

KRITON KUCI

**REDEFINING TOURISM
NARRATIVES: NAVIGATING
BEYOND BANAL NATIONALISM**

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**Redefining Tourism Narratives:
Navigating beyond Banal Nationalism**

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Redefining Tourism Narratives: Navigating beyond Banal Nationalism

*Did you know that the origins of iso-polyphony, one of the world's most ancient acapella singing traditions, can be traced to the Illyrians, the ancestors of modern Albanians?*¹

*The Albanian nation doesn't have a history filled with wars of conquest against other peoples, but the history of Albania testifies to the ancient traces of our people in the Southeastern European region, as an indigenous and hospitable population to those far from their own land.*²

¹ "Did you know? Interesting facts about Albania" ([Anon.] <https://albania.al/did-you-know/>)

² "A Brief Overview of the History of Albania" ([Anon.] <https://albania.al/history/>)

*Albania is considered one of the regions with the oldest population traces in the Balkans and Europe... The Indo-European population settled here at the beginning of the third millennium BC. As a result of this union, a new population, the Pelasgians, was created on the Balkan Peninsula, which preserved specific cultural and linguistic characteristics... This ancient population became the precursor to the Illyrians.*³

The above text is taken from the official website of the Albanian National Tourism Agency, the state agency whose task is to promote Albanian tourism. When during a cycle of lectures on nationalism I showed the text (as well as other fragments offrom the texts found on the page) to my first-year students, the most common response I received from them was: So what? The text only tells the truth!

My students were not entirely wrong when they said that the text tells the truth. However, the text tells a special kind of truth. The truth that is constructed, perceived, and reproduced in a certain social context, within a certain historical framework. The text tells the *national* truth.

And what is considered national truth at a given time is the product of certain social interactions. "Historical truth" itself, in a Foucauldian sense, is a social construction. The "historical truths" of different nations are "true" for the national subjects of one nation, but not necessarily for the national subjects of another nation. And yet they are considered true at least within the cultural boundaries of certain nations. As Eric Hobsbawm has shrewdly pointed out, national historiography has constructed and reproduced the great truths of the nation's history withinthe ideological framework imposed by nationalism.

³ Ibid.

They are supported and strengthened by a set of social institutions as well as by a variety of social practices, including discursive practices as Benedict Anderson has highlighted. Nationalism has constructed the way modern people think, speak, behave, act, consume, travel, evaluate, give meaning to the world, and in the final analysis construct social reality. These practices very often are not experienced as conscious experiences but function as routines. Tourism is one of these practices.

Nationalism and Tourism

The relationship between tourism and nationalism is multifaceted, encompassing both positive and negative dynamics. Tourism and nationalism share a complex and multifaceted relationship, including aspects of culture, identity, economics, and politics. While tourism can promote national pride and solidarity, it can also exacerbate tensions and conflicts between different national or ethnic groups. Understanding this dynamic requires examining various dimensions, including how tourism shapes national identity, fosters cultural exchange, and influences political narratives. One significant aspect of the relationship between tourism and nationalism lies in the construction and promotion of national identity. Tourism often serves as a vehicle for showcasing a country's unique cultural heritage, historical landmarks, and natural attractions, contributing to a sense of pride and belonging among its citizens. For example, heritage tourism initiatives, such as the preservation of historical sites or cultural festivals, can reinforce narratives of national identity by highlighting shared history and values. Furthermore, tourism can facilitate cultural exchange and mutual understanding between nations, promoting a sense of global citizenship while still preserving national

distinctiveness. Through interactions with tourists from different backgrounds, locals may gain new perspectives on their own culture and identity, fostering a sense of openness and cosmopolitanism. In this way, tourism can play a role in transcending narrow nationalist ideologies and promoting a more inclusive worldview.

However, the relationship between tourism and nationalism is not always benign. In some cases, tourism can exacerbate nationalist sentiments and fuel tensions between different groups. For example, the commodification of cultural symbols and traditions for tourist consumption can lead to debates over authenticity and ownership, particularly in regions with diverse ethnic or indigenous populations. Additionally, the influx of tourists into sensitive or contested areas can spark conflicts over territorial sovereignty or cultural heritage, as seen in disputes over historical sites or religious landmarks. Moreover, governments often leverage tourism as a tool for promoting nationalist agendas and shaping political narratives. By strategically promoting certain destinations or historical narratives, authorities may seek to reinforce particular interpretations of national identity and history, while marginalizing dissenting voices or alternative perspectives. This instrumentalization of tourism for political ends can further entrench nationalist ideologies and perpetuate divisions within society.

