

The Symbiotic Relationship Between Power Structures, Benefit Distribution, and Tourist Authentic Experience in Community-Based Tourism

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Abstract

Community-based tourism (CBT) is widely promoted as a sustainable development model that empowers local communities, preserves cultural heritage, and provides authentic experiences for tourists. The concept of "authenticity" is central to the marketing and appeal of CBT. However, this article argues that the realization of authenticity in CBT is not a predetermined outcome but a dynamic and contested process, deeply entangled within the nexus of power structures and benefit distribution. Existing literature often treats community participation, benefit sharing, and authenticity as separate, albeit related, concepts. This study synthesizes these elements to propose a symbiotic relationship model. Through a critical review of literature and the application of a political ecology framework, this paper deconstructs how power asymmetries among key stakeholders—including external investors, local elites, community members, and tourists—shape the distribution of economic and social benefits. It further demonstrates how this distribution directly influences the cultural performances, staged environments, and narratives presented to tourists, thereby co-constructing the tourists' perceived authenticity. Conversely, tourists' pursuit and validation of a particular form of authenticity reinforce existing power hierarchies and economic flows. The paper utilizes a conceptual model and a typology table to illustrate these dynamics. It concludes that a truly sustainable and ethical CBT model must move beyond simplistic notions of authenticity and participation. It requires a deliberate restructuring of power towards more equitable governance and benefit-sharing mechanisms, which in turn fosters a more mutually constituted and critically reflexive form of authenticity for both hosts and guests.

Keywords

Community-Based Tourism, Authenticity, Power Structure, Benefit Distribution, Political Ecology, Tourist Experience

1. Introduction

The global rise of alternative tourism paradigms has positioned Community-Based Tourism (CBT) as a counter-model to the perceived ills of mass tourism, such as cultural commodification, environmental degradation, and economic leakage. At its core, CBT promises a triple-bottom-line success: local empowerment, cultural and environmental conservation, and the provision of deeply meaningful, "authentic" experiences for discerning tourists. The allure of authenticity—the opportunity to encounter "the real" life, culture, and traditions of a place—is a primary motivational driver for tourists seeking CBT destinations.

However, the conceptualization and operationalization of "authenticity" in tourism are fraught with complexity and contention. The seminal work of MacCannell (1973) on staged authenticity and Cohen's (1988) typology of authenticity experiences highlight that what is presented as authentic is often a social construction. In the context of CBT, this construction is not a neutral process. It is profoundly influenced by the intricate web of power relations and economic interests within the community and between the community and external actors [1]. The critical question, "Whose authenticity?" thus becomes paramount.

While a substantial body of literature examines community participation, benefit distribution, and authenticity separately, there is a paucity of research that explicitly and systematically links these three pillars of CBT. Most studies imply a linear relationship: greater community participation leads to more equitable benefits, which in turn produces more authentic experiences. This paper challenges this linear and often idealized narrative. It posits that power structures, benefit distribution, and tourist authenticity exist in a symbiotic relationship—a complex, circular, and mutually reinforcing interplay.

This article aims to deconstruct this symbiotic relationship. It seeks to answer: (1) How do power structures among stakeholders in CBT determine the allocation of economic and social benefits? (2) How does the mechanism of benefit distribution influence the production and performance of "authenticity" for tourist consumption? and (3) How does the tourists' quest for and perception of authenticity, in turn, legitimize and reinforce specific power structures and patterns of benefit distribution?

To address these questions, the paper is structured as follows. First, it reviews the key literature on authenticity in tourism and the theoretical foundations of CBT and power. Second, it introduces a political ecology framework to

analyze power structures and benefit distribution. Third, it presents a conceptual model and a typology to elucidate the symbiotic relationship. Finally, it discusses the implications for theory and practice, arguing for a transformative approach to CBT that prioritizes equity and critical reflection over the mere performance of authenticity [2].

