*, but rather ambiguity that lends itself to misinterpretation.

It is also important to keep in mind that making “the poor” the primary beneficiaries of tourism is not defined in absolute terms. “The definition [of PPT]
says nothing about the relative distribution of the benefits of tourism. Therefore, as long as poor people reap net benefits, tourism can be classified as ‘pro-poor.’”\textsuperscript{44} This is to say, they are not enabled to exercise exclusive rights over any aspect of the package that might impinge on the interests of other stakeholders. “A stronger definition of pro-poor growth would be growth that \textit{disproportionately} benefits the poor, but this would exclude many tourism initiatives that can usefully contribute to poverty elimination.”\textsuperscript{45} In essence, poverty elimination, however it would be defined, trumps the power of “the poor”. Or rather, increased power is not a necessary condition for poverty elimination.

The intent to set PPT apart from CBT and ecotourism notwithstanding, PPT does not indicate a particularly strong alliance with, nor even confidence in, non-governmental entities. In an article evaluating 10 years of PPT, Goodwin and Ashley recommend as the steps towards assuring the success of a PPT initiative, to “bring together the formal private sector, the small and informal entrepreneurs, residents and governments within a destination and develop a multi-stakeholder partnership approach.”\textsuperscript{46} Presumably, they are not too keen on local NGOs because they “rely heavily on donor funding.”\textsuperscript{47} More importantly, Ashley and Goodwin state that, “[for] too long, tourism ‘special pleading’ and statistical hyperbole from one side has been met – and reinforced – by tourism disdain from the other. Poverty professionals have no affinity with a service sector which pampers the rich, irrespective of how much world GDP the tourism industry claims to generate.”\textsuperscript{48} In no uncertain terms, they are critiquing the development sector of “pleading,” that is, fundraising, for initiatives and simultaneous disregard of tourism’s capacity for self-sustainability, to generate large amounts of capital.

PPT cannot pretend to dismiss the development sector entirely; after all, much of the production of knowledge of PPT occurs in the offices of some of the largest

\textsuperscript{44} Ashley \textit{et al.} “Pro-Poor Tourism Strategies”, p.5
\textsuperscript{45} Chock \textit{et al}. Ashley \textit{et al.} “Pro-Poor Tourism Strategies”, p.153
\textsuperscript{46} Caroline Ashley and Harold Goodwin, “‘Pro poor tourism’: What’s gone right and what’s gone wrong?” (Overseas Development Institute, 2007), p.2
\textsuperscript{47} Ashley \textit{et al.} “Pro-Poor Tourism Strategies”, p.12
\textsuperscript{48} Ashley and Goodwin, “‘Pro poor tourism’”, p.1
development organizations. For example, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) is a source of the information that PPT is based on and was the first to coin the term “pro-poor tourism.” On the research level, these are the crucial entities that provide well-founded evidence for RT practitioners to move forward. Goodwin acknowledges as much in saying, "in order to generate the body of empirically validated knowledge needed to inform policy choices there is an urgent need for detailed applied research on the outcomes of intervention.” This is a task he designates to the ICRT, of which he is a chairman, and other research organizations and the aforementioned development organizations.

However, unlike the other stakeholders, smaller NGOs are not highlighted for a particular and exclusive purpose they serve in RT. Conversely, the role of the private sector is crystal clear and its resources crucial. PPT is contingent upon “ensuring commercial viability […] This requires close attention to product quality, marketing, investment in business skills and inclusion of the private sector.” Goodwin is affirming that without this essential expertise of the private sector, of presenting the consumer with a palatable and even enthralling package, any herculean effort to create the perfect experience with impeccably balanced benefits will be lost in communication between the remote destination and the eager tourist. Furthermore, in terms of scale, the tour operator’s “role is more significant because of the scale of their purchasing power and the influence which they can exert through it.” He cannot reiterate it enough that “there are few destinations in the world where it is possible to travel that do not have mass tourism as well. And by definition you have much more impact by focusing on the larger part of the problem.”

So, CBT and ecotourism are certainly not PPT; and PPT holds small organizations in low esteem. Also, Responsible Tourism and PPT provide jobs that have always been provided by tourism. These low-skill jobs remunerate laborers the

49 Chock et al. “Tourism as a Tool for Poverty Alleviation”, p.145
51 Ashley et al. “Pro-Poor Tourism Strategies”, p. 42
53 Ibid
average wage but do not assure assets for the long-term, such as property ownership. It advocates the growth of the industry and demonstrates no mechanisms of deceleration if the other conditions for PPT are not met. How is PPT any different then from an expanded mainstream tourism?

Its proponents would argue that the institutional partnerships fostered by PPT’s active multi-stakeholder principle, “expanding the tourism sector and increasing the benefits reaching the poor” are expected to happen simultaneously. In a reflection of PPT’s successes and challenges, Goodwin and Ashley lament that “PPT responsibilities are allocated to a part-time ‘community tourism’ staffer or are put under a separate stream of project activities [other than expanding tourism].” However, if it is the case that the stakeholders are not cooperating as they should be in a PPT framework, it brings up the question of whether PPT has, in fact, differentiated itself from the mainstream, of which it is supposed to be the biggest ally.

Second, PPT is certainly against the kind of indiscriminate use of natural resources that mainstream tourism has long been responsible for. However, one of PPT’s recommendations is to “expand tourism while also tilting the benefits to the poor.” Since we have just demonstrated that “tilting” sounds great, but in PPT practice is tantamount to proliferating the same kind of jobs that have always existed, what remains is the expansion of the tourism industry. Regardless of the efficient technologies that would be used in the acceptance of responsibility, expanding the tourism industry means using more resources. In the sustainable livelihoods approach, this would be the environmental capital resource that Goodwin holds ecotourism responsible for destroying.

Thirdly, the argument can be made that even though the jobs that are available to “the poor” are low skill, PPT strongly emphasizes the need for training in all these jobs. "The poor lack understanding of tourists and their interests, so PPT needs to

54 Ashley and Goodwin, “‘Pro poor tourism’”, p. 1
55 Ibid
56 Ashley et al. “Pro-Poor Tourism Strategies”, p.14
focus on appropriate training to increase awareness and understanding of who tourists are and what tourism products they want.” In effect, they learn skills that will make their labor more valuable. Be that as it may, PPT academics and practitioners alike would be first to admit that the biggest problem is that practitioners are not accountable to donors, or to anyone really, for demonstrating whether the poor have received net benefits, nor whether their skills have indeed allowed them to diversify their livelihoods.

Finally, Goodwin asserts that as RT continues to grow, the tourist “who wanders to experience other places as an immersed outsider, becomes increasingly relevant. As experiential travel becomes more common “the framework is…expanded from one concerned with disassociated ‘gazing’ to emphasize a more engaged set of experiences and imaginings.” It is not this increased interest in cultural tourism that differentiates it from the mainstream. Rather, it is the embrace of the (in)authentic, the acknowledgement that since “cultural identity involves myth-making, it is fictional,” the local community can “stage, manufacture and charge international and domestic visitors for culture.” As such, authenticity, at best “a middle-ground between actual history or heritage experiences and the tourist’s perceptions or aspirations” should be considered an occasion to derive profit, rather than a hallowed state to be preserved.

To demonstrate this fact, Woodward and McCombes cite a study by Darya Maoz, who researched the behavior of Israeli backpackers who visit India for extended months at a time and live in conclaves with their compatriots. Challenging the traditional concept of the ‘tourist gaze’ wherein the tourist objectifies and reduces the local community to a consumable product, she describes a mutually constitutive gaze in which the local has equal agency in negotiating the stereotyping gaze of the

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57 Ashley et al. “Pro-Poor Tourism Strategies”, p.15
58 Goodwin, Taking Responsibility for Tourism, p.63
59 Ibid
60 Ibid
61 Ibid
φ Simon Woodard and Lucy McCombes are professors of the Communities, Culture and Heritage Module at Leeds University.
tourist. In response to the backpackers who demand spirituality and complain when they don’t get it,⁶² the locals pose as gurus and reikis, they play “the primitive and exotic, and preserve an authenticity that no longer exists or never did as conceived by the tourists.”⁶³ They stage this perverse authenticity, the artifice unknown to the tourist, in return for handsome monetary compensation. In essence, the hosts capitalize on the tourist’s demands for their own material gain, thereby striking a compromise that meets both their interests.

Even within Maoz’s “mutual gaze” concept, which is supposed to mutually constitute the parity of the two parties, she comes to the conclusion that the tourist retains the greater power, and the acts of resistance on the part of the locals lie “on the defensive side – the side which has to adjust itself, sell itself, hide and protect itself.”⁶⁴ That is, they are forced to compromise their flexibility and self-determination in the service of the tourists, one that perpetuates a belittling stereotype of themselves.

In fact, RT theory is substantially lacking in providing a credible method of proactive resistance for the locals to counter the adverse effects of the rampant growth of this industry it is encouraging. Among the available examples are passive resistance (exemplified by the famed “sullen waiters, rude bus drivers and haughty shopkeepers),”⁶⁵ holding celebrations during off-peak season, therapeutic rituals to regenerate collective identity and organized protest.⁶⁶ Ironically, most of these methods of resistance are counterproductive to the argument that the host community benefits from the influx of opportunity afforded by tourism. Refusing to check a customer into a hotel is a sure way to repel future customers from that business; especially in the digital age where the tourist can give the hotel terrible reviews that potential patrons will read.

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⁶³ Maoz, “The Mutual Gaze,” p.234
⁶⁴ Maoz, “The Mutual Gaze”, p.235
⁶⁶ Woodward & McCombes, “Unit 1. Communities, Culture and Heritage, p. 21
This is not a critique based on a standard it holds itself up to; Goodwin acknowledges that the encounter between the host and the guest is “inherently unequal.” However, it refutes an argument made in response to the critique that tourism corrupts culture. The argument is that the local communities are engaging in the tourism industry willingly. This assertion of agency, however, does not acknowledge that the “willingness to engage” may just be that at the point when tourism has become the primary industry, there are few other options but to join.

Whether this assertion aligns RT with the mainstream or has it depart from the beaten path is not clear. What is interesting is, how this conviction translates in the marketing. Goodwin says, “tourists may arrive with expectations and a desire for authenticity which requires that local people not change the way [they] live, and yet development is surely their right.” First, one may ponder where tourists develop these ideas of authenticity. Second, acknowledging that development and a static authenticity are not compatible does get RT out of the hot seat for promoting two very conflicting aspirations. How does one go about selling Responsible Travel?

One can follow the thread of altruism as the prime selling point of engaging in RT, all the way from the tour operator’s office to the click of the consumer’s mouse. The Marketing Module cites a survey of 400 tourism enterprises that reveals, “the main reason for acting responsibly is altruistic.” That is to say, these businesses choose, if they do at all, to adopt the Responsible policies not because of the many perceived financial and strategic gains that it would afford them, but rather out of a moral inclination, an act of selflessness with regard to the destination communities. In saying as much, they are dismissing as negligible the contribution of resources that the local people are making to make RT projects happen. They do not consider the locals’ contribution has any influence in their financial gain.

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67 Goodwin, Taking Responsibility for Tourism, p.175
68 Ibid
69 Xavier Font, “Unit 1. Marketing Responsibly, or Marketing Responsible Tourism Products?” in Marketing Responsible Tourism (Leeds: Leeds Metropolitan University), p. 13
Even if this is true, this narrative of altruism follows all the way to the primary marketplace for RT vacations: responsibletravel.com. The vacation you purchase here has double value. First, the potential customer is drawn in by imperative callings such as “experience the real Ethiopia”\(^{70}\) and “travel like a local,”\(^{71}\) a promise to the tourist of much closer proximity to the far-off cultures they will be visiting. This allure of accessibility of remote cultures, arguably a claim to authenticity, suggests to the tourist that what she is buying into is more than a business; she is bartering cash for “experiences rather than packages, authenticity rather than superficial exoticism.”\(^{72}\)

Responsibletravel.com speaks on the behalf of the hosting communities by asserting:

> They want you to feel a little like you really live there for a short while, and can enjoy the peace and quiet or the pace and excitement of the place as much as the people who really live there do.\(^{73}\)

Such exclamations of the host’s enthusiasm to be hospitable, as it were, facilitate a preliminary introduction between the host and the tourist, promoting the idea that the impending in-person interaction transcends the financial exchange that preceded it. By and large, the message that the marketer communicates to the tourist is, ‘this is not a business, it is a much more profound connection.’

Second, the marketer relates the qualities of abjectness that surround the community’s realities. There are subtle but deliberate anecdotes of shoeshine boys who had been on the verge of quitting school when a career opportunity afforded by tourism saved the day. There are other contextual bites of information that relate to the tourist and the needs that she can fulfill:

> In Ethiopia where technology has not kept pace with the demands of productivity, harmful environmental


\(^{72}\)Ibid

\(^{73}\)Ibid
practices are common and people usually resort to exploiting land and other natural resources to meet their needs [and if you would exchange ideas on how to protect and conserve the same] such kind acts will motivate them to do more.\textsuperscript{74}

This language of perceived need appeals to the tourist’s moral self, satiates the “do something (good)” impulse. By choosing to vacation in this culturally bountiful, economically impoverished area, your money \textit{and} your time generate an impetus for change. But don’t get them wrong, “this is not charity, but is payment for a quality service by local people.” So it is not a business, nor is it charity, it is development: a supposedly mutual and level exchange. By virtue of having supported and patronized this imaginative poverty elimination program, you, the tourist, are assured that ‘you are there as a friend and not as an intruder.’ In essence, the tourist’s purchase has been a double value special; you are consuming authenticity (for your enjoyment) and poverty (in order to cure the malaise).