Historical Evolution of the Relationship between Tourism and Nationalism

The roots of the relationship between tourism and nationalism can be traced back to the emergence of modern tourism in the 18th and 19th centuries. During this period, the rise of nationalism as a political and cultural force in Europe coincided with the growing popularity of leisure travel among the affluent classes. Grand tours,

undertaken by aristocrats and intellectuals, often served as opportunities for cultural and nationalistic education, as travelers explored the historical sites and cultural treasures of their own nations or neighboring countries.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, nationalism became increasingly intertwined with tourism as governments and nationalist movements recognized the potential of tourism as a tool for political mobilization and nation-building. *Colonial powers utilized tourism to promote imperial ideologies and showcase their colonial possessions as symbols of national greatness.* Similarly, newly independent nations sought to assert their national identities and promote domestic tourism as a means of fostering patriotism and unity among their citizens.

The interwar period witnessed the emergence of mass tourism, fueled by technological advancements, economic prosperity, and the democratization of travel. Nationalist regimes, such as fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, exploited tourism as a propaganda tool to glorify the nation and propagate their ideologies. Meanwhile, in liberal democracies, tourism played a role in fostering national unity and promoting a sense of belonging among diverse populations.

The post-World War II era saw the emergence of tourism diplomacy as a means of promoting international cooperation and understanding. Governments invested in cultural exchange programs, international festivals, and tourism promotion initiatives as part of their diplomatic strategies. Tourism became increasingly instrumentalized as a tool for soft power projection, as nations sought to enhance their global image and influence through cultural diplomacy.

In the contemporary era, globalization and technological advancements have transformed the relationship between tourism and nationalism. On one hand, globalization has led

to the homogenization of tourist experiences, as destinations seek to cater to international tastes and preferences. On the other hand, nationalist movements and populist ideologies have fueled a resurgence of ethno-nationalism and cultural protectionism, influencing tourism policies and practices in many countries.

Banal Nationalism and Tourism

As Michael Billig has so astutely pointed out, in modern societies, there is a continuous, daily process of reminding nationhood, and this continuous process of reminding is the reason why “we”, the members of the nations, do not forget the national identity. We are reminded every day of our national affiliation. “We”, the Lithuanians, Luxembourgers, Americans, French, Serbs, Greeks, Albanians, etc., are reminded every day that “we” are members of our nation. This daily process of emphasizing the importance of nation and nationality implies the banal reproduction of a complex of perceptions, beliefs, customs, and re-presentations. Banal nationalism describes exactly this process. The concept of nationalism is expanded in such a way as to include the means and ideological habits which make possible the reproduction of the nation. These are the reasons why “we” do not forget “our” national identity. In modern societies, nationhood is constantly reminded through common practices and ideological habits. Tourism also will do its part in reminding the nation to “us” but also to “them”.

Material manifestations of banal nationalism in tourism are evident in various aspects of tourist destinations and experiences. Tourist infrastructure and development often reflect nationalist agendas, with governments and local authorities investing in projects that showcase national achievements, heritage, and cultural distinctiveness. For instance, the construction of iconic landmarks, museums,

and heritage sites serves to symbolize and reinforce national identity, inviting tourists to participate in the collective celebration of the nation. Moreover, the commodification of national symbols and imagery in tourism marketing and branding further reinforces banal nationalist discourses. Tourist brochures, advertisements, and promotional campaigns often rely on stereotypical representations of national identity to attract visitors, perpetuating simplified and essentialized narratives of the host nation. This commodification of national identity not only shapes tourists' perceptions but also contributes to the construction and dissemination of banal nationalist ideologies within and beyond tourist destinations.

In addition to material manifestations, banal nationalism in tourism operates through ideological mechanisms that reinforce taken-for-granted assumptions about the nation. Touristic narratives, representations, and performances play a crucial role in constructing and perpetuating nationalist ideologies, framing the visitor experience within the context of national history, identity, and values. Cultural heritage sites, museums, and guided tours often serve as vehicles for the dissemination of nationalistic narratives, promoting a sense of collective belonging and shared identity among tourists. Furthermore, tourism policies and practices are often imbued with nationalist agendas, with governments and tourism authorities utilizing tourism as a tool for nation-building, cultural diplomacy, and soft power projection. Strategies such as branding, cultural festivals, and heritage preservation initiatives are deployed to enhance the nation's image and reputation on the global stage, fostering a sense of national pride and identity among tourists.