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Evolving Concept of Authenticity in Tourism

The discourse on authenticity in tourism has evolved significantly since its inception. Initially, Boorstin (1961) lamented the rise of "pseudo-events" designed for tourist consumption, portraying tourists as passive consumers of inauthentic spectacles. MacCannell (1973) offered a more nuanced view, arguing that tourists are modern pilgrims actively seeking authenticity in other times and places. He introduced the concept of "staged authenticity," where backstage regions of social life are deliberately opened to tourists, creating a false backstage that is, in fact, a new front stage.

Cohen (1988) further diversified the concept by proposing that authenticity is not an objective property but a socially constructed symbol. He differentiated between objective authenticity (the genuineness of originals), constructive authenticity (projected meanings and stereotypes), and existential authenticity (a state of being activated by the tourist experience itself). Building on this, Wang (1999) made a crucial distinction between object-related authenticity (pertaining to the toured objects) and activity-related existential authenticity (pertaining to the tourist's own feelings of being more real and true to themselves) [3].

In the context of CBT, these constructs collide. Tourists may seek object-related authenticity in cultural artifacts and rituals, while simultaneously desiring existential authenticity through personal connections with locals and immersion in daily life. However, the very act of packaging and selling these experiences inevitably transforms them, leading to what Greenwood (1989) famously termed "culture by the pound"-the commodification of cultural practices.

The application of these authenticity constructs in CBT reveals inherent tensions. While tourists often seek what they perceive as "objective" authenticity-genuine cultural practices untouched by commercialism-the economic necessities of tourism inevitably lead to some degree of performance and adaptation. This creates a paradox where the pursuit of authenticity often leads to its transformation, raising fundamental questions about who controls this process of cultural representation and who benefits from it.

2.2 Community-Based Tourism: Ideals and Realities

CBT is broadly defined as tourism that is managed and owned by the community, for the community, with the intention of fostering holistic well-being. The ideals of CBT are rooted in principles of empowerment, self-determination, and poverty alleviation [4]. Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation has been widely adapted in tourism to conceptualize different levels of community involvement, from mere manipulation or therapy to citizen control.

In reality, the implementation of CBT often falls short of these ideals. Power is rarely distributed evenly within communities. Local elites, often male and from dominant families or clans, frequently capture a disproportionate share of the benefits and decision-making power, marginalizing women, youth, and ethnic minorities. Furthermore, external actors-tour operators, investors, and government agencies-wield significant influence, often setting the agenda and controlling market access, thereby reducing the community to a junior partner or a mere labor pool. This leads to a phenomenon where participation is "tokenistic" rather than transformative, with communities having limited genuine control over tourism development. The disconnect between CBT's empowering rhetoric and its frequently disempowering practice represents a fundamental challenge that requires critical examination.

2.3 Power and Political Ecology in Tourism

To understand these dynamics, a political ecology framework is particularly useful. Political ecology examines the relationships between political, economic, and social factors and environmental issues and changes. Applied to tourism, it reveals how power relations mediate access to and control over tourism resources. Power, in this sense, is not merely coercive but also productive; it shapes discourses, knowledge, and what is considered "valuable" or "authentic" [5].

Power, in this sense, is not merely coercive but also productive; it shapes discourses, knowledge, and what is considered "valuable" or "authentic". In CBT contexts, power operates through multiple dimensions: economic power (control over capital and resources), political power (decision-making authority), discursive power (the ability to define what counts as authentic), and symbolic power (the legitimization of certain cultural representations over others).

Stakeholders in a CBT project operate from different positions of power:

- **External Operators/Investors:** Hold financial capital and market access.
- **Government Agencies:** Hold regulatory power and control over infrastructure and permits.
- **Local Elites:** Hold social and cultural capital, influence over community decision-making.
- **General Community Members:** Often possess labor and cultural knowledge but lack formal power.

- **Tourists:** Hold economic capital and, through their expectations and consumption patterns, wield significant discursive power.