However, in the double negation of the tourism package being neither a charity nor a business, this language reasserts the recipient/donor relationship that RT prides itself in avoiding. Taking a second look at the commentary on Ethiopia’s technology, what the local community is lacking in is not just money but motivation. This runs directly in contrast with the claim that you are paying for a service. Rather, it indicates that your mere presence will give velocity to the sluggish development of technology. There is a certain irony in telling the tourist that their act of vacationing, an essentially lethargic activity, is what the locals need to motivate themselves into action.

First, in the RT framework, the local person is rendered visible not just for her own benefit but also to demonstrate (to the tourist) the labor that she engages in, in return for the tourist’s money. That is, she does work not just to improve the quality of her life but also to show the tourist that the tourist’s money is not charity, in the

\textsuperscript{74} Responsible Travel. \textit{Travel Like a Local}. \url{http://www.responsibletravel.com/} (accessed December 5, 2012).
sense that it was not given “for free.” However, in the next moment, the language disavows this labor as insufficient, that it requires the presence of the tourist for the local to be motivated to do more. As such, the host is reaffirmed as a needy recipient of the benevolence on the part of the tourist. As long as this language is the means by which the responsible travel product is sold, no amount of “tilting” the financial benefits of tourism to the host will suffice to change her image from one of a helpless African to one of an independent, enterprising individual.

Consequently, this seemingly unproblematic insistence on “altruism” can be read as a discrediting of the service that the local community is providing both to the tour operator and to the tourist. Rather than acknowledging the relationship between “host” and “guest” as what it really is, a financial transaction between a service provider and a consumer, this language subjects the host to a binding relationship to the “guest” and to the tour operator, the same the latter of which believes that their responsible actions are altruistic. The resulting interaction is one in which the host is obligated to act according to the demands, subtle as they may be, of her benefactors, lest she shun the benevolent hand that feeds her. Such is the result of capitalizing on perceived (or even real) poverty as an occasion to advertise RT as ethical and give its tourism packages more meaning than a supposedly frivolous act of consumption.

This is the reason why the tourist’s use of their money to patronize the host’s tourism business is perceived to have more meaning than, say, the same money that would be used at a business in the tourist’s home country. That is to say, whereas RT expresses the objective of diversifying livelihoods, rather than increasing the dependency of destination communities on any single aid/support program, in the language of marketing, it reasserts the host communities as beneficiaries of a charitable cause, rather than operators of a self-sustaining business. “The income they will earn as a result of your trip will have a great deal of importance for the children and families they support.”75 Again, in terms of the mechanisms of a financial exchange, what it is describing is nothing more than the ability of any person who

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uses the money they have garnered from selling their labor to carry out the responsibilities that they have in their lives. The “double value” narrative is a pretense for RT to exaggerate its own reach at the expense of the service providers, “the poor”.

With regard to the designation of host communities as “the poor” in a PPT framework, Goodwin says, “the language was not intended to be used with beneficiaries – it was intended to ensure that the beneficiaries are the economically poor.” However noble the intention, the language has seeped all the way into the advertising, promoting the erroneous narrative of “altruism” as the driving force behind RT. In consequence, it bodes a bleak outcome for a movement that holds economic empowerment as its central objective. Whatever its plans for development, the beneficiaries, even if they are flourishing as a result of tourism, are fixed into this misleading label of “the poor.”

In conclusion, the academics and practitioners of RT, most importantly Harold Goodwin, elaborately and consistently draw apparently undisputable territorial boundaries to separate it from such niche tourisms as CBT and ecotourism. They do not express the same vehemence in differentiating the movement from mainstream tourism. Rather, due to its gargantuan scale, access to capital and established network, they see mainstream tourism as the vessel of change needed to address the distribution of benefit toward the economic needs of the destination community. However, due to the private sector’s monopoly of the language of marketing and advertising, regardless of how empowering the tourism is to the host community, what is privileged in the sale of the product is what it sells: abjectness. Finally, neither does the re-imagining of the tourism industry assure poverty alleviation, which it purports to be its central goal.

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Chapter 2 | Interpreting the Portrait of a Community

"I may have inadvertently unearthed the perfect holiday: affordable, unforgettable and in one of the most awesome, exotic and unexplored parts of the world. This is a trip that will enrich your life and that you will likely look back on from your deathbed with a smile."77

-Manchan Magan

This was the testimony that Manchan Magan, an Irish travel writer and television personality, shared of his vacation in northern Ethiopia with the readers of the Sunday edition of the Irish Times. The holiday in question, set at a 4,000 ft. altitude in the northern Ethiopian highlands, is indeed splendid in its simplicity and enthralling in its difference. By day, the traveler and her personal guide trek along the gentler dips and peaks of the basalt plateau, inhaling the panorama of vast farmlands that, from a bird’s eye view, look like the patterns on a brown and green patchwork quilt. By night, she relaxes at the campsite resting on a cliff edge where the landscape is even more dramatic, enjoys a warm meal around an indoor campfire, chatting with the local employees and sleeps in a tastefully adapted tukul.78 This is the brainchild of tourism project named DESTA.

The previous chapter elaborated the argument that Responsible Tourism, what is left of the concept after defining it in opposition to other forms of alternative tourism, is a proponent of mainstream tourism’s modus operandi. Harold Goodwin, arguably the most vocal spokesperson for RT and PPT, goes to great lengths to assert that tourism should remain business-oriented, rather than being co-opted by the nebulous non-commercial sphere of “development”. For one, his logic condenses to

Community Tourism Ethiopia – (accessed September 30, 2012)
78 A tukul is a circular hut, typical of residences in the northern rural areas, its base made from mud and rounded rocks and its conical dome strung together by wood and thatched by hay.
the business being self-sustaining because it garners its own profit and thus can re-invest independently. Second, in a business, all employees are remunerated for the labor they have rendered, rather than being grudging recipients of money, as in development via aid, or in-kind gifts, as in a charity. Third, authenticity, rather than being a static snapshot of a locale’s culture in its golden age, is a staged phenomenon, a compromise between the tourist’s great expectations and the performance rendered by the destination community. As such, the local people should capitalize on it for their maximum financial benefit. However, between Goodwin’s insistence on grand scale and the filter of advertising language, the substantive elements of PPT are reduced to the language of altruism and dependency. As such, rather than overcome them, PPT reasserts the constitution of the tourist as the Subject influencing and acting on the host, the agentless Object.

This chapter will analyze DESTA as a demonstrative example of developing tourism as what it has always been: a business. Furthermore, through the analysis of tensions that have occurred within the project due to conflicting visions of development I make the argument that the business framework is the most effective for the rendering of service without the pretense of charity. In essence, the employees are strictly service providers and the tourists, consumers. However, departing from Goodwin’s assertion that ownership by the community is not a necessary condition of success, I argue that the community’s self-determination and control of their collective resources does necessarily require local ownership.

Long before the arrival of the first tourist two men, Tsegaye and John had been working in a multi-sector development program through SOS Sahel in Amba woreda, a project that aimed to solve the recurring issue of food insecurity of the smallholder farmers due to unpredictable rainfall and the fact that of agriculture was the sole means of sustenance. Therefore, the objective of the project was to diversify the farmers’ livelihoods and provide them with alternative, stabilizing means of subsistence, through microfinance schemes etc. It was only when a tour operator friend of John’s, Dave, came for a visit from London than an ambitious prospect

79 Third-level of government administration, the equivalent of a county.
materialized. Perhaps it was the different knowledge sets that they had, Dave knew the global supply and demand of the tourism industry, Tsegaye had the expertise of a development project and knowledge of the nature of the regional and state bureaucracy. The trio hatched the idea of tourism as an alternative livelihood; a wild notion relative to the other initiatives that the SOS Sahel Program had implemented thus far.

Although the nature of the idea was entrepreneurial, the three were contemplating the possibility through a decidedly development-based lens. That is, their initial process codified the potential in a parallel manner to the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, which we discussed in the first chapter. First, they identified the physical capital of the dramatic landscape: a visual manifestation of the geological processes that had shaped it over thousands of years, it was, in itself, an incidental museum of natural history. The curious plants and animals specific to the Afromontane sub-region make it a palpably living and breathing environment; thus, even more enthralling than the still exhibits at a museum.

Through this lens, agricultural labor yields a secondary form of capital that has nothing to do with the material produce of crops. Be it planting bakela, sifting sinde, mulching teff, composting manure or winnowing gebs, farm work has an intrinsically “performance” aspect to it, as an occupation, that the physically immobile, mentally athletic labor of an accountant behind a desk does not lend itself to. In fact, the protracted processes of agrarian life that stretch from the first to the thirteenth month of the Ethiopian calendar are the consistent elements that lend themselves to ebbs and flows regulated by the seasons of sun and rain and the canon of the Coptic Orthodox Church. This is indeed a visual feast, supplemented by the scenic splendor that renders a travel experience unforgettable.

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80 Faba bean
81 Wheat
82 An endemic cereal to Ethiopia
83 barley
Thus far, the plan to establish a tourism project was uncontroversial and quite in keeping with the framework encouraged by PPT. By recognizing the non-financial forms of capital, i.e. the social, economic and cultural assets that already exist in the area, one can minimize the initial cost of establishing a project and make it sustainable from a very early stage. Besides those factors already mentioned, the proximity of the locale to Zagwe, just 60 kilometers away from the tourist hub of Ethiopia, with its series of rock-hewn churches, made the geographical positioning conveniently accessible to the highway that connects Zagwe to the capital of the region, Desei, and to Addis Ababa. Therefore, the financial support that SOS Sahel lent the trio, 150,000 ETB in initial capital, was sufficient to begin the actualization of the idea.

Of course, that was until every parish that the trio approached with the plan responded with adamant refusal. This project required not only the use of their collective resources but also the community’s labor to build the guesthouses. Understandably, the residents and the parish elders alike were suspicious that these strangers were aggressive industrialists who looked at farmhands and saw dollar signs. As the proponents of PPT pointed out in the last chapter, the time that the local community would invest in establishing the project was time they would not be engaging in agriculture, and putting food on the table.\textsuperscript{84} The latter was a lot more immediate to them than the former. How could the community be guaranteed of the long-term benefits and that the men’s intentions held their best interests?

The founders were well advised not to force the matter onto the parishes by going straight to the woreda and seeking legal permission before gaining community support. Instead, they approached the matter through the highest form of social authority: the Coptic Orthodox Church. The church functions not only as a moral authority but also as the fiber that organizes a community into a functioning whole through ordaining the legitimacy of social relationships. Every household is designated as a member of a parish (as a unit of community), by belonging to the

nearest church. At least one child of each of the 24 households I interviewed attends *kess timirt bett*\(^85\) as opposed to the government school. Higher ups in the church also form the elements of a judiciary system by which disputes are settled. Recognizing as much, Tsegaye and Dave made their case to the church elders who would, if all went well, convince the community on their behalf.

The fact that the founding team had initiated the concept from a development perspective gave them the credibility of expertise in environmental preservation, livelihood diversification, and an investment in locally prevalent knowledge. Had they been businessmen instead, chances are they would not have won the support of the community. Consequently, if the project was in fact successful, it was promised that success would not be defined as just the accumulation of profit but the actualization of social, environmental *and* economic goals through the investment of profit in these objectives. Also, the operational concept that the founders had espoused, community-based tourism, by definition stipulated that this kind of “tourism [is] owned and/or managed by communities and intended to deliver wider community benefit, benefiting a wider group than those employed by the initiative.”\(^86\)

As such, the support they eventually gained from the community allowed for the first building of the *tukuls* and the establishment of the project as an NGO, under the name DESTA. In the early stages, the NGO was the managerial entity that oversaw every aspect of the project. Between the staff in the nearest city (Zagwe) and the office in Addis Ababa, tasks were getting delegated to each development employee according to their area of expertise. Among them were a curator of ethnological exhibits (Nigist, the booking coordinator), a veteran of the SOS Sahel program (Shiferaw, the manager), a tour operator (Dave, the Technical Advisor) and the co-founder (Tsegaye, the man on the ground). The capital necessary to facilitate

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\(^85\) A schooling system that is administered by the church.

\(^86\) Goodwin & Santilli, “Community-Based Tourism: a Success?”, p.4

It’s important to note that while the definition of CBT varies and is used flexibly by different projects, this definition highlights the characteristics common to all CBT initiatives.
the functioning of the project came from the Dutch, British, German and Irish embassies.

Evidently, the development model was one in which the NGO was acting on behalf of the communities that had agreed to get on board. What the NGO referred to as the beneficiary community is locally known as an *idir*\(^{87}\). In the case of the *idir* in Estaysh\(^{88}\), all the members of the *idir*, coincidentally, belong to the same church and use the church as a meeting space. Thus, DESTA consolidated the names of the *idir* members and purchased the land for the campsite, making all the residents joint owners of the land\(^{89}\). Then, the *idir* members, now co-owners, who would convene bi-annually for a general assembly meeting in the church, elected a four-member council to manage the campsite and services for the tourists. Consequently they delegated the local management to the council and the NGO retained its role as upper management. For all intents and purposes, the different members of the NGO called the shots and the council, as well as the guides acted accordingly.

Until the NGO’s fall-out with Dave in June 2010, after six years of smooth operations, the business aspect of the project, booking and marketing, was subsumed under the framework of development. By that June, it was clear that there was a disparity in Dave’s long-term vision and that of the rest of the employees for the development of the tourism project. Dave was of the opinion that the plan had always been to accommodate the exponential growth of tourists by carving out a business entity separate from the NGO to power the tourism. The rest were under the impression that making any part of DESTA an all-out for-profit business was self-serving and did not meet the community’s best interests. Dave’s contract was not renewed and he, with the support of the Board of the NGO, opened DESTA Tours, a decidedly business entity, just a few months later.

