THE ROLE OF TOUR GUIDES IN SHAPING ETHICAL ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN TOURISTS AND RESIDENTS

A Qualitative Exploration in Benin, West Africa

MASTER THESIS

Master of Arts in Urban Tourism and Visitor Economy Management

by Jeanne Adoun

Supervisor: Dr. Xavier Matteucci

ABSTRACT

Encounters between tourists and local communities are often viewed as spontaneous opportunities for cultural exchange; however, the extent to which tour guides play an active role in mediating the ethical dimension of these interactions has so far been insufficiently explored in the academic literature. This study examines the mediating role of tour guides in shaping ethical encounters between tourists and locals within the significant cultural and historical context of Benin in West Africa. Using a qualitative and constructivist research methodology, data were collected through semi-structured narrative interviews with 25 professional tour guides and 25 residents, supplemented by reflective written reports from 30 participating tourists. The thematic analysis of the resulting corpus shows that ethical encounters do not arise spontaneously from the good intentions of individual visitors but are rather actively constructed through the tour guide's conscious mediation practices. More specifically, the results show that tour guides regulate intercultural power imbalances, protect the dignity and privacy of residents, contextualise sensitive cultural practices, and create the normative conditions under which respectful exchange becomes possible. The participating residents consistently reported that the presence and professional demeanour of a competent tour guide transformed potentially intrusive sightseeing visits into socially safe and mutually enriching interactions. Conversely, encounters without effective mediation were characterised by ethical ambiguities, boundary violations and a commercialisation of local everyday life. These findings position the tour guide not only as a logistical facilitator, but also as the key ethical shaper of the encounter between host and guest. This study contributes to the growing literature on ethical and equity-oriented tourism by arguing that sustainable intercultural engagement depends less on the moral awareness of individual tourists than on the structural and relational competencies inherent in the professional practice of tour guiding.

Keywords: ethical encounters, tour guides, intercultural mediation, host-guest relationships, Benin, responsible tourism, qualitative research