The negotiation (or lack thereof) between these actors determines who benefits from tourism and in what way, directly impacting how the community and its culture are presented and performed. This complex interplay of power relations forms the foundation upon which authenticity is constructed and experienced in CBT [6].

3. The Symbiotic Relationship: A Conceptual Framework

The core argument of this paper is that power structures, benefit distribution, and authenticity are not in a linear chain but a symbiotic loop. Each element continuously influences and is influenced by the others.

3.1 The Axis of Power and Benefit Distribution

Power structures are the primary determinant of how benefits-both economic (income, jobs) and non-economic (social recognition, cultural reinforcement)-are distributed. In a CBT project dominated by an external tour operator, the financial benefits are likely to be skewed, with the operator taking the lion's share of profits, while the community receives wages or fees for performances (See Figure 1). Decision-making power over what is presented to tourists rests with the operator, who will shape the "product" based on market perceptions of authenticity.

Conversely, in a community-controlled model with equitable internal governance, benefits are more likely to be distributed broadly across the community [7]. Decision-making about cultural representation is retained by the community, potentially leading to a different, more self-determined form of cultural presentation. However, even in community-controlled models, internal power hierarchies can persist and may lead to the marginalization of certain groups whose cultural expressions are deemed less "marketable" by local elites.

The distribution mechanism itself becomes a reflection of power relations. Financial flows, resource allocation, and decision-making processes all reveal the underlying power structure of a CBT initiative. When benefits are concentrated among a small elite, whether external or internal, the incentive structures tend to prioritize commercial viability over cultural integrity or broad community benefit [8].

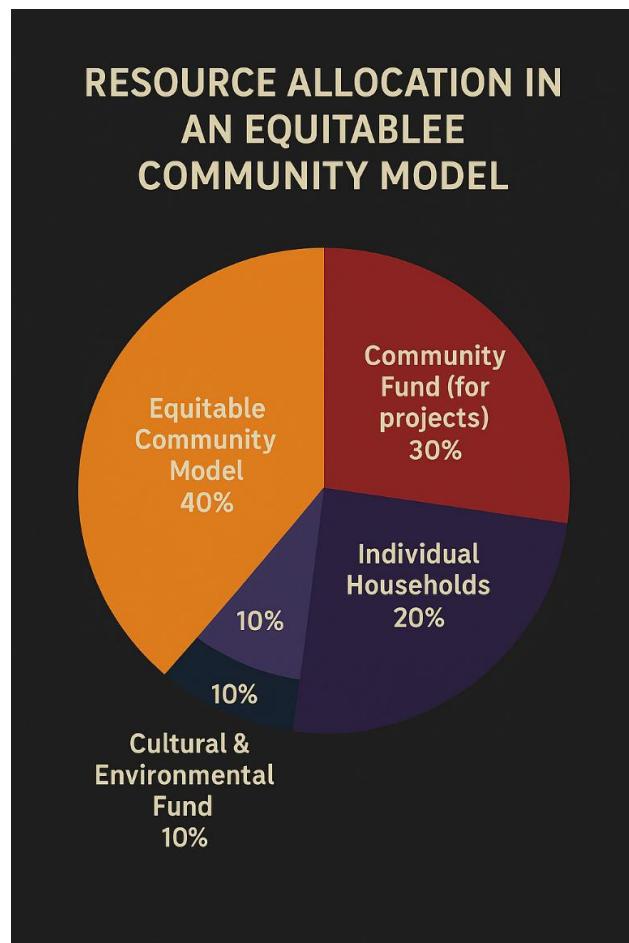


Figure 1. Simplified Model of Benefit Distribution in Different Power Structures

Figure 1 explains In the “equitable community model,” resource allocation is multi-layered, emphasizing a balance between public interests (such as community projects and environmental protection) and individual well-being (such as family support) in order to achieve long-term social equity and sustainable development.