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\(^{87}\) A neighborhood financial association that raises funds for times of emergency

\(^{88}\) Boya is a kebele, this is the most basic form of government authority, the equivalent of a town council

\(^{89}\) The land was purchased from the woreda, as all land belongs to the government and is leased, not technically purchased, for a period of 99 years.
The break was consequential because while the NGO had been predicated on a strictly development model in which it was a business only to the extent that it allowed the activities of development to be carried out, the formation of DESTA Tours extracted the business element and made it a self-sustaining entity. The tug of war that ensued between the NGO and Tours over rights to booking and marketing indicated that this aspect held a kind of autonomy that the rest of the managerial duties did not. Whereas the rest of the duties were dependent upon the capital garnered from the donations of embassies and charities, which required some degree of accountability to the donors, the booking was a task through which independent interests could be pursued by virtue of self-sustaining capital.

Look at it this way. For every night a tourist stays at a DESTA campsite, she pays about 1,000 ETB. 25% of the entire amount pays the guides, 15% goes to the Technical Support Unit (the booking and marketing entity) and 60% goes to the community. The NGO did not get a cut per se; it only received the 15% as long as the Technical Support Unit was subsumed under its jurisdiction. For the DESTA project to achieve financial sustainability, there would indeed have to come a time when the earnings garnered from the tourism activities would suffice for running the costs of the whole operation. When such a time came, whichever entity held the rights to the portal through which the tourist exchanged money for a travel experience, the booking, would be the entity that allowed the communities to remain in business.

Therefore, the entity to whom the marketing and booking was entrusted not only held the possibility of pursuing sovereign interest, but also long-term sustainability as a stakeholder. Although Dave had the support of the Board, he was not able to secure exclusive rights to booking and marketing. It appears that the proprietors of the other aspect of great leverage (ownership of the campsite), the community, were not willing to grant the exclusivity. The community allowed the NGO to stay afloat by designating both the NGO and Tours as agents that had the right to market their tourism product through websites, ads, brochures etc.

As a result, the establishment on the ground of the community as the owners of the income deriving asset, i.e. the exclusive right to rent out their environment and
collect on the rent, allowed them to retain a solid degree of control, while tensions and quarrels precipitated in upper management. Furthermore, it provided them the freedom to protect their interest in continuity of the stream of tourists rather than leaving it to the NGO board to decide who does the booking and marketing. Ostensibly, once the revenue from tourism allowed them a form of sustainable livelihood, it would increase the vulnerability of their supplementary source of sustenance to expropriate benefits from them for the sake of quieting down quarrels between the NGO and the tour agency.

In the tumultuous year of 2010, when these problems were beginning to boil over between the NGO and the tour agency, the guides who accompany the tourists on their treks consolidated themselves into a microenterprise under the name DESTA Zagwe Lasta Community Tourism Guiding Enterprise (LLCTGE). As the second of three entities that collect on the rent from tourism for a tangible service that they give to the tourist, they too were able to sustain a level of autonomy. In fact, DESTA NGO was the only stakeholder that was non-profit, which meant that the salaries of the people did not come from the tourism activities but rather in the form of the cash from the donors; the NGO was not considered overhead. Also, the guides had the added advantage of leveraging the sheer geographical distance between the community and upper management, 500 plus km between the community’s coordinates and the seat of the NGO and the tour agency. The guides carved out a niche as the mediators between the local people and the other stakeholders so that the community could transition into a new phase that was not predicated on the development model.

The dissolution of DESTA NGO that came in the last few months of 2011 meant that the council that oversaw the tourism activities on the ground would now absorb the managerial duties that the NGO had carried out. As such, the project had become financially sustainable, and it was time to show that the standards that the different members of the NGO had insisted on while they were managing from above could and would be sustained by the council and the community. Consequently, whereas before the model of management had made it such that the community, the
council included, was recognized as a single entity with the same interests, this new business model that gave the council more power would express the differences in interests among the community members.

Whether it was as a result of the NGO’s dissolution that the following events occurred, or that the collapse revealed the differences is not clear. However, what is clear is the events that transpired when management was under the jurisdiction of the council members. Presently the most self-evident characteristic of the project at the campsite is that the employees, the four-person council, the four chefs, and the three guards derive a tangible income from the fulfillment of their duties. They are a business. They operate quite like any hotel operates. The camp manager is the concierge who welcomes the tourists and helps them to get settled in. The chefs provide an afternoon snack after the tourists’ long trek and then a warm dinner to fight against the heavy winds. The guards protect the premises so that the tourists can sleep soundly and undisturbed.

Unlike in a hotel, however, come nighttime, the employees mingle with the tourists. Dinner is served in the main tukul, a big, airy, circular space around which the tourists, the guides, the camp manager and the guards gather over an indoor campfire. Conversations are numerous and fluid, the guides speak as well as interpret between the employees and the tourists. The camp manager, who until this point has been quite reserved and preoccupied with making sure everything is in order, relaxes and engages the tourists, via the guides, in artful conversation. He is fond of riddles and speaks in metered speech, not to mention that his distinct laughter, as one guest commented, invites conversation. Among the comments in the guestbook were votes of appreciation for dance lessons, magic tricks and language exchanges that happened around the campfire. As such, besides their practical duties, the camp manager and employees invest extra time to entertain the tourists.

The tourists are bade farewell in an equally warm fashion. In the morning, the other three council members (the treasurer, chairman and secretary) arrive early to meet the guests, ask them about their stay and to settle the bill accrued for drinks from the night before. While the tourists resume their trek with their guide, the
council members run over calculations and consult with the guards and chefs about what needs to be bought etc. for the next round of guests. The council members, technically the employers of the chefs and guards, have a distinct relationship with the employees beyond the exchange of a fixed wage rendered for a day’s service. Each employee and employer receives a fixed wage for every day of service they provide at the campsite. This is arguably because the employer and employee are not strangers to each other, they belong to the same idir\(^{90}\), they attend the same church. In fact, two of the council members are renowned priests. So the same two people who are ‘camp manager’ and ‘chef’ at the campsite would likely encounter each other that very Sunday as ‘congregant’ and ‘priest’ at the church.

In fact, three out of twenty-four of the members of the community I interviewed – who hold a share in the ownership of DESTA but are not directly involved in its management – argued that the aforementioned social relations run much deeper. That is, the camp manager is likely also the uncle of the man the chef married. In no uncertain terms, these three interviewees charged the management of DESTA with nepotistic practices that frustrate the interests of the community. They elaborated that the nepotism occurred in two ways: employment (as in, active participation) and wider community benefit.

A note regarding active participation before considering the claims of nepotism: there are two ways that a member of the community can take part in the tourism product on the ground. First is through the rotational position of menged meri. This is the local guide, not the guide through the enterprise, but rather the one who meets the tourist and the official guide on the highway where they have just been dropped off. He straps the guests’ luggage onto the mule and leads them on the 2-hour journey to the campsite. For this service, he is compensated the same amount as the chef or the camp manager, 40 ETB. This position is rotated among all the participating households of the community every time a tourist group arrives. The

\(^{90}\)“Idir is an association of people that have the objective of providing social and economic insurance for the members in the events of death, accident, damages to property, among others.” – (Bezabih Emana, “Cooperatives: A Path to Economic and Social Empowerment in Ethiopia” – ILO Working Paper-, p.2)
second is through the provision of the mule, the same one that the luggage is strapped onto from the highway to the campsite. A household receives 20ETB for renting their mule as a form of transportation.

Despite this manner of participation that allows the community to see the tourism project more clearly, these two positions in and of themselves do not give the residents a sense of heightened ownership or of community benefit. On the subject of community benefit, while 16, out of 24, of the interviewees were in support of DESTA as a project, only 11 agreed that they derived a tangible benefit from the project. On the other hand, 4 said they did not support DESTA and 10 said they received no tangible benefit from the project. 2 interviewees conflated DESTA with a government project that trains women in improvement of agricultural practices. This mixture of ambivalence, support and lack thereof indicate that the ‘we’ concept that the NGO had imagined that they had engendered among themselves and the members of the community was not quite operational.

The charges of nepotism are not lost on the council members. In fact, the camp manager and one of the menged meri expressed explicitly that the only way they were able to maintain consistent service to the tourist was through the employment of persons they knew to be reliable. According to their explanation, the rotational post of menged meri, which is available to all households, may be good for the community for financial gain but it presents a slew of problems for management. First, a majority of the menged meri had a penchant for arriving late to pick up the tourist group. This not only pushes back the schedule of the trek but also gives reason for the guides to question the council members’ accountability for their employees. The case was that much worse the one time a menged meri ran off with the mule and the tourist’s belongings.

In the event of lateness or other, though infrequent, misdemeanors, the council members run into the problem of enforcing hard-lining authority to punish the offenders. This is precisely because of the inextricable links of a tight-knit society in

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91 Interview with residents of Estaysh, December 24-December 30th, 2012.
which the chairman may ‘fire’ a menged meri today and encounter the same man to settle a dispute among neighbors the next day. As the camp manager put it, they know the intimacies of that person’s life outside of their minor misconduct and there is nothing more that they can do other than prevent the person from being a menged meri again. As such, he legitimates the use of reliable networks they know will follow through with their commitment, to maintain a level of professionalism that keeps the business of serving tourists afloat.

However, it is important to keep in mind that temporary employment is only one of two ways that any member of the community can benefit from DESTA. The second comes from each household’s stake as an owner of the campsite, a proprietor who rents out the space to tourists and collects the rent from it. This rent comes in the form of profit after the overhead costs of maintenance and administration have been deducted. This is, the money that remains of the 60% that upper management in Addis and Zagwe hands over directly to the community after all wages have been paid and goods have been bought to replenish the service. At the very least, 20% of that 60% is profit that goes into an abkute amari bidir ena kuteba; the equivalent of a savings account where the money is stored permanently but is available to the community in the form of micro-loans.

To that end, community members do not collect dividends by virtue of their ownership but rather the profit is kept as a collective account on their behalf. As the plan had originally been during the NGOs time, the operational concept remains that the council should invest the profit in projects that the community deems important to their lives. This was the case when, at a gathering of the general assembly, the community agreed that a grain mill was their most urgent necessity. After every harvest, the women collect the grain into burlap sacks and carry it on their backs a two-hour walk to the nearest grain mill. There was no dispute among my interviewees that this was the most labor-intensive farm activity and that a solution was necessary.
According to a particularly vehement interviewee, the community and council agreed that 20,000 ETB would be invested in the construction of a *tukul* to house the machinery and for the machinery itself. He and another woman gave testimony that they had contributed their free labor, and that of their grown children, to carry the building materials necessary for the *tukul*. There was quite some excitement about the prospect. Then, the same interviewee continued:

> After a consensus had been reached and the *tukul* had been built, the machinery for the *weicho* (the mill) arrived and some aggressive dispute ensued. The police had to intervene to settle it. Besides that the machinery was faulty, there is little else we heard about what went wrong. So instead the council decided to make the *tukul* a grain bank.92

In the interviews, the council members did not venture to clarify the complication behind the investment, in fact, they simply said that their biggest achievement for the community so far was the investment of 20,000 ETB in a grain bank and that they had employed 9 youths to build it. The logic behind the grain mill is that a particular crop could be bought en masse during a season when demand is low, thus the price is low, and that when the demand rises again, it could be sold to the community members at a reduced price from what they would find available on the market. It is also a legitimate source of food security in case there a year of bad rains comes.

Regardless, there are quite a few residents who have become disillusioned with the project because: a) the idea of the grain mill was entirely abandoned and b) they remain uncompensated for the labor and time they had personally invested in it. We can read this as demonstrative that it is a misleading claim that development or poverty alleviation according to the goals of the destination community is the necessarily subsequent effect of bringing tourism to an area as a source of income, even when it is focused. At least in the case of DESTA, the way it has played out instead is that tourism has achieved a stable and solid source of alternative income for the employees of the project but that not even the surplus of the revenue necessarily means that the other social, economic or environmental issues prevalent in the

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92 Interview with Estaysh resident #11, December 27th, 2012
community are going to be addressed just because the money is available to make it happen.

As such, the problem of addressing the most salient issues to the community does not have to do with scale, like Goodwin had insisted upon in the first chapter. Building more guesthouses, as we will consider in the next chapter, presents a whole other set of problems. As for the argument that community ownership is not a necessary condition of the success of a tourism project, the following paragraphs will demonstrate that a ‘pro-poor’ project is in a much better place to derive income, whether for a few or for the many, through ownership by the community than otherwise. The leverage it allows them to maintain their own standards and practices for the business is not something that is purchasable by a sum of money.

Although the failure of the implementation of community benefit through a larger investment may be indicative that this model, promoted and exemplified by the NGO, just may not work in context, the two entities remaining in upper management, the guiding enterprise and the tour agency, both remain committed to this procedure of development. When the NGO collapsed, and perhaps even before then, the professionals who supposedly had the expertise to implement the initiatives of environmental conservation, provision of public services (schools, health centers etc.), and the professionals who facilitated them, dissolved with the NGO, as did the funding from the embassies. Thus, the dream of development for community benefit is relegated to an obliging actor: the tourist. In the previous chapter, RT, in partnership with DESTA’s own marketing, had posited the tourist’s time and presence as an active agent of development. Within this context, the battle over exclusive rights to do booking and marketing, which the tour agency had previously fought with the NGO, approaches a new frontier: the revival of the dream; and a new contender: the guides. The tourist, although acting in her own interests, becomes implicated in this altercation.