Banal nationalism also operates through discursive formations that shape the production and consumption of national identity in tourism contexts. Tourist narratives,

guidebooks, and promotional materials often employ discursive strategies that naturalize and reinforce nationalist ideologies, framing the tourist experience within specific national narratives and symbols. These discursive constructions not only shape tourists' perceptions but also contribute to the reproduction and normalization of banal nationalist tropes and stereotypes within tourist discourse.

In the everyday practices of tourism, individuals actively engage in the construction and negotiation of national identities through their interactions with local communities, cultural artifacts, and landscapes. Tourists interpret and ascribe meaning to their travel experiences based on their preconceived notions of national identity, often drawing on banal nationalist discourses and representations. Souvenir shopping, for example, becomes a way for tourists to collect and display symbols of national identity, reinforcing their sense of belonging to a particular nation.

Moreover, the consumption of food, music, and other cultural products in tourist settings becomes imbued with nationalist meanings, as tourists seek authentic experiences that align with their imagined perceptions of the host nation. By engaging in these everyday practices, tourists actively participate in the reproduction and dissemination of banal nationalist discourses, contributing to the perpetuation of national identity narratives in tourism contexts.

Manifestations of Banal Nationalism on Websites of National Tourism Agencies: The Case of Albania⁴

Official tourism websites serve as digital gateways,

⁴ Information obtained from the tourist website <https://albania.al/>

offering both domestic citizens and international audiences a curated glimpse into a nation's identity, attractions, and cultural heritage. Beyond their primary function of promoting tourism, these platforms play a significant role in shaping and reinforcing nationalist narratives. Through carefully constructed content comprising narratives, imagery, and historical accounts, official tourism websites craft a specific image of the nation, emphasizing iconic landmarks, cultural festivals, and historical achievements to instill a sense of pride and unity among citizens while projecting an idealized version of the nation to the world. Cultural heritage, central to nationalist agendas, is prominently showcased on these platforms, with traditional arts, cuisine, and customs highlighted as core components of national identity. Furthermore, official tourism websites serve as instruments of soft power diplomacy, projecting a positive image to the international community to influence global perceptions and foster international goodwill. However, the construction of national identity on these platforms is not without its challenges; selective presentation and omission of certain historical or cultural aspects can perpetuate stereotypes, marginalize communities, and reinforce exclusionary forms of nationalism. Despite these complexities, official tourism websites remain influential in shaping perceptions of national identity, making it imperative to critically evaluate the implications of their narratives for broader socio-political dynamics. The first thing that strikes you when you look at the website of the Albanian National Tourism Agency is the absence of the national flag and symbols, which, in the tradition of the banal nationalism approach, are an important component. Michael Billig himself considers as the metonymic image of banal nationalism the national flag that hangs outside public buildings and nobody notices. The only time the flag

appears is in the language section. However, the absence of the image of the national flag does not mean that elements of banal nationalism are absent. On the contrary.

The historical narrative used in the section of history on the website of the Albanian National Tourism Agency is not far from the official Albanian national narrative, where history is understood as an uninterrupted succession of battles fought by the Albanian nation. The text presents a simplistic historical narrative of Albania, emphasizing, as all nationalists do, the supposed ancient roots of the nation and the struggles for independence. These common places about the nation's history, its antiquity, its autochthony and continuity, taken-for-granted assumptions about the nation are elements of banal nationalism.

Nationalist Discourse

The text portrays Albania's history as a continuous struggle for independence and self-determination against external enemies, particularly the Ottoman Empire. It highlights key national heroes like Skanderbeg and pivotal events such as the Albanian National Renaissance and the Declaration of Independence in 1912, framing them as defining moments in the nation's history. The narrative celebrates Albania's resistance to foreign domination and its efforts to modernize and integrate into the international community, particularly through its membership in NATO and aspirations for EU integration.

Primordialist Components of Nationalism

The text emphasizes Albania's ancient origins, tracing its history back to the Paleolithic period and highlighting the continuity of its population and culture through various historical epochs. It identifies the Illyrians and later figures like Skanderbeg as ancestral figures who symbolize the

nation's enduring identity and resistance to foreign invaders. By highlighting the "autochthonous" nature of Albanian settlements and the preservation of language and traditions despite foreign conquests, the text reinforces the idea of a primordial national essence that transcends historical contingencies.

