Commercializing Hospitality
A New Concept for Residents of Viengxay, Laos
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ABSTRACT: Recently, small numbers of independent tourists and small groups have begun to visit the remote and poor region of Viengxay in northern Laos. This article is based on focus-group interviews and on-site observation in thirteen villages in Viengxay, intended to explore the perceptions and expectations of locals regarding their roles as hosts in this emerging tourism context. It discusses the ways in which locals are developing attitudes and practices of hospitality towards tourists. These practices are emerging under the influence of factors such as native cultural traditions, individual and communal expectations and attitudes towards tourism, as well as historical factors arising from the area’s history of war and political isolation. Although locals intuitively treat tourists according to their society’s ‘traditional’ treatment of guests, this treatment is also modified to reflect an appreciation that tourists are a specific type of guest for which the rules of hospitality may need to be reinterpreted. Locals’ perceptions of tourists and behaviour in their relations with tourists are evolving as a result of growing contact between locals and tourists and the concomitantly changing expectations from and understanding of the tourism industry. This article articulates common themes for conceptualising the ways in which hospitality practices in the Viengxay villages are emerging from interaction and conflict of these various aspects.

KEYWORDS: cave tourism; development; heritage; hospitality; tourism; Viengxay, Laos; Vietnam War tourism

Introduction
The district of Viengxay is located in the remote forested northern Laotian Province of Houaphanh. It is home to members of several different indigenous ethnic groups, many of whom live in small villages and maintain many aspects of their ‘traditional’ way of life. A small but growing number of tourists, mostly independent or in small groups, have been ‘discovering’ and visiting Viengxay in the past few years. The locals who inhabit the villages of this area are unaccustomed to receiving tourists, but it is anticipated that the number of these visitors from afar will increase steadily in coming years, due in part to development projects initiated by international organizations.

This research addresses the question of how local people in Viengxay perceive their roles vis-à-vis tourists within the emerging tourism context of their local area. Lashley (2007) has written that change in perceptions and practices of host–guest relations in developing tourism contexts is an important area for research. Tourism and hospitality development in Viengxay is still in the very early stages, but it is expected that visitor flows will increase.
significantly. This article captures the current state of intangible cultural factors at this early stage, and serves as a reference point for future policy and development in the area. It provides a benchmark against which future evolution in local people's perception of the nature of their role in tourism in their area can be compared as tourism develops and as local people become accustomed to participating in the tourism economy.

**Anthropology and Tourism**

Because of the multidisciplinary nature of tourism studies, Crick (1989) has doubted that it could become a unified field, arguing instead that tourism must be studied from a number of perspectives. Among these many relevant angles of approach to tourism studies, Burns (1999) remarked on the natural affinities between tourism as a field of knowledge and anthropology, in that both deal with issues of human culture and dynamics. An anthropological approach is particularly cogent in gaining an understanding of tourism, which tends to deal with the interfacing of different cultures through the interactions of hosts and guests (Nash 1981; Burns and Holden 1995).

As cited in Nash (1996), the original application of anthropological concepts to the study of tourism has been attributed to Nuñez’s 1963 study of tourism in rural Mexico. The growth of anthropological studies in tourism has paralleled the increase in global tourism over the past fifty years (Holden 2005), especially to the less-developed countries in which anthropologists tend to work (Nash 1996). The cultural practice of tourism has been associated with post-modernism (Urry 1990) and thus linked with the discourses of post-modernity within anthropology.

‘Culture’ is of course a central concern of anthropology. The tourist becomes an ‘agent of contact between cultures’ (Nash 1989: 37) who can also be an agent for cultural change in the society that receives him or her, especially in the case of developing societies. Anthropologists have studied processes of ‘acculturation’ through which societies that come into contact through tourism borrow characteristics or practices from one another (Greenwood 1977; Burns 1999). In the anthropological literature, the relations and interactions that happen in tourism are often seen as being characterized by segregation and asymmetry (Krippendorf 1986; Nash 1989; MacCannell 2001) and even as a type of imperialism (Turner and Ash 1975).