The back and forth between the guides and the tour agency is by no means hidden but exists, perhaps to the detriment of the project, on the Internet. According to a message posted by Dave in a Trip Advisor forum:
It is agreed, that DESTA Tours is the agent for the DESTA communities and so all bookings should flow to DESTA Tours (although the agreement is still to be finalized. If a guest is already in Zagwe - we would recommend they speak directly to the Guiding Enterprise in Zagwe, however we recommend advance booking to avoid disappointment as some of the treks do get booked up in advance.\footnote{\url{http://www.tripadvisor.com.my/ShowTopic-g293790-i9957-k5866981-Tesfa_Tours_is_taking_advantage-Ethiopia.html}}

Whether each of their purposes is to gain a business advantage or to promote larger community benefits is impossible to gauge in earnest. What is palpable and ever present, however, is the appeal to authenticity, both as a means of gaining that exclusive right and of attracting the tourist through the same authenticity, for the purpose of community benefit.

Consequently, the leverage that Dave has to win the exclusive license to sell the tourism product is by describing his legacy as a co-founder of DESTA as a development project, for the merit of the entire community. He attests, “I have been working with the Meket communities since 1999, and after much struggling we had our first proper hosted clients in 2003.”\footnote{Ibid} In an interview, Dave also asserted that his responsibility to the communities is “to assure that they operate at a meaningful profit,” that “the profit be used in a transparent way and towards bigger projects,” and to “maintain awareness on the side of the community that everything that is being done is for their benefit on the other side of the line.”\footnote{Interview with tour operator Dave Clarkson, January 8, 2013} In doing so, he does not refute DESTA Tours’ business interests in remaining the face of DESTA communities to the world but rather highlights it as standing side by side with the goal for larger community benefit\footnote{In fact, a dispute over the original website demonstrates that his legacy works to the benefit of Tours. Some time back he had proposed that the original website, the NGO one, be changed to a .org, rather than what it had been from the beginning: .com. Neither the communities (all 11 of them), nor the guides were too pleased by what they took to be transgressing the bounds of his authority. The community’s concern was that most of the tourists knew this original websites and if they recommended the vacation to their friends, the website would be much harder to find; given that the counts of hits on Google would}.
On the other of the struggle, the guides’ claims to an authentic relationship with the community rest on: a) a shared national, regional and cultural heritage with the communities and, b) the daily encounter with the communities through the duties of guiding. With regard to the first, all three guides I interviewed see themselves as part of the community. Based in Zagwe, they hail from the surroundings, whether Zagwe itself or the more rural environs just like the communities they work in. When it comes down to it, they recognize themselves as a self-made, free-acting enterprise that creates jobs for young Ethiopians like themselves. Whether in a CBT or PPT framework, they too would be recognized as the beneficiaries of a tourism project.

Secondly, they view as intrinsic in their role as guides the responsibility not only to be “language ambassadors” between the community members of the tourists, but also to “assure that the community members be able to maintain their culture and the simple lives they have chosen for themselves” and “to improve the distribution of the profit of income”\(^97\). They also cite lending their expertise, based on their advanced degrees including in law, business administration and accounting, as informal advisors to the management of the community’s tourism business. In their bid for a stake in booking and marketing, they are not seeking exclusive rights but rather, given their relationship with the community, simultaneous rights as the tourist agency has.

In both cases, the tour agency and the guides make a case for the right to do marketing and booking based on claims to an authentic relationship that supersedes their respective business interests. Despite these arguments over whose roots run deeper, as it appears that the communities have not given either entity exclusive rights to booking and marketing, perhaps it is all the same to them as long as guests arrive. One can venture to assert that this may be the reason why the battle has appeared on

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\(^97\) Interview with guides Minyahl and Yared, December 30\(^{th}\), 2012
the web. Because there has yet to be closure on the side of the service provider, the guides and the tour agency have gone to the other end of the transaction to one-up each other in legitimacy by appealing to the consumer, the tourist. The argument over the authentic relationship is supplemented by claims of who has the community’s best interest at heart.

With regard to the dream of community benefit as development, the commitment to this goal is not just a vestige of DESTA-NGO but also part of the global discourse on an alternative approach to tourism. As we saw in the last chapter, whether in RT, PPT, CBT or DESTA Tours’ rendition of the community concept, what differentiates the travel package from a mainstream vacation is that the greater community, not just the employees are the beneficiaries of the business. Thus, the discourse works to the advantage of both entities in their insistence on the importance of investing in larger projects for community benefit. Curious it becomes then, to consider that although both entities speak the language of community benefit, neither intervened to save the community benefit project par excellence, the grain mill, when it failed calamitously. Whether this is a case of negligence or simply a conviction that it is up to the community, as a self-sustaining business, to address the matter, the insistence is demonstrated as at least part rhetoric rather than all action.

Still, the rhetoric is very useful in operationalizing a language that speaks to the tourist. In essence, as the consumer pulls the cash out of her wallet to pay for her vacation, she is struck by the question: which way will my money benefit the community more, if I book through the guides or if I book through the tour agency? The authentic cultural experience is guaranteed because whomever she books with, the community she visits is the same. However, given the circumstances, the narratives are promoted through marketing and through the travel experience itself, and are not necessarily based on a disinterested representation of the local community but rather a specific interpretation that substantiates the agenda of the guide or the tour agent.

As such, the elements of the narrative that the tourist takes to be authentic culture are steeped in practices of self-interested representation. Take the
performativity of agricultural work illustrated in the beginning of this chapter. Besides simply being a visual feast, the performance of work is rendered by the guides as a signifier of work ethic, a representation of the dignified, hard-working Ethiopian. This interpretation constitutes a spectacle, a “multilayered performance that surrounds attempts to create and control particular representations of nature, [which] employ simultaneously enacted, often competing narratives.”98 The guides are particularly invested in this interpretation for their own reasons.

First, they see themselves implicated in this very image of the self-sufficient, dignified Ethiopian. As one guide put it (in response to the question ‘What is the most rewarding aspect of your job?):

This job allows me to communicate with so many different people, and for us as a guiding enterprise being able to make decisions as a unit when there is a crisis, the freedom to do it for ourselves is important. I’m able to cover my own basic needs and be self-sufficient. Also, creating jobs for the young people in our city is so satisfying.

Secondly, they take Ethiopia’s image problem in the international arena seriously. Two of three interviewed guides ranked “changing the tourist’s perspective of Ethiopia” as the top priority of their enterprise. As demonstrated by a casual conversation I had with two guides, the goal is to change the image of Ethiopia by demonstrating action that proves the case of a new narrative; i.e. displacing the passive recipient of foreign donation with the image of a diligent farmer, an occupation held by more than half of the Ethiopian population99.

In fact, around the campfire one night, there was lively discussion between the guides and the tourists that compared the work of Bob Geldof, in the service of Ethiopia, with a project like DESTA. Lukas, one of the guides, made the argument that by appealing to the world’s compassion through images of emaciated Ethiopians, Geldof reinforced the image of famine and helplessness that has long outlived the phenomenon and stuck the nation with a PR issue it has yet to shake off. On the other

99 Interview with guide Yared, December 30th, 2012.
hand, he stated, a project like DESTA opens the tourists’ minds to the idea that the rural folk who had once been portrayed in all too familiar postures of abjectness are neither in a perpetual state of starvation nor are they bereft of the agency and the resources to meet their basic needs. The tourists, an Englishwoman, her mother and her Thai friend, expressed genuine surprise at this interpretation of Geldof’s global campaign.

There is plenty of evidence of the community members’ hard work. In response to the question ‘what are your goals for the future?’ three chefs, all women, and at least half of the interviewees stated “serto melewet”. The literal translation of this phrase is (doing) hard work for a better life. Various interviewees supported this claim by adding “there is nothing I can expect, by way of hand outs, from the government, I can only till the land and make it more productive”, “if I can’t work hard and save the money I earn while I’m still young and have strength, there’s no way I can do it as an old man,” and “if I work for it and get it, it means I have improved.” 100 15 of the 24 respondents also said assuring that their children finish high school is their top priority.

While this may be supporting evidence on the side of the guides to legitimate the element of the work ethic, it is important to note that it is not necessarily the work in and of itself that constitutes meaning to the rural denizens’ lives. It may just be that the work that they are committed to is toward the fulfillment of their personal goals and exists independently of the desire to perform or allow the guides and the tour agency to demonstrate to the tourist that they are hardworking. In other words, the desire to use the image of the farmer tilling the land as verification of a narrative that argues against indolence and lack of agency is decidedly that of the guides, and not the farmers. The narrative is a representation and not necessarily the fact in itself. Be that as it may, it is a spectacle that the tourist is keen to hold on to. William Easterly, himself once a patron of the DESTA business, commented on the “tenacious skill and hard work…and the dignity of local people…who don’t consider themselves the

100 Interviews with Estaysh residents, December 24-December 29, 2013.
poor”\textsuperscript{101}. This comment portrays the inextricable link fabricated between the dignity of the people and their hard work.

Furthermore, it is within this context of the paramount importance placed on this element of the narrative that makes the tardiness of the menged meri (the local guides discussed earlier) a point of tension between the guides and the council. That is, according to the guides, not attending to the guest in a timely fashion indicates a level of unprofessionalism that undermines the principles of a good business and the narrative that tries to disprove laziness. To give another example, on the second day of my stay, Lukas, the guide, and I returned to the campsite for lunch after having walked a couple of hours to conduct interviews. We found the campsite abandoned, the chefs who were to prepare our lunch absent, save for the guard. Lukas was livid that the employees would be so neglectful of their jobs.

It turned out that there had been a funeral, and most of the community attended. Rather than being a sign of their neglect, this situation can demonstrate the subtle ways in which a new venture like the tourism project can contend with longstanding social obligations that weave relationships together within the community. The employees already make many compromises, in terms of time diverted away from their primary mode of production (agriculture), fulfilling their religious obligations (they work on the Sabbath) and their household duties (the women bring their babies to work because there is no one else to look after them). In fact, one chef’s husband is rumored to have divorced her because he did not want her earning an independent source of income from DESTA. Rather than attempting to vindicate the employees for their ‘unprofessionalism’ I mean to illustrate that the opportunity cost of engaging in the tourism business is not defined only by time diverted away from other sources of income but also from networks of social obligation that can be equally important to a person’s life as their bread and butter.

These elements of the local people’s lives are perhaps more authentic in practical terms than the ones that are packaged and sold to the tourist. The production

\textsuperscript{101} http://lalibelactge.com/sample-sites-2.html
Testimonials – accessed March 29, 2013
of so-called authenticity for the sake of tourism is dependent on a very selective process that deems one facet of a practice worthy of a travel experience and another facet a nuisance. As my luck would have it, that day I was at the abandoned campsite while the employees were at the funeral, I was spatially mis-located at the losing end of a “marvel of authenticity”. A more fortunate guest shares her story of how she spontaneously happened on such a priceless spectacle:

Almost unbelievably we came upon that very funeral the next day – people dressed in their best congregating in a field. The costumes, the coloured parasols the horses dressed in medieval type costumes. The crowd circling the decorated coffin singing and swaying to music. You couldn’t have planned it in a month of Sundays and again you had that feeling that this experience was very, very special and every second had to be savoured and committed to memory.\textsuperscript{102}

Only as a recapitulation of a travel experience could such a description of a funeral, which necessarily follows the death of somebody’s loved one, come off as anything but sadistic. It does point to an inevitability of making culture, as it is manifested in daily life, the focus of tourism. As Dave put it, “back in the beginning all the guests were completely blown away, they would send us comments like, ‘Don’t change a thing it’s absolutely perfect!’”\textsuperscript{103} Now we get some mixed reviews. He points to the encounter between the first community and Brad Pitt, when he visited in 2004. Not only was the superstar as completely strange to them as any ferenj, but they also asked him “What is America?”

Therein lies the quintessential meeting between two parties from opposite worlds, a mutual ignorance and the opportune moment to form a bridge. This is the dream of a new age of tourism, manufactured as high up as the UN World Tourism Organization: “Firmly believing that, through the direct, spontaneous and non-mediatized contacts it engenders between men and women of different cultures and lifestyles, tourism represents a vital force for peace and a factor of friendship and

\textsuperscript{102} http://tesfatours.com/contact/guest-book/  
TESFA Tours – Guest Book (accessed March 4, 2013)  
\textsuperscript{103} Interview with tour operator, Dave, January 8, 2013.
understanding among the peoples of the world."**104 Through the testimonies of other tourists, DESTA promises the same. Magan, the Irish travel writer, tells his readers, “It’s hard to overstate the sheer otherworldliness of the Ethiopian highlands…the highland terrain has helped shelter this part of Ethiopia from foreign influence, and as a result it is now one of the best preserved and culturally distinct regions left on the planet”**105. The communities therefore come off as a naturally self-preserving entity enforced by their advantageous geography. They are also portrayed as anticipating every new visitor with the same level of unawareness.

This promise of a mutually virginal experience, which holds the essence of the disavowal that the tourist is anything more than just a tourist, is nothing if not unsustainable. The fantasy of a unique and singular experience between ‘host’ and ‘guest’ is jeopardized by the tourists’ very presence. After a certain point, the locals become accustomed to the tourists as a normal fixture of the landscape. Therefore, in order to maintain the fantasy the tourist always wants to see a little more, something different, than the tourist before her. Thus the reason why chancing upon a funeral, the spontaneity and novelty, resonated with her sense of a ‘very, very special’ experience. The more orthodox elements of daily farm life, such as the performance of farm work, pale in search of a newer image. The tourist interviewees expressed a similar fancy to go further than being shown an image of farm work. “We would have liked more conversation, nothing necessarily intensive or intrusive, but if we could ask them a few questions, just ‘How is your family? Good harvest this year?’ There is only so much a guide can say ‘and this we see here is winnowing.’”**106

Five out of seven tourist interviewees echoed that sentiment, for DESTA to facilitate a closer interaction with the residents and not just with the employees at the campsite. Whether actively or subconsciously, the council, at least the one in Estaysh, has not done as much. It is also hard to know where this request for closer interaction

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104 http://dtxtq4w60xqpw.cloudfront.net/sites/all/files/docpdf/gcetbrochureglobalcodeen.pdf


Community Tourism Ethiopia – (accessed September 30, 2012)

106 Interview with tourist #4, December 26, 2012.
would fall in terms of who would be responsible for the realization of the tourist’s feedback. The council? The guides? The tour agency? Regardless this desire for a closer interaction is not the deal breaker for the tourists, as the numbers of them who visit the DESTA communities are rising by the year.