Continuity of the Nation

The narrative underscores the resilience and endurance of the Albanian nation throughout its history, despite facing numerous challenges and foreign occupations. It portrays Albania as a cohesive cultural and territorial entity with deep historical roots, from ancient times to the present day, suggesting an unbroken continuity of national identity and aspirations. In summary, the text employs a nationalist discourse that combines primordialist elements emphasizing Albania's ancient origins and continuity as a nation with banal components that reflect taken-for-granted assumptions about its historical significance and identity.

Recommendations for a Balanced Approach to Tourism

How to get rid of the banality of nationalism? How to get rid of the details when the very place that the devil is in the details? The answer is simple: You can't. The reason is that modern societies are not only built on the ideological foundations of nationalism, but after the radical changes of the late 1980s and early 1990s, in the absence of an alternative ideology, nationalism has become the only dominant ideology. Tourism as a social practice cannot be constructed outside the ideological and discursive frameworks imposed by nationalism. However, in order to foster at least a more inclusive and balanced approach to tourism it is important to focus on some possible steps.

These could be, for example, diversifying tourism narratives, promoting regional tourism, emphasizing sustainable practices, providing cultural sensitivity training, encouraging cross-cultural exchanges, and leveraging social media for inclusive storytelling. Additionally, addressing the impact of nationalism in tourism is crucial for creating a welcoming and comprehensive travel experience.

1. Diversifying tourism narratives is essential for creating an inclusive and multifaceted understanding of a destination. This involves representing a wide array of perspectives and histories to provide a richer cultural tapestry. Inclusive storytelling can counteract nationalist tendencies that often highlight a singular, dominant narrative. By incorporating stories from various cultural, ethnic, and historical viewpoints, tourism can foster a more balanced and harmonious understanding of a region's heritage. To shift away from nationalist tendencies, it is important to actively seek out and include marginalized voices and lesser-known historical accounts. Collaborating with local communities, historians, and cultural experts can help ensure that the narratives presented are accurate and representative of the diverse experiences within a region. Educational programs for tourists that highlight this diversity can also play a role in broadening their understanding and appreciation of the destination.

2. Promoting regional tourism is another key strategy. Encouraging tourists to explore lesser-known areas helps address economic disparities and distributes tourism revenue more evenly across a country. This approach draws visitors away from overcrowded hotspots, stimulating economic growth in other regions. It also reduces pressure on popular tourist

sites, preserving them for future generations and ensuring a more sustainable tourism industry.

3. Emphasizing sustainable tourism practices is crucial for protecting both cultural heritage and the natural environment. Sustainable tourism involves adopting practices that conserve natural landscapes and cultural sites while promoting responsible travel. By educating tourists about the importance of conservation and responsible travel, the negative impacts of mass tourism can be mitigated. Sustainable tourism also involves supporting local economies and communities, ensuring that tourism development benefits everyone involved.

4. Providing cultural sensitivity training for tourism professionals is essential to ensure that they understand the complexities of national identity and can present diverse narratives respectfully and accurately. This training helps combat the influence of nationalism by fostering an appreciation for different cultures and histories. When tourism professionals are well-versed in cultural sensitivity, they can offer more authentic and respectful experiences to visitors, enhancing the overall quality of tourism.

5. Encouraging cross-cultural exchange programs promotes mutual understanding and respect between tourists and locals. These programs create opportunities for meaningful interactions, allowing visitors to experience local culture firsthand and locals to share their traditions and way of life. Cross-cultural exchanges can break down stereotypes and prejudices, contributing to a more inclusive and empathetic world.

6. Leveraging social media for inclusive tourism narratives is a powerful tool in today's digital age.

Tourism boards and professionals can use social media platforms to share stories that highlight the multifaceted nature of national identities, showcasing lesser-known destinations and diverse cultural practices. By doing so, they can counteract simplistic and nationalist portrayals of a country, presenting a more accurate and inclusive picture. Social media campaigns can also engage a global audience, spreading awareness about the importance of balanced and inclusive tourism.

7. Addressing the impact of nationalism in tourism requires a concerted effort to promote narratives that go beyond a single dominant culture or history. This can be achieved by collaborating with local communities, historians, and cultural experts to create content that reflects the true diversity of a region. Educational programs and partnerships with local organizations can also play a significant role in promoting a more inclusive approach to tourism. Additionally, promoting tourism policies that emphasize multiculturalism and diversity can help counteract nationalist tendencies.

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