Host societies develop ‘coping strategies’ (Boissevain 1996) to deal with the influx of tourists and the accompanying commodification of their culture. Other strains of anthropology see commodification as an agent of preservation for cultural traditions (Cohen 1988). Adams (1996) sees culture as being constructed by hosts and visitors in the tourism relation through their interactions, rather than as something that existed in ‘authentic’ form prior to tourism contacts (Dicks 2003). Recent anthropological studies in tourism have investigated issues such as cultural survival as it relates to tourist host societies’ rights to self-determination (McIntosh 1999) and the effects of the commodification of culture on local identities (Medina 2003).

The following section examines in more detail the particularities of the relationship between hosts and guests in the tourism and hospitality context.

**The Concept of Hospitality**

The relationship between host and guest is central to the concept of hospitality. ‘Traditional’ cultures associate the host–guest relationship with different degrees and types of obligations, while modern societies are less likely to see hospitality as a matter of social duty and more as an economic and commercially institutionalised activity. The concept of a ‘hospitality industry’ and use of the words ‘guest’ and ‘host’
in such commercial contexts is seen by some as paradoxical or ironic (Heal 1990; Burn 1999) and later Smith and Brent (2001) have edited volumes investigating the nature of the host–guest relationship in tourism within different cultural contexts, and the impacts of these relations on various host societies. Telfer (2000) identifies three types of hospitality: that offered to one’s friends, that offered to members of one’s wider social circle, and ‘good Samaritan’ hospitality offered to strangers in need.

Though the offering of hospitality originated as a private domestic matter, the same word has come to be used to refer to the selling of similar amenities as a commercial service (Walton 2000). Tourism can thus be conceptualised as ‘commercialised’ or ‘industrialised’ hospitality (Leiper 1979). While acknowledging an apparent contradiction in the use of the same term to refer to a freely offered act of generosity in a domestic context and a commodity sold for monetary profit, the distinction is not always clear-cut. For instance, Telfer (2000) finds that a commercial operator offering generous service and reasonable prices, with a real concern for the comfort and enjoyment of her guests, can without irony be called ‘hospitality’. Distinctions between commercial and non-commercial practices are not a priori and are constantly being negotiated (Hochschild 2003; Hultman and Cederholm 2009). The performance of hospitality relations can serve to reaffirm existing societal structures and practices, but can also transform such structures and practices (Selwyn 2000).

Hospitality in tourism has been characterised as a type of ‘commercial friendship’ (Lashley and Morrison 2000). Lashley (2000) distinguished three different areas of hospitality studies: addressing hospitality as a socio-cultural phenomenon, as a set of domestic practices and as a commercial endeavour, respectively. These three categories are not mutually exclusive and refer to different aspects of hospitality rather than three distinct categories of hospitality. The practice of hospitality typically has both commercial and socio-cultural aspects, both of which have been receiving increasing interest recently (Brotherton 1999; Brotherton and Wood 2000, Lashley 2000; Lashley and Morrison 2000). This dual nature can lead to conflicts in the aims and values at play in the practice of hospitality, especially from the position of the hosts (Selwyn 2000; Telfer 2000). Of primary interest in this article is the notion of hospitality as a specific discourse by which relations between locals and tourists, who take the roles of hosts and guests, are framed. King (1995) has shown that hospitality is a cultural practice embodied in a society’s customs and rules. Hospitality takes different guises in different situations, and evolves within a society over time (Gray and Ligouri 1980; Wood 1994). This evolution has been described in terms of an increasing shift towards the commercial aspect of hospitality and away from the cultural (Greenwood 1977), or as a transition from a native culture to an emergent tourism culture (Cohen 1996).

Hospitality relations are often characterised by contact and interaction between people from different cultures who might otherwise never meet. Through the provision of not just a place to stay but also a venue for intercultural contact between hosts and guests (as well as between guests and other guests), the ‘lifestyle values’ of rural host societies become the ‘tourism values’ that are marketed to and consumed by predominantly urban tourists (Hultman and Cederholm 2009: 128). In assuming the role of guests, tourists become temporary participants in the host society. As a side-effect of the host–guest contact that occurs in such relations, hosts may exhibit a temporary ‘phenotypic’