Interestingly, the other element of the narrative of “the real Ethiopia”, namely hospitality, appears to be the redemptive force against all the minor grievances communicated by the tourist. This spirit of warm reception is manifested in the assiduous manner by which, when I was interviewing residents in their households, the tourist, or in this case the researcher, was attended to in a spontaneous and effortless manner. One of the children would materialize an agoza\textsuperscript{107} for me to sit on, the woman of the household would produce a big cup of wegemit\textsuperscript{108} while someone else would show up with a big plate of food, all in a matter of minutes.

I was no exception simply because I informed them I was writing a research paper about the tourism in their community. Back at the campsite, the chefs and guides would watch the tourists carefully to respond to their body language before they asked for more food or a gourd of water. The tourists commented on this quality of the guides as well:

> Compliments to our Guide Daniel – who not only understands his terrain but enjoys doing what he does. Ted and I admired Daniel for his professionalism – he managed to keep us moving for days without him seeming forceful or intrusive. He let us be.\textsuperscript{109}

Although from a sociological perspective it is not possible to contemplate the meaning or the motive behind the hospitality on the side of the local, what is evident is that it has an undeniable function for the tourist. In Magan’s case, he explains the authentic encounter and the hospitality like this:

> Since the people here have never been colonized and have a heritage far older and richer than ours, they possess a sensibility that is almost

\textsuperscript{107} A flat length of animal hide that is used as a cover over which a guest takes a seat
\textsuperscript{108} A type of yoghurt sprinkled with chili powder.
\textsuperscript{109} \url{http://tesfatours.com/contact/guest-book/}
TESFA – Guest Book (accessed March 3, 2013)
aristocratic and ensures there is none of the awkwardness one occasionally feels in community encounters, no sense of having to smile through difficult situations. Nor is there any hint of artifice in the relationship between the tourists and the communities – if they sing for you it is only because they are in the mood for singing.\textsuperscript{110}

Therefore the anxiety of simply being catered to because of an undercurrent relationship between a perceived ex-colonizer and a subject is redeemed by the lack of a colonial history and consequent free-willed hospitality on the part of the local. Similarly, another trekker related:

\begin{quote}
I was concerned that it could feel like we were on a “people safari”, staring at the local communities and feeling resentment as we traipsed through their land. Nothing could have been further from the truth. We were genuinely touched and surprised by the warmth of everyone we met, and the fact that so many people wanted to come and greet us.\textsuperscript{111}
\end{quote}

In his case, the apprehension caused by feeling like the trekking expedition is like a safari in which the local is akin to say, a lion, is absolved entirely by the locals’ enthusiastic show of agency, translated through hospitality. Another tourist attests, “nobody is ‘on the make’, you are never ever hassled or harangued. These are the most obliging and dignified people imaginable.” In this case, the obliging hospitality quiets the anxiety of being defrauded by a person who stages authenticity for a monetary interest.

These readings are consequential because, as was posited earlier in this chapter, the tourist is imagined to be an agent of development, especially after the development branch of the DESTA, the NGO, dissolved. The degree to which the tourist wants to take on this role is decided by the fulfillment and inspiration they experience during their vacation with DESTA. Thus, since the “community benefit” rhetoric is held out as the paramount objective of the DESTA project, all its entities included, the tourist is encouraged to show gratitude by contributing to this goal. As

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{110} http://irishmedia.blogspot.com/2011/08/community-tourism-ethiopia-irish-times.html
\textsuperscript{111} http://tesfatours.com/contact/guest-book/
\end{flushright}

TESFA – Guest Book (accessed March 3, 2013)
such, in the past, a $4,000 donation helped to build a school at one of the communities, another tourist sent all the guides hiking boots and another donated $10,000 worth of equipment for solar-powered electricity.

This is all well and good except that in some cases, and these big donations are an exception, this type of reliance on the tourist’s benevolence as the force of “development” is mutually exclusive of the additional benefit that the council or employees may feel entitled to for the services they have rendered. Thus the disagreement over gratuity, an issue over which the insistence on the narrative of authenticity (via hospitality and work ethic) crumbles. After all the efforts to embed the narrative into the tourist’s experience, at the end of every stay at a campsite, she is confronted with the dilemma of whether or how much to tip. A previous tourist writing in the guestbook warns:

> Just think about if giving money to individuals is the proper sign to show them your gratitude. The connection between tourists and locals is much deeper and not based on money and the people are honestly friendly and helpful. So be [creative] in being thankful.

That is, the disavowal of a superficial relationship between local and tourist and the insistence on a more profound connection, confirmed by hospitality, translates into a reason not to spurn the connection’s profundity by reducing it to a financial transaction. But again, pointing to the hospitality as solely an indication of this imagined relationship is a game that the tourist, the guides and the tour agency are a part of. Who says that the local’s hospitality is motivated by a desire for a connection with the tourist? In fact, there is evidence to believe quite the contrary.

When asked what DESTA should be doing better as a tourism business, not a single one of the residents, or the council members, or the chefs, or the guards said that it should facilitate a closer relationship between them and the tourists. What 13 out of 24 residents and 4 out of 4 council members did say, however, was that there should be more tourists visiting so that the revenue stream grows. If this portrays

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nothing at all, it does indicate that the money gained, whether through tips or rent, is
not mutually exclusive to the hospitality they render and may even be an integral part
of it. This challenges the confirmation bias of hospitality as evidence of the *mutual*
desire for communication as central to an alternative tourism experience, the pre-
requisite that supposedly constitutes the tourist as not just a strange foreigner
traipsing over the land but also a global ambassador and even a friend of the people.

Secondly, Dave insists that tourists, if they tip at all, should tip up to 10-15% like in any other business. His reasoning, according to the interview, was that if you
give an employee a whole day’s worth of wages in the form of a tip, it gives them the
wrong idea about whether they should be asking to get paid more and if they should
expect the same from every tourist. On this point in particular, he and the guides are
in contention. The latter argue that it is insulting to tip the employees spare change;
10% of the camp manager’s daily wage would be 4 ETB, not even enough to take
public transportation to get to Hamusit, the weekly Thursday market. Whichever the
case, implying that a big tip would deter them from committing to their work is a
refutation of the ‘work ethic’ element of the narrative. If they were so steadfastly
committed to hard work, why would money drive them to indolence? Therefore, the
employee loses out on a tip, once again because of a representation that they had no
part in constructing. That is, as we said before, their hard work and the need for
money may stand apart from each other, rather than being inextricably linked like the
narrative implies. Consider the following example:

Although we had a big bag of packets of sweets, pencils, hair slides etc.
we were told very firmly by our guide not to give out gifts- this seemed
very harsh and it was hard to resist at first until it was explained to us
that if all foreigners were associated with gifts or money it would before
long reduce these lovely dignified people to begging. It says more about
us than anything else that when it boils down to it we just wanted to see
the look on their faces as we gave them some cheap pencil (how
awful!!)Instead our guide sorted through everything we had and
divided it up between the communities.113

113 http://tesfatours.com/contact/guest-book/
TESFA – Guest Book (accessed March 3, 2013)
First, in another way, it demonstrates the same point as that of tipping, that even the guides believe that the adamant work ethic is susceptible to the possibility of receiving money for no work rendered. Secondly, it demonstrates that tourists themselves are eager, however well intentioned their enthusiasm, to engage the local community in an economy of gratitude in which the tourist is the benevolent donor and the local person is the ever indebted and grateful recipient. As a result, whereas on one occasion a tourist may use the hospitality to eliminate any feeling of the donor/recipient relationship, on another occasion they may be tempted to re-constitute the very same dreaded relationship in the name of masked altruism.

As such, we have just shown that both elements of authenticity that are integral to the constituting the local culture are demonstrated to be products of something that has more to do with the personal interests of the other stakeholders than a genuine self-reflection on the part of the members of the community. That the Estaysh community engages in their agricultural activities daily is unquestionable, the work is very visible. Similarly, the practices of hospitality by the community are equally discernible. However, it is the interpretation of these practices that allows the battling entities, the guides and the tour agency, to push for self interested ends for their enterprises and insist on a goal, community benefit, that they leave to the tourists to accomplish.

The example of tipping is a prominent one to consider because of the council members’ assessment that the current prices for accommodation, and therefore their wages, are not high enough. Although the isolation of the community augments the value of the travel experience the council explains that in order to get all the supplies they have to do a fair amount of running around every time a guest is expected. For example, the chefs, all women, have jobs that are very labor-intensive. They wake with the sun, cook breakfast for the tourists, the camp manager, the guides and themselves, warm up coffee/tea, fetch water from an hour’s distance, start preparing lunch, then the snacks for the next round of guests and then prepare dinner.

114 7 out of 7 tourist interviewees ranked the isolation as the primary draw of the TESFA package
While it is the council members who decide how much each employee is paid, Dave is the one who sets the prices for the tour package. Their argument is that in order to make a meaningful margin of profit and remunerate their employees fairly, the prices should be higher.

In response, Dave argues that “for the price we ask for now, we offer fairly basic facilities. However, after you increase the price above a certain level, the tourists start expecting much more.” He elaborated that the community did not take charge of refurbishing the tukuls, decorating the interior in any certain way that would make it more than just a very basic accommodation. On this point, the guides are in agreement with him. When asked what the biggest challenge between the community and the guiding enterprise is, one of the guides responded, “Maintenance. The communities sometimes expect the guiding enterprise to replace what is missing or mend what is broken, instead of using their profit for maintenance costs.” He added that some of them have yet to completely comprehend the fact that they are a business and thus maintenance and the costs are up to them.

This situation represents a very interesting moment in the timeline of an initiative that began as a development project and is now a functional enterprise. The initial phase of the development entity managing the project on behalf of the communities was successful and the NGO dissolved. The formation of DESTA Tours and DESTA LLCTGE (the guides) birthed a new phase of three business entities, two of which are agents of the main business located at the campsite. In this phase, the management of the project has been devolved almost entirely to the community in ownership. The community, in turn, has delegated the task of management to the council. What is supposed to happen now, the ultimate goal according to the initial blueprint, is that the community manages the business the same way that the NGO had managed it for them so that they can maintain this vital and alternative source of income.

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115 Interview with tour operator, Dave, January 8th 2013
116 Interview with guide, Minyahl, December 30th 2013
Except, as the issue with maintenance demonstrates, they do not follow this trajectory. In Estaysh’s case, garbage is the main maintenance problem that needs to be addressed. First, despite the notion that tourists who purchase boutique vacations such as DESTA are more responsible than a mainstream tourist, there is still quite some litter near the premises of the campsite organic baby formula, water bottles etc. Second, there are no garbage bins in the rooms. Whether for this reason or otherwise, one side of the cliff face, overlooking the panoramic wonder of the mountains is sporadically dotted with garbage. It is important to note that the introduction of tourism brought kinds of waste, such as plastic, that the area did not have at all before.

The council members are not unaware of this. One morning, after the guests had left the campsite, there was a minor squabble between the council members in of which the subject of which was that the guard, who is charged with the duty of disposing of the garbage, was not doing his job. The same problem that they encountered with dealing with the menged meri’s tardiness, discussed earlier in this chapter, applies here. There is little else other than strong admonishment that the councils are willing to do, or have done so far, to wield influence in making each employee fulfill a certain part of their job, given the tight-knit nature of their community. Perhaps they could create a new position for the correct disposal of garbage. However, their initial argument for raising the price was because they do not make enough to fairly compensate their staff as it is, let alone to pay a new employee.  

Hence, social obligations frustrate their ability to enforce a managerial duty. Who else would be able to enforce it? Dave, as an agent, certainly has interests in the upkeep of the campsite. First, he has begun selling the DESTA vacation as a part of a larger package of a multiple-day tour of Ethiopia. In order to maximize the margin of profit for the specific number of days that the tourist stays at a DESTA campsite, a bargain he makes with the larger tour operators that he contracts, he has to be able to

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117 After having calculated the amount the council receives from the tourist’s purchase, deducted the amount for each person’s wage and an estimated amount of what supplies would cost, it is likely that there is 20% in profit from every single tourist’s stay.
point to more than the bare minimum amenities that are offered at the campsite. Besides, the people who buy package tours usually tend not to be adventure travelers, and expect a certain level of amenities, including perhaps Wi-Fi and a ‘modern’ bathroom. Thus, it is certainly in his interests to see that the campsites are sufficiently maintained.

Dave’s marginal utility in investing personal funds, as an agent and not as an owner of the DESTA campsites, would decrease with every Birr he puts towards it. This is because he is incurring a cost to improve a product that is only useful to him as long as he remains the travel agent of the DESTA vacation. Although it is unlikely that the communities would dismiss his services, as they acknowledge his legacy with the project, neither are they willing to give him exclusive booking rights. Had this continued as a development project administered by an NGO, he would have the managerial influence to invest in renovation and maintenance on the behalf of the community. But long gone are the days of the NGO in which the operational pronoun was “we”.

Similarly, as a distinctly entrepreneurial entity, the guides also have an interest in seeing that the campsites are maintained at the best quality possible. Not only does it maximize the tourist’s satisfaction with the accommodations, it also allows the guides to portray that the self-managing council are doing a good job of running their business. The upkeep reflects not only on the communities but also on the relationship that the guides have with the council and employees. However, their cut, the 25% of the total amount that one tourist pays for every night, is used to pay 17 employees’ salaries as well as administrative costs. It is unlikely that they would or could put their own money towards renovation.

If not the guides, nor the travel agent, there remains only one other entity that ostensibly would have the highest interest in addressing the management problem of garbage: the community members. Each household that belongs to the idir has their name on the land’s deed. As a democratically elected body, it is on their behalf that the council manages the campsite. If it were the case that the community members were receiving dividends from the rent that is collected from the land and if it were,
in fact, supplementing their income they would have all the reason in the world to intervene. Especially if it were the case that they saw the management problem as a threat to the community benefit that they gain from the tourism project, they would fire the council and replace them with representatives who would solve the garbage problem.

However, there is no deal-breaking evidence that the larger community is presently deriving a margin of benefit so great that they see the accumulation of garbage on the campsite as a threat to a vital and alternative source of income that reduces the vulnerabilities of their lives. In plain terms, the initial impetus that drove the establishment of DESTA was the conviction that revenues from a tourism project could give stability to the extremely unpredictable and precarious nature of a livelihood based solely on agriculture. This belief is crucial not just to the founding principles but also to the tourists. As one tourist put it, “the knowledge that we are actively contributing to avoiding a rerun [of famine] brought its own dividend” to the travel experience. Yet, as has been demonstrated, were the tourism project so vital to the communities’ source of income, each member would have picked up the garbage herself to make sure that the tourists keep coming.

I do not intend to dispute that the council and the employees derive a very real financial benefit from the tourism project. However, it is undeniable that 10 out of 24, of the residents interviewed have yet to see tangible benefit from the project, as opposed to 11 who say they do reap reward. Still, for those who have received it, they apparently do not think it to be imperiled by the actions of mismanagement on the part of the council. Thus, although the initial dream of self-management by the community, which has indeed been achieved, does not look at all like the management that the initial blueprint had intended, that of assiduous attendance to maintenance may or may not attract more tourists.

http://www.wanderlust.co.uk/magazine/articles/destinations/ethiopia-northern-highlands?page=all
Wanderlust – Ethiopia: Northern Highlands (accessed March 7th, 2013)
Second, the conviction that what has been achieved through the tourism project is to keep an impending environmental and social disaster at bay, turns out to be otherwise. Take as a penultimate example the answer that one resident gave to the question, “What would a ‘good life’ look like for you?” The man answered,

When I have a pair of oxen, a pair of cows, 20 sheep, consistent food security, a mule for riding, a donkey for transport, and when I can replace the thatched roof of my house with a [corrugated] metal roof\textsuperscript{119}

Whether he believes that DESTA will allow him to realize his dream is not perceivable. However, consider the desire to replace the traditional thatched roof, which contributes to the feeling of ‘other-worldiness’ that the tourist experiences walking alongside the resplendent and pristine architecture. If indeed one day the man reaps a tangible financial benefit from the tourism project, he will invest in a metal roof that destroys the tourist’s fantasy of a self-preserving culture that lies at the heart of ‘experiencing the real Ethiopia’, filled with the sense that “you are living through different centuries.”\textsuperscript{120}

The interviewee is not alone in his goal to stray from the “traditional” culture that the tourist finds so magical. As a gesture of gratitude for the hospitality and help that the residents provided me during my fieldwork, I asked each family I had worked with to don their favorite attire so that I could set up a makeshift studio and snap a family portrait that I would print and send back to them. One family in particular, a lively couple and their beautiful teenage daughter, who had all been in their soiled farm clothes, obliged enthusiastically. While waiting for them in the living room, I felt a surge of excitement: I imagined the man would come back in his unblemished white \textit{gabi}\textsuperscript{121}, like the one my great-grandfather wore in a picture we have of him at home. I thought, “their daughter’s hairstyle is so Ethiopian, what a picture it will make.”

\textsuperscript{119} Interview with Estaysh resident #24, December 29\textsuperscript{th} 2012
\textsuperscript{120} Manchan Magan for the Irish Times
\textsuperscript{121} A thick, white, hand-woven blanket that is worn as a poncho or shawl by both men and women.
The man came back in a wool coat, the woman in a green dress and a *netela* and the daughter, for lack of a better description, a turquoise and off-white long skirt made from polyester material, a hot pink zip up that read Jo-Jo, and with her hair covered with a blue bandana. I was stumped. If nothing else, this portrays the multiple degrees of difference in the way in which I, as an outsider, albeit an Ethiopian one, wanted to portray a rural Ethiopian family and the way the family wished to represent themselves in their family portrait. This case is neither the standard of a “rural Ethiopian family” nor an exception, if such a prototype exists at all, merely undeniable evidence contrary to a fantasy of how a visitor labels what she sees.

Although the framework of a self-owned business has not been without its challenges, it has allowed the communities to maintain a significant degree of autonomy in the midst of a project that attempts to interpret their way of life as a subject of defining authenticity and the path that development should take based on this idea. The distinct social relationships between the owners of the business (the community members), the employees and the managers’ call for a revisiting of both the principles and practices of an entrepreneurial initiative meant to benefit an entire community. As such, attempting to effectuate this benefit by setting the conditions for larger investment of the profits as necessary to development is revealed to be one that just may not be relevant to the community in question. Finally, positing the tourist, and tourism, as an indispensable agent of this definition of development makes something of a caricature of one’s personal desire to be a friend of the people.

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122 Similar to the *gabi* but much finer weaving, worn as a scarf by women.
Chapter 3 | Towards a New Paradigm of Sustainability

The previous chapter’s analysis of the key elements of the DESTA product reveals that the project has happened upon a particularly consequential crossroads. On the one hand, it provides an opportunity for employment for approximately 142 individuals, taking into account all the 11 communities it works with in the region, the guiding enterprise and the tour agency. Of that total, 121 employees live in the communities, 11 to each community, allowing them a viable source of income to supplement their family’s breadbasket. The stakeholders have also achieved an indelible linkage with a market that provides a steady flow of tourists who come away with charmed experiences and special memories. Most importantly it has been able to accomplish this feat with minimal impact on the grander environment and without stripping the communities of their collective ownership of the land.

Be that as it may, a set of challenges remains in its path towards a meaningfully sustainable future. Primarily, in the case of Estaysh, although it has satisfied some of the community’s desires for overall public benefit, it has yet to follow through on implementing investments that correspond to the residents’ greatest needs. In addition, the positioning of the tourist as the key agent of development, presumably due to the stakeholders’ disagreement as to the procedure for the distribution of the fortune, has resulted in a crisis of clashing interests. At the root of this crisis is the clash between the tourist’s wish to gain intimate access to the exotic and unfamiliar local culture and the duty to be a force of positive change to a society that exists in a seemingly different world than her own. The resulting phenomenon, rather than a mutually beneficial exchange of cultures, is the reconstitution of the rural Ethiopian as an expectant recipient of aid and the foreigner as the benevolent but ignorant patron.

In light of these circumstances, which disregard the truth that the rural Ethiopian is providing a valuable service to the tourist, there is an urgent need to reconsider the driving rationale behind the production of the DESTA vacation. This
chapter proposes that DESTA’s stakeholders adopt a paradigm that is in tune with the facts on the ground. In doing so, they would shed the remaining vestiges of the previous phase of the project and challenge the pressures of matching their product to a highly confining market of responsible and community-based tourism. This would entail affirming the campsite council’s practices of administering tourism as the standard praxis rather than dismissing it as a flawed anomaly. Equally in need of dismissal is the notion of canonizing the tourist as an impetus towards an advanced society, and along with it the detrimental fantasy of a profound connection between the tourist and the local. In identifying the specific challenges that DESTA faces, and considering the interests attached to them, I propose a set of strategies that could subdue tensions among the stakeholders and push the project forward.

First and foremost, the previous chapter made the argument that the strategy of community benefit by investment in larger projects has been the procedure of development advocated by the tour agency and the guiding association. Here I suggest that the council, although it has not delivered the way upper management has expected it to, is addressing the community’s needs according to its own mechanism. A closer look at the practices of the Estayish council’s approach to its general assembly reflects that it has adopted the framework or form of social organization that the founders of DESTA used to register the project at the beginning: the *idir*. "*Idir* is an association of people who have the objective of providing social and economic insurance for the members in the events of death, accident, damages to property, among others. In the case of a funeral, the *Idir* serves as funeral insurance where community members elect their leaders, contribute resources either in kind or in cash and support the mourning member."  

In effect, it has been functioning as a form of insurance for the people.

For instance, in a whispered exchange that took barely a few seconds, a middle-aged man grasped a council member by the elbow at the bustling Thursday market, *Hamusit*, and made his case for a small loan. The council member

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123 Bezabih Emana, “Cooperatives: A Path to Economic and Social Empowerment in Ethiopia”, (Dar es Salaam: International Labor Office, 2009), p.2
communicated a stern ‘no’ to which the former said something about Gena\textsuperscript{124} and the creditor gave in, counted 11 ETB into the solicitor’s hands, to which the man expressed gratitude and hurried away. Although presumably this was from the council member’s personal funds, his role as loan disburser demonstrates what makes up the majority of the council’s relationship with the community. Whether serving as arbiters in a dispute, dispensing money in an emergency or recording family members’ names for inheritance of the land, the council and the money they manage operate as a form of social and economic insurance. The establishment of a grain bank, which serves as a form of collective food security in the event of crop failure, indicates the same function.

Furthermore, the entirety of the campsites’ activities forms the elements of a business. However, unlike a business that is out solely to derive a financial gain or one that fosters links among its employees only to the extent that it improves profit margins, a business based on the principles of the \textit{idir} allows a very seasonal industry to maintain continuity even when tourists are absent. As a social institution that predates the nation’s current economy, the preceding communist regime and the previous feudal monarchy, the \textit{idir} has a legitimacy that binds the members of the community in a reciprocal relationship. Therefore, on that day when the campsite was abandoned because a member of the \textit{idir} passed away, the employees were not being neglectful of their business but rather carrying out the very social obligations that give their business longevity.

Accordingly, suggesting the purposeful adoption of this viable alternative to larger investment is not to say that the community should stay out of the business as long as the 11 employees and their respective families derive a solid income. Instead it shows that the framework depends on social participation and is financially sustainable. The challenge that remains is to foster a sense of ownership among the community members so that they feel an active stake in the business that will incentivize them to act to maintain the quality of the product. Subsequently, the council would do well to reconsider how to respond to the community’s need for hard

\textsuperscript{124} This means Christmas, at the time Christmas was a few days away.
income that subsistence farming does not yield for them. These costs arise from things such as the annual land value tax, expenses incurred sending children to school – transportation, school materials, packing lunch – and foodstuff from the market.

Needless to say, there is an argument to be made for the direct disbursement of profit from the tourism activities to each one of the households. Provided that there is a means, the profit margin can increase, which will be discussed later in this chapter, and the community’s immediate need for cash could be solved by setting aside a fixed percentage of the surplus to be divided among them. Although it may be a miniscule amount at first, it would be worth a trial phase that would allow the other stakeholders to gauge whether it increases the sense of ownership and incentive for participation in maintenance of the tourism project.

Until now, the farmers have been meeting their needs for supplementary income through other means. One man I interviewed said that he grows eucalyptus trees and sells the leaves on the market, which earns him about 1,000 ETB a year. Additionally, the benefit of having at least one child enroll in kess timirt bet\textsuperscript{125} is that when they come of age and begin serving the church, they receive a modest income for their services. For example, for every sermon a priest gives he earns 30 ETB. On the farm, breeding chickens, sheep and cows to sell at the market, the first of which earns 30 ETB per chick. Also, young adults have begun migrating to other places, such as Metema, Awash, Asayte and Raya to work on commercial farms and support their families. For a day of labor involving horticulture, or livestock and food production, a laborer can receive between 50-60 ETB.

If the council were able to disburse the returns directly to the members of the community, it could potentially incentivize the young adults to stay in the kebele. In doing so, the population would be protected from decline and the new generation would perhaps have the means to engage in income-generating activities closer to home. The shift in DESTA’s practice, from putting all the profit in a savings account to distributing dividends per household, would indeed be a significant change. For

\textsuperscript{125} A school system administered by the church.
one, this would perhaps be the only activity that could produce financial support to a
family without their having to engage in a labor-intensive activity or the investment
of their personal funds. Not only would the dividend relieve some of the financial
exigencies that a family faces, it would also be the crucial incentive needed to
persuade the families to keep their houses in the traditional architectural style. If they
saw tangible long-term economic benefit from the tourism business, they would be
more inclined to maintain the aesthetic qualities that make their parish a marvel to
trek through.

This is hardly the only way to support the members of the general assembly
and increase their participation in the project. One interviewee asked me rhetorically,“Why have they refused to buy produce from my farm to use at the campsite?”
Ostensibly, local sourcing that engages the business entity in an exchange with a
farmer may be more along the principles of the DESTA project than direct
disbursement. As it is, all the supplies at the campsite, be it the foodstuff or the
candles in each tukul, are procured from within the kebele. However, specifically with
the food, it is not entirely clear how much of it is bought at the market and how much
of it is bought directly from the farmers in the community.

As two of the council members reported, it already takes a considerable effort
to overcome the challenges of their community’s isolation and gather all the materials
that are necessary to serve the tourists. The coal for the clay stove, the water for
cooking and cleaning purposes and the honey for the breakfast bread come from three
different places that lie at a great distance from each other. Still, institutionalizing a
system of purchasing from within the immediate environs is a worthwhile assignment
for the stakeholders to take on. If they organize an efficient method of local sourcing,
the council members and employees would need to travel a shorter distance to tick off
the items on their periodic shopping list. Equally, they will have created another
means by which the community could tangibly participate in the tourism project. An
important facet of this strategy would have to include methods of storing perishable
items over long periods without the use of electricity.
Thus far, the proposed changes have not been sweeping but rather subtle and strategic means of building on the practices on the ground level that have proven effective. Affirming the campsite as the space of a self-sustaining business is a significant step towards re-positioning the tourist as a consumer who finances a business only to the extent that she purchases the product. What this means is earnestly embracing the model by which a rural community can mobilize the changes it sees as necessary for itself. Confirming Dambisa Moyo’s argument against “aid” as the answer to Africa’s problems, the understanding that has been promoted through DESTA’s different marketing channels contains a subconscious and insidious logic that drives aid and the general prospect of development. Within this logic, “Africans are viewed as children, unable to develop on their own or grow without being shown how or made to.”126 The stakeholders of DESTA must extricate themselves from this rhetoric for the sake of their own sustainable existence.

The intellectuals at Leeds emphasize the inextricable link established between perception and reality as a means to portray that the quality of the product is only as high as its advertising communicates to the tourist. Similarly, to the consumer’s mind, the destination community’s business is only as self-sustaining and transformative of the society as it is demonstrated to be at the point of purchase. Although DESTA’s sustainability is acknowledged, it is subsumed by the larger rhetoric that the tourist’s presence, despite her acute lack of knowledge of the country, is the determining factor of mobilization towards development. By not taking the initiative to counteract this claim, DESTA’s marketing is disregarding a golden opportunity to highlight that their strategy, not just a sales gimmick, puts community members front and center in the advance towards development.

In fact, the rhetoric gives the tourist occasion to match her desire for a transformative experience with the fanciful notion that her role as developer animates a similar inspiration within the local. The precursory impulse is inherent in the activity of travel while the latter aspiration is imagined. That is to say, travel is sought

126 Dambisa Moyo, Dead Aid, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), p.32
as an inwardly reflective experience that, rather than serving someone else’s needs, fulfills the traveler’s desire to resuscitate the joy of mundane regimens of daily life, by re-living them in a context of hyperbolic difference. However, imparting the duty of development to the traveler gives her the impression that her self-serving adventure has the similar function of renewal for the local community she encounters. But to galvanize a force of societal transformation requires not only more velocity than that provided by the marvel of difference but also a very particular knowledge of the socioeconomic dynamics of the community, the latter of which the tourist, by definition, both lacks and relishes.

By extension of the same logic, the endeavor to re-brand a nation according to a new narrative and export it back to the tourist’s country through the agent’s memories meets a formidable challenge. Before the vacation the tourist presumably knew very little about the destination’s society or history. Over the course of her stay with DESTA, the guides illustrate a moving picture show of staunch work ethic and endearing hospitality, which is intended to reflect a pattern that is representative of the nation. In the aftermath of the tourist’s experience, what most testimonies demonstrate is a haphazard patchwork of perceptions based on previous knowledge and specific insights derived from the vacation that become glazed over by the action of memory. Take the account of a certain Alan as an example:

During the Derg’s ‘socialist experiment’ of the 1980s, the Meket smallholdings were expropriated by the government and absorbed into dysfunctional cooperatives. When successive harvests failed in the mid-decade, Addis turned a blind eye, and the world watched in horror as northern Ethiopia suffered apocalypse. One million people are thought to have died... The knowledge that we were actively contributing to avoiding a rerun brought its own dividend.

There is a certain sequence of thoughts that this description reveals. Alan recounts events of a famine that occurred 30 years ago, attributing it more to a failed

127 The Derg was the communist regime that overthrew the last Ethiopian Emperor, Haile Selassie, in 1974 and remained in power until 1991.
128 http://www.wanderlust.co.uk/magazine/articles/destinations/ethiopia-northern-higlands?page=all
Wanderlust: Ethiopia – Northern Highlands (accessed May 1, 2012)
socialist villagization scheme than to patterns of climate, i.e. drought. He then laments the entire country’s ignorance of their fellow country cousins while highlighting the helpless horror of foreigners as they watched the scene on their TV screens. Within a span of two sentences he dismisses the vacuum of three decades since the tragedy, and the change of government since – indicating the discontinuation of the cooperatives to which he had just ascribed blame for the disaster. Finally, he sheds light on his decision to vacation with DESTA as a deliberate act to eliminate any chance of a similar and imminent tragedy, not that there is any indication that one is waiting to happen. Within such a context, situating an Alan as a developer and spokesperson, gives him an even stronger reason to magnify the perceived abjectness as a way to draw out the importance of his role in future retellings of the experience.

Perhaps it would serve us well to give the tourist the benefit of the doubt, that she would do a journalist’s job of weaving her marvelous experience into a captivating tale and taking the ethnographer’s duty of balancing it with a historically relevant, geographically specific analysis. Even so, the well-meaning intention of the stakeholders in upper management to make the performance inherent in agricultural labor the linchpin of the remodeled and more accurate narrative of Ethiopia is not without its limitations. Especially with regard to the second function, is it not plausible that the demonstration of work ethic is not the antithetical image to that of the abject or helpless Ethiopian? These adjectives that were pegged to the country in the wake of famine persist to this day partly because they are a phenotypic aspect of the judgment passed on what is thought to be an intrinsic issue. That is, the helplessness is perceived to be only a symptom of a deeper malady, that of scarcity and shortage.

Thus, to a tourist who has only known the former image, whether or not the farmer cultivates her land with assiduous commitment, any sign of shortage or indigence will confirm the initial bias that the tourist held of Ethiopia. In this context, the performance of agricultural work, rather than being an image of self-dependence, gives life to the billboard imagery used to demand humanitarian intervention,
appealing to the passersby’s compassion to “save Africa,” turning it into grotesque performance with the same message. It would take a steeper challenge to reduce farmer-as-savvy-businessman, with results to show for it, into a similar image of abjectness.

Furthermore, because the objective of cultural tourism is the discovery of, well, culture, the abjection is ascribed not to economic or political reasons but to cultural reasons. This implies that the issue of poverty, when seen through the lens of tourism is inherent in the practices and the values of the people. This could be read as the reason why Alan, a few paragraphs ago, transposed a famine that occurred under the aegis of a very different economic and political doctrine onto the present day and understood his decision as a conscious act to fight against a calamity caused by some cultural defect. As Eriksson Baaz points out, in reference to the guidelines given to development workers, “they are encouraged to read events, practices and ‘difference’ mainly in terms of cultural difference – not, for example, as individual or economic differences”\(^\text{129}\).

For this reason, the stakeholders in charge of marketing and educating, the tour agency and the guides, would be well advised to highlight other elements of the narrative that challenge the image of abjectness and (dependence on the altruist to cure it) at a more profound level. In another one of Lukas’s accounts of his experiences as a guide, he shared the story of an interaction between an Estaysh resident and a tourist. The tourist snapped a Polaroid picture of the farmer and presented it to him as a gift. In return, the farmer produced 10ETB for the present, to the gift-giver’s astonishment. As such, insisting on a reciprocal exchange in which money is the basis communicates to the tourist that the notion of a mutually cherished interaction and exchange is, in fact, unrequited. Whether or not this offends the tourist’s sensibility, it dispenses a healthy dose of reality that protects sovereign boundaries against trespassing by the roles the tourist has assumed as friend, developer and spokesperson.

\(^{129}\) Baaz, *The Paternalism of Partnership*, p.100, p.120
Relinquishing the notion of the dutiful role of the tourist will not necessarily be as big a challenge as one might expect. Since the designation of the duties is created by the marketing itself, if DESTA stops advertising itself that way the tourist will not expect it. Interestingly, there is a notable difference between the data gathered about tourists from the guidebook and that from personal interactions and interviews with tourists while on their journey. The latter were personable and moderately animated, such as the French family who moved between hushed, giggling banter with their daughters to engaging the guides in conversation about the purported benefits of mandatory military service. Similarly, a Dutch couple was interested to know about the lives of people in the area but were content dangling their legs off the cliff edge between sundown and early evening. Put simply, in person tourists are not obsessively seeking spiritual redemption through the rescue of rural Ethiopians.

However, it appears that the retrospective eye, once the tourist is back at home, bathes the memory with a golden glow in which the experience becomes exquisite and valiant, and more so with every new telling. As such, the tone of the guests who send their feedback to DESTA after departure is ebullient, ecstatic, speaks in superlatives and only comments on the memorable and challenging aspects of their trip. Indeed, in order to make an online guidebook a captivating read that entices future tourists, the tour guide would naturally select the testimonies that are most exciting. A byproduct of this intent, however, is to fill every new round of tourists with a set of impossible expectations of an artificially magical and overwhelmingly different experience, like the previous tourist.

The snapshot of a community’s culture, as it exists in previous tourists’ memories, is unsustainable not least of all because by definition culture is an amorphous set of notions that exists in a perpetual state of flux. Furthermore, if the money from the tourism project is indeed to give the community the opportunity to promote and transform society according to the way they see fit, they cannot be expected to remain in a single moment in their history that may be long gone, if it ever did exist. Nor is the project at a lost for an element other than static tradition as
its claim to authenticity. What I am proposing is a marketing strategy that is based on the elements of the vacation that are authentic but not finitely so. The conditions of their infinitude, however, are contingent upon the maintenance of a very controlled scale of tourism.

There are aspects of the trekking vacation that never lose their novelty simply because, in their simplicity and transience, they are exciting to every new tourist. Among them showering outdoors, an otherwise mundane and daily routine, becomes a feast for the senses at the edge of a basalt cliff. The guest stands on a wooden platform on evened cement that serves as the tub and is fenced by a palisade of bamboo sticks. Whether by moonlight, dawn or dusk, the view above and to the surrounding 270 degrees complements the cliff faces, peaks and valleys that appear infinite. The chefs heat up the bathing water in the same pot that the morning tea is boiled in, giving the water a rosemary or minty scent that smells and feels incredible contrasted to the gusts of nippy wind. Especially after a day spent challenging the forces of nature, this feels like a treasure that would give any mint placed on a 5-star hotel pillow a run for its money.

The safety and absence of self-consciousness with which a guest can shower outdoors is but one of the reasons why scaling up tourism in the area, as was Goodwin’s recommendation, would ruin the value of the DESTA vacation. In fact, in the tourist interviews, the isolation was ranked first by all seven tourists, as the reason why they chose the DESTA product as part of their Ethiopia vacation. Community benefit was the second priority with five votes. Rigor of vacation and price were repeatedly ranked last. Consequently, maintaining the isolation of the campsite and general ‘other-worldly’ feel of the area should be a top priority to the DESTA stakeholders as they consider the best way to move forward. It is an asset that can be capitalized on quite significantly and that would be wrecked irrevocably in the event of an increased number of tourists.

Similarly, the effortless hospitality provided by the staff at the campsite is one of DESTA’s greatest resources. The dismissal of the tourist’s role as the agent of
development would serve as an occasion to disassociate the hospitality from the functions it has played in the past. As discussed in chapter two, these include a reading of it as a gesture of redemption of the tourist’s voyeurism or of the local’s gratitude to the tourist’s unmatchable gift. Instead, when taken into account as a value-adding component, it can be cause for a sizable increment in the product’s pricing. If need be, for it would not require too many resources, the employees at the campsite could receive further training on how to match their traditional sense of hospitality with that of the rising expectations of the tourists.

In a similar fashion, the guides could fine-tune their service by perfecting their reputations as gregarious, patient and often witty companions to the tourists. During my stay, a tourist asked his guide, Emanuel, how it was that eucalyptus, a non-indigenous plant, was so omnipresent in the Ethiopian landscape. Emanuel, putting on the stern countenance of a teacher, explained that a man violated the law against the introduction of foreign plant species and smuggled the seeds of the evergreen past airport security in his shoes, and it had been spreading like wildfire ever since. They believed him without raising a doubt, until he started chuckling at their serious contemplation of his fictional explanation. They laughed right along when they realized he had been joking. Consciously or otherwise he portrayed how stories can be created and sold as fact; that culture does not exist as an indubitable and established truth.

After all, although the guide is just as Ethiopian as the farmer whose life they narrate, they are exempt from the expectation of being paragons of a preserved culture that the rural folk are subject to. This situates them at a very strategic place in the trekking vacation. For one, dong some previous research about the tourist’s origins and using it as a point of conversation would be an interesting way to build on the camaraderie and ambiance that is created by consecutive hours of journeying through the hills and valleys. On the one occasion that a guide attempted to do this around the evening campfire, the tourist’s face lit up and a lively conversation ensued about the interlocutor’s mountaineering adventures in Nigeria.
Insisting on an unyieldingly high quality of service would likely decrease the cost of extraneous renovations that may or may not go unnoticed. This is not to say that refurbishments are not necessary, in fact, they are crucial. However, the amenities that are lacking are miniscule when considered relative to what such a seemingly implausible project like DESTA could be facing. The investment it would take to equip each room with garbage bins, kerosene lamps and the main *tukul* with extra blankets and a ventilation system to expel the smoke from the indoor campfire are well worth it for all the stakeholders. As for the garbage, it would be wise to create the job of a custodian who could come in every other week to clean up the garbage and dispose it properly.

Most of the proposed modifications are fairly straightforward. Perhaps what is novel about them is that they are part and parcel of the argument that the relationship between a tourist and a local should be very clearly defined and understood on a financial basis. The clearing up of ambiguities allows the service provider to charge a premium on a quality, such as hospitality, as part of a stellar service, rather than having it dismissed as a cultural (thus, free) gesture. These proposals and the forthcoming ones, if undertaken in earnest, could even dissipate the tensions that exist between the stakeholders in upper management.

One also might raise the concern that Edward Bruner points with regards to the importance of tourism. “If a new attraction built for tourists does not fit an established master narrative it is more likely to fail, as the tour agents may have a difficult time attracting clientele, and the tourists themselves may feel that the attraction is not authentic”\(^{130}\). In responsibletravel.com, DESTA has found an opportune market in which it can align its product to customer values. However, as discussed before, the paternalistic narratives promoted by that market and its proponents have stunted DESTA’s growth and flexibility.

Although it might appear a threat to the project’s existing clientele, there is

quite a case to be made for a substantial rebranding of the product that is more concordant with its strengths. That is, rather than appealing to the tourist’s sense of humanitarianism, DESTA is positioned impeccably to align itself with markets that specialize in adventure and escape. Instead of appearing under the caption of “You may not be St. Bob but you can help fight poverty in Africa simply by choosing the right holiday,” it should be appearing under “The World’s Least Visited Spots.”

Black Tomato, a high-adventure luxury tour operator, allows the consumer to find destinations according to the criteria, ‘when do you want to go?’ and, ‘what is your need?’ Under the second criterion are choices such as “a retreat,” “freedom,” “to disappear,” and “to get lost.” DESTA would fit remarkably well under any one of these categories.

Tour companies that focus exclusively on high-end adventure also thrive on scarcity of commodity, isolation of place and minimalist provision of amenities. Take Momentum, an adventure travel outfitter, as an example. The employees plan between 15 and 20 trips in one year, each with a group of maximum 6 travelers. For an extreme travel experience in the most rugged and trying of terrains, the company charges $7,000 per head. Although DESTA may not necessarily want to become that exclusive, it could certainly highlight the aspects of its product, such as low amenities and distance to the nearest city, that in a more mainstream business would be considered unacceptable. There is a particular demographic that would pay a premium for such splendid isolation in a peculiarly different setting.

Similarly, Abercrombie & Kent Extreme Adventures, entices its consumers with the following bid:

Extreme Adventures are for the travelers ready to meet a different kind of challenge. No matter what goals we attain in our lives and careers, nature remains the ultimate benchmark of what we can achieve. An Extreme Adventure reveals exactly who you are,

131 http://www.guardian.co.uk/travel/2005/jun/26/ecotourism.observerescapessection1
The Observer – “You May Not Be St. Bob...” (accessed October 18, 2013)
132 http://www.roughguides.com/gallery/the-worlds-least-visited-spots/#/0
The Rough Guides – The World’s Least Visited Spots (accessed March 29, 2013)
demanding the most of your physical, psychological and perhaps even spiritual selves... Venture to places that test your ability to persevere; push your body to the limit in the harshest conditions and with the most demanding activities. Savor the rewards that only come from experiencing nature at its most extreme.  

Albeit for a handsome price, A&K shifts the spotlight off of local peoples as a center of attraction and poses Nature as a protagonist with whom the tourist is able to interact and challenge. Although the terrain that DESTA operates in is not as rugged as some of the destinations that A&K whisks its tourists to, the former could certainly benefit from activities that supplement the trekking. While it may be too soon to consider skydiving and paragliding, tamer extreme adventures such as ziplining or something similar may be a long term goal that DESTA gears towards, the highlands certainly have the terrain for it. Perhaps the stakeholders would not even have to administer the costs or the activity itself but could strike a deal with a company similar to those noted above to do it.

If high adventure is not along the stakeholders’ interests, DESTA could also move in the direction of a resort like Playa Viva on the Pacific coast of Mexico. The principles and practices of the latter are quite aligned with DESTA’s. The winner of Trip Advisor’s Travelers’ Choice Award 2012, the spa facility been exalted as “secluded luxury with a conscience,” “serenity with your values intact,” and “incredible location, incredible staff, wonderful concept.” Although it is a resort, it is not gated off from the community of 500 people, all of whom are farmers. Its accommodations, like DESTA’s, are modeled according to the architecture relevant to the area. The elaborate woodwork of the doors, and the design of the rooms is an object of marvel to the tourists.

Most importantly, although the Mexican company demonstrates a commitment to the community’s development, it does not make them the central

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133 [www.akextremeadventures.com](http://www.akextremeadventures.com/)
Extreme Adventures Travel – Abercrombie & Kent (accessed March 31, 2013)
134 [http://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g1022301-d1593952-r53034790-Playa_Viva-Petatlan_Pacific_Coast.html](http://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g1022301-d1593952-r53034790-Playa_Viva-Petatlan_Pacific_Coast.html)
Trip Advisor – Playa Viva – Traveler Reviews (accessed March 8, 2013)
spectacle for the tourists’ viewing pleasure. The foodstuff is purchased directly from the farmers and the company has begun a fund, Oceans Foundation, “committing at least 1% of Gross Revenues and placing that amount into a Trust for the Community.”

Although the website’s language communicates the challenges of the area, it does so without highlighting the abjectness or helpless need and focusing more on sustainability and the goals thereof. Quite like DESTA, except that the source in this case is the community rather than the tourist, it faces a rising challenge of improperly disposed garbage. In response, community organizers have been employed to arrange days for the community to do trash pick-ups. The organizers also placed waste receptacles along the streets so that un-compostable garbage can be disposed of instead of being burned.

As such, DESTA could use Playa Viva as a model to blend the rigor of the trekking activity with the relaxing comfort of a spa. It could do so without having to be a spa perse but rather by including one or two other components, something as simple as the shower, to its product. The tourist would most likely relish the contrast. Supplementary activities could include a cultural performance after dinner or Ethiopian childhood games for groups that come as a family. In all of the previously mentioned examples, excess is not the purpose of the trip. The one thing they all have in common is that their attention to detail and service is impeccable such that the bare minimum provisions emerge as a very purposeful aspect of the product.

DESTA not only boasts the potential to absorb the qualities of these types of companies but it also has a very established set of resources and linkages to work with. Sixty percent of its revenue goes directly to the community, as opposed to Playa Viva’s 1%. Most importantly, the community members are not just recipients but have been integral to every stage of the project’s development. With all these strengths, DESTA too can remain community owned and managed without relying on a narrative of authenticity dependent on abjectness, and find a means to incentivize trash pick-ups.

135 http://www.playaviva.com/your-hosts/community-stewardship
Playa Viva – Community Stewardship (accessed March 5, 2013)
As a final suggestion, one that would be crucial to crystallizing the project’s strengths, the tour agency and the guiding association’s websites would benefit from reconstruction. With regard to the tour agency’s, the interface is very user friendly and allows for efficient browsing through which the consumer can receive all the information necessary to plan her vacation. Under its ethos section, it says what its partnership with the community should do, but not what it has done. This is an opportunity to update the website with the environmentally, socially and economically sustainable activities that the stakeholders have put into action recently.

The guiding enterprise’s, on the other hand, has high-quality pictures of the area and a telling description of its history. It does require more spatial information about the regions that the guides offer their services in, perhaps a page about the specific attractions and a little socio-historical commentary to place their functions in context. Furthermore, the pages need to be more maneuverable in their design, for a consumer to refer to it as a source of information. The slideshow could be a little smaller; it presently takes up a lot of the screen. The suggestions about the implementation of sustainable activities given to the tour agency would also apply here.

Although they share the same name, DESTA, a strikingly similar logo and an equally indistinguishable slogan – “Experience the real Ethiopia”\textsuperscript{136} and “Experience and retain the real Ethiopia!!”\textsuperscript{137} – it is clear that these two stakeholders are at loggerheads. For one, neither website makes mention of the other and it is by no means clear to an unaware tourist what the relationship is between the two. The differentiation is left up to travel forums and tourists who have visited to arbitrate booking standards by the perception of whose relationship with the community is more authentic and moral. If the two stakeholders’ battle over exclusive rights to booking is, in fact, irreconcilable, perhaps the way to move forward is to specialize their marketing strategy to different tourist demographics.

\textsuperscript{136} http://www.tesfatours.com
\textsuperscript{137} http://lalibelactge.com/
(accessed December 5, 2013)
As a pilot project that was the first of its kind in Ethiopia, DESTA was able to thrive as an underdog tourism location away from the mass attraction that Zagwe is. The authenticity that it publicized to its consumers rested on an unadulterated culture and a people in isolation. Its framework was decidedly a development one in which the NGO acted on behalf of the community and prided itself on achieving greater community benefit. Over the course of the 10 years of operation, the situation within the Estaysh community has demonstrated, quite ironically, that it is not the NGO-esque structure of relations that is most beneficial to the distribution of benefits and long-term sustainability. When the DESTA NGO dissipated, rather than shedding the goal of an external player acting on behalf of the community’s development, the tourist was spotlighted for her capacity to take on the role. However, the business framework that the councils have adopted since does the work of development without the need for a separate stakeholder to bring them sweeping changes.

In this context, the onus is on all of the stakeholders to embrace in earnest this new phase that they brought about together. Relinquishing the disavowals that it takes to install the tourist as developer, the community as a static cultural exhibit and the interaction as a mutually uplifting experience, would only usher in a new era for DESTA. Affirming the modus operandi on the ground gives the stakeholders in upper management, the guides and the council, an opportunity to match the product to a market that falls somewhere between high adventure and high comfort. Tailoring their product to a somewhat higher echelon of consumers would also allow them to grow the business while maintaining the assets that make DESTA an outstanding and unique vacation. Rather than being a cry of praise to privileged upper class travel, this is an opportunity for a community seeking economic empowerment by targeting the very source of capital necessary to fulfill its goals without compromising the use of collective resources. DESTA, with its history as a development project and current phase as a business, is a quintessential example of how all projects intended to alleviate poverty are under immense pressure to scale up to the scope of poverty. Having thus far resisted such pressure, thereby maintaining the social and environmental resources intact, TESFA should march forward and take its rightful place as a leading “green” business in Ethiopia’s rising tourism industry.
Conclusion

The individuals and institutions entrusted with branding the nation have to own and broadcast the multiplicity of the Ethiopian story to make tourism a successful endeavor. In my conversation with Ato Hapte Selassie Tafesse, the first Minister of Tourism in Ethiopia, and thus the first officially charged with the duty of crafting this narrative, he related that one of the most challenging aspects of his job had been justifying petitions for a budget to finance marketing and advertising. In response to one such request for funds, a colleague said to him, “Why do we have to solicit and entice people to come to Ethiopia with advertising and publicity with money from government? Let them come if they will.” While the Minister was successful in creatively crafting different ways to fundraise for marketing and advertising, such creativity has stagnated in recent years. It appears that not enough people are convinced that attracting tourists to one’s country does require consistent investment in branding the country.

The catch-phrases and claims to authenticity that are presently being used as Ethiopia’s brand are likely to signal one of the following: Cradle of mankind. Birthplace of coffee. Where it all began. Fourth holiest city of Islam. 2 millennia of Christianity. Civilizations circa 2000…BC. All of these claims are certainly true. Yet, in and of themselves, they do very little to capture the mind of a consumer who is looking for a getaway. In their solemnity, they appeal more to the kinds of tourists who have idiosyncratic hobbies that correspond with one of the catch-phrases. It seems contradictory that given the bountiful range of heritage and biodiversity, Ethiopia’s travel narrative still operates in the claustrophobic confines of these slightly outdated boundaries. In a sea of substance from which elements of a more relevant and captivating narrative can be constructed, so little is used towards a branding bid to attract tourists.

Culturally speaking, the plurality is vast. The woreda of Raya, situated barely 80km from Estaysh is a place whose green landscape and merry people are vibrant fixtures of popular Ethiopian culture but are non-existent in the tourism narrative.
They are reputed for their carefree lifestyle and a certain deliberate vanity, if not outright decadence. The narrative of a staunch work ethic certainly could not circumscribe them. In fact, they pay outsiders to cultivate their land as they indulge in the comforts of the world. This culture presents an alternative, a unique one, as a supplement to the stern solemnity with which places like Axum, Lalibela and Gondar, and even Estaysh, are marketed.

Historically, the resources for a new narrative are infinite. Ethiopia lays claim to the last emperor of Africa, a man who referred to himself in the first person plural, “we,” and had a lengthy official title, “His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, King of Kings of Ethiopia and Elect of God.” A controversial figure though he is to his own people, he served as an inspiration and provided training ground for liberation movements on both sides of the Atlantic, only to now be relegated to the peripheries of Ethiopian culture as a regal relic. Yet, a people in a Caribbean nation with a phenomenally successful brand, namely Jamaica, have maintained his resurrection, as the Messiah of the Rastafarian religion and movement. In this context, Ethiopia is Zion, the homeland. The lifestyle that has developed around this movement, of one-ness with the natural forces and outgoing groove, chronicles yet another contrasting narrative to the solemnity of the Ethiopian brand. As the authentic source of the Rastafarian movement, Ethiopia could indeed re-claim, re-appropriate this outgoing spirit and incorporate it into its brand.

Geographically, running the meandering length of the Great Rift Valley, there are 862 bird species, 18 of which are unique to Ethiopia. The avifauna, like the kaleidoscopic visual feast that is the small Malachite Kingfisher, or the melodious Abyssinian catbird that can sing awake a keen ear, are a birdwatcher’s dream. Ethiopia’s next-door neighbor, Kenya, is equally endowed and has been able to capitalize on it magnificently, from the carpet of flamingos on Lake Nakuru to the herons at Lake Naivasha. Tourism practitioners in Ethiopia could learn a lot from

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The Rift Valley Lake Birds (accessed March 15th, 2013)
Kenya’s tourism model; and lay claim to the narrative of the mythical phoenix, of rising from the ashes.

In effect, with all due respect to the retort to “let them come,” the response would be to say that especially in the electronic age, a deliberately constructed image is a necessary precursor to successful tourism and must be disseminated through a multiplicity of channels. Ethiopia, Ethiopians and especially those whose job it is to generate a narrative, must tell the story. “13 months of sunshine,” a slogan coined by the same Ato Hapte Selassie mentioned earlier, is as clever and catchy as the Ethiopian brand has gotten; and that was a half century ago at the dawn of the tourism industry. The challenge is considerable, but the potential is great. It’s a matter of who lays claim to it and uses it towards the sustained and long-term benefit of future generations of Ethiopians.
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