3.2 The Axis of Benefit Distribution and Authenticity Production

The distribution of benefits directly shapes the "authenticity" that tourists encounter, creating what can be understood as a typology of authenticity production in CBT. This relationship manifests through several distinct patterns that reflect the underlying political economy of the tourism initiative [9].

When benefits are concentrated, the incentive for those in power is to produce a standardized, easily marketable, and non-threatening version of authenticity. This often results in what MacCannell described as staged authenticity, where cultural performances are simplified, sanitized, and scheduled for tourist convenience. The economic logic here prioritizes volume and predictability over depth or genuine cultural exchange.

When benefits are more equitably shared, there is a greater incentive for a wider segment of the community to engage in tourism, potentially leading to a more diverse and nuanced cultural representation. This environment can facilitate deeper, more existential experiences for tourists, as interactions may feel less scripted and more spontaneous. The economic structure thus directly influences the qualitative nature of the tourist experience [10].

Table 1. Typology of Authenticity Production in CBT

Power/Benefit Model	Form of Authenticity Produced	Mechanism	Example
External Operator Dominated	Staged & Constructive Authenticity	Operator packages culture based on tourist stereotypes for maximum profit. Cultural elements are simplified, sanitized, and scheduled.	A "traditional village tour" where a dance is performed on a strict schedule for tourist groups, with curated "meet-the-local" sessions.
Local Elite Dominated	Selective & Hegemonic Authenticity	The culture of the dominant elite is presented as the universal community culture. Marginalized groups' traditions are suppressed or appropriated.	Only the history and crafts of the dominant clan are showcased; the stories and crafts of minority groups within the community are ignored.
Equitable Community Model	Negotiated & Existential Authenticity	A broader range of community voices influences the narrative. Experiences allow for more spontaneous interaction, fostering existential authenticity for both hosts and guests.	Tourists participate in daily activities (e.g., farming, cooking) alongside families, with a portion of the fee going to a communal fund for schools and clinics.

Table 1 illustrates ***"Types of Authenticity Production in Community Tourism (CBT)"**, that is, how culture is presented to tourists under different power and interest structures. It categorizes authenticity into three main modes. This table illustrates that in community tourism, "who holds power and interests" determines how cultural authenticity is presented. Only when community members participate equally can a truly meaningful and mutually beneficial cultural experience be achieved.

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3.3 The Axis of Tourist Experience and Power Reinforcement

The symbiotic loop is closed by the role of the tourist, who is far from a passive recipient of pre-packaged experiences. Tourists arrive with pre-conceived notions of authenticity, shaped by guidebooks, media, and social media. Their consumption choices and post-experience reviews provide direct feedback to the market, creating a powerful mechanism that reinforces or challenges existing power structures.

When tourists validate and pay for a particular staged experience by praising it as "amazing and authentic!" they financially and discursively reinforce the power structure that produced it. The external operator or local elite receives positive reinforcement for their model, ensuring its continuation. Conversely, if tourists begin to seek out and value more "raw" or "local-led" experiences, they can create market pressure for a shift in power and benefit distribution. The

tourist's search for authenticity is, therefore, an active force in the political economy of CBT, legitimizing certain power configurations over others [12].

This three-axis relationship forms a continuous loop, as illustrated in Figure 2.

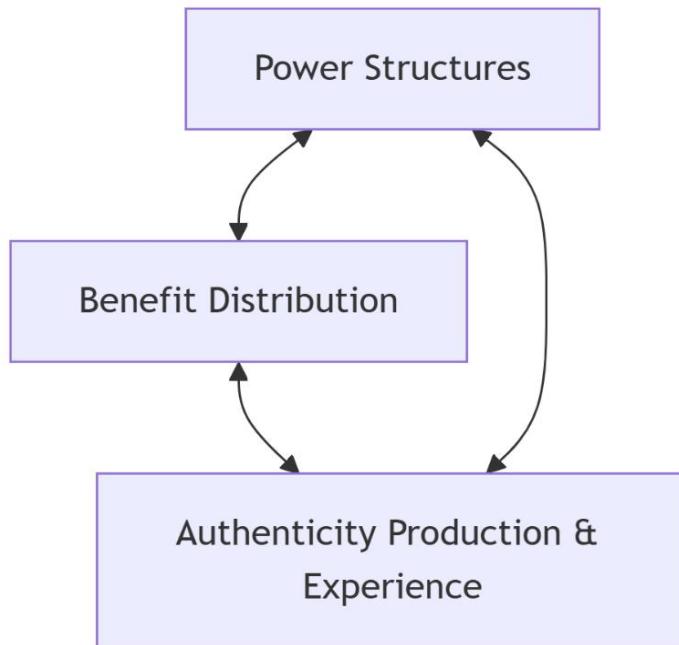


Figure 2. The Symbiotic Relationship Model in Community-Based Tourism

Figure 2 shows a cyclical model, demonstrating the interplay between "Power Structures," "Benefit Distribution," and "Authenticity Production & Experience": Power structures determine who possesses resources and discourse power, thus influencing the distribution of benefits; Benefit distribution, in turn, affects how people create and experience authenticity; and people's perception and experience of authenticity, in turn, reinforces or challenges existing power structures. This is a model describing the dynamic cycle of society and culture, revealing the interaction and feedback mechanisms between power, interests, and authenticity.

4. Discussion: Towards a Symbiotic Ethics in CBT

The symbiotic relationship model demonstrates that achieving authenticity in CBT is not merely a marketing challenge but a profound issue of governance and justice. The persistent question, "Whose authenticity?", forces a critical examination of who has the right to represent a culture and who benefits from that representation [13].

The model suggests that the commonly sought-after "objective authenticity" may be a chimera in a commercial tourism context. Instead, a more productive goal may be to foster what we might term "symbiotic authenticity." This is an authenticity that is:

1. **Critically Self-Aware:** All stakeholders, including tourists, recognize that the experience is a co-created performance and reflect on their role within it.
2. **Equitably Negotiated:** The cultural content and narratives are determined through inclusive processes that acknowledge and compensate diverse community voices.
3. **Existentially Open:** It creates a space for spontaneous, interpersonal connections that feel authentic to both the host and the guest, moving beyond a rigid script.

For practitioners and policymakers, this implies that interventions must focus on restructuring power before promoting authenticity. This includes:

- Strengthening community land tenure and resource rights.
- Supporting the development of transparent and accountable local tourism institutions.
- Building capacity for negotiation and business management among all community segments.
- Educating tourists to be more reflexive and critical consumers, encouraging them to ask questions about who owns and benefits from the experiences they purchase.

5. Conclusion

This paper has argued that the interplay between power structures, benefit distribution, and tourist authenticity in Community-Based Tourism is best understood as a symbiotic relationship. Power dictates who benefits, which in turn shapes the performance of authenticity for tourist consumption. The tourists' pursuit and validation of this authenticity complete the loop by reinforcing the very power structures that created it. This model moves beyond linear, idealized narratives of CBT to expose the complex and often contentious political economy underlying the tourism experience.

The pursuit of "authenticity", when divorced from questions of power and equity, risks becoming a tool for legitimizing inequality and cultural hegemony. A transformative approach to CBT must, therefore, integrate the quest for authentic experiences with the struggle for equitable governance. The most meaningful and sustainable form of authenticity may not be one that is found in a perfectly preserved past, but one that is consciously and justly built in the present, through relationships of mutual respect and shared benefit between hosts and guests.

Future research should apply this symbiotic framework to empirical case studies across different cultural and economic contexts to further test and refine its propositions. Particularly valuable would be longitudinal studies examining how shifts in power structures affect authenticity construction over time, and comparative studies of CBT initiatives that have successfully institutionalized more equitable models. Such research would contribute to developing more ethical and sustainable approaches to tourism that genuinely benefit communities while providing meaningful experiences for visitors.

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