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Editorial Introduction: Dark Tourism: Reconciliation or Rubbernecking?

Morag M Kersel, *DePaul University*



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Editorial Introduction

Morag M. Kersel

Editor for Archaeological Heritage and Ethics

Dark tourism: Reconciliation or rubbernecking?

In 2005 the historic centers of Berat and Gjirokastra, Albania, were nominated to the UNESCO World Heritage List (Meskell 2012). The nomination documentation states, “Berat and Gjirokastra are inscribed as rare examples of an architectural character typical of the Ottoman period” (UNESCO 2013). In the nomination there is no mention of the later history of these sites, that is, the post-World War II, Cold War history that forms an integral part of the biographies of these tourism areas. Why was this essential element of the past omitted from the tourist’s gaze? In the following essay Eaton and Roshi suggest that Albanians (and, I would argue, the heritage specialists at UNESCO) are uncomfortable with difficult heritage, defined by Macdonald as “a heritage that the majority of population would prefer not to have” (2006: 9). Generally heritage sites do not focus on apartheid, communism, extreme poverty, fascism, genocide, Nazism, slavery, terrorism, and war—topics that are emotionally challenging to the visitor. Eaton and Roshi argue that rather than white-washing history, Albanians should be embracing their difficult heritage as part of their healing and reconciliation with the past. Not only is this a chance for Albanians to make peace with their past, it could also be an opportunity to capitalize on an economic growth industry, “dark tourism” (Foley and Lennon 1996).

Over the last two decades there has been an upsurge in what Foley and Lennon (1996) termed dark tourism: the commemoration and memorialization of atrocity, death, and disaster. In 2007 Williams noted that “more memorial museums have opened in the last 10 years than the past 100” (2007: 9). Recently, dark tourism received the imprimatur of the academic world when in 2012 the University of Central Lancaster, U.K., established the Institute for Dark Tourism Research (IDTR), the world’s first center dedicated to the study of this particular type of tourism. Research focuses on the relationships between places with horrific associations and the tourists who visit by asking questions like, “why do people feel compelled to visit sites like Auschwitz, Chernobyl, or Ground Zero?” (IDTR 2012). Is it as Antze and Lambek (1996: 248) suggest, that people are actively seeking to be part of larger history; and that they want to be witnesses to the past

in the present time? Do visitors attempt to empathize with victims and imagine the motivations of the perpetrators? Or are they mere rubbernecker who wish to see the very spot where a bad act took place, obtaining a sense of relief when they can return to the safety of their bus, car, or hotel room escaping the horrors of the past? Is an important part of the attraction of these sites of trauma to allow people to contemplate death—from a comfortable distance?

Although human fascination with death seems constant, thanatourism (from the Greek *thanatos* [death]) has expanded within the last 200 years thanks to the influence of the media (Knudsen 2011). The primary feature of thanatourism is “less a fascination with death per se, than feeling for the particular people who have died (personal, nationalistic, or humanitarian)” (Seaton 1996: 243). A global demand for “authentic” attractions has turned thanatourism into an increasingly profitable sector of the tourism business. The Cambodian government is planning a theme park commemorating atrocities carried out under the Khmer Rouge regime. This initiative is part of Cambodia’s larger effort to capitalize on the brutalities of its past—and to tap into a booming global industry in travel to grisly destinations, an outstanding example of thanatourism (Burmon 2010).

Eaton and Roshi make an excellent case for the value of memorialization of difficult heritages as a tool for dealing with a disturbing past. Interpreting and memorializing grim events is not just about drawing in tourists’ cash. Traumatic heritage sites also help us gain a fuller understanding of who we are. Trauma can form an important component of group identity; individual and collective memories become the basis for new legal frameworks, management, and policies. The authors also argue that it may be beneficial for the average Albanian to acknowledge the recent past and to have their suffering under the Hoxha regime (1944–1985) recognized by locals and tourists alike. Eaton and Roshi make a persuasive claim for the inclusion of the underground escape routes and hiding places for the elite communist officials as part of the site of Gjirokastra, arguing that “heritage practices can help bring about a reworking of a traumatic past by using sites of violence for processes of reconciliation.”

Many of the former communist countries have faced the process of reconciliation with the recent past, in different ways and at different times. “Communist heritage” tourism—the consumption of key sights and places associated with the various communist regimes and their associated sites in places like Romania—has emerged as a particular form of cultural or heritage tourism for special interest tourists. A re-signification, as Eaton and Roshi suggest, of the communist bunkers and other architectural modifications at Gjirokastra could act as a dark tourist endeavor confronting a traumatic past and at the same time venerating and addressing past injustices to the Albanian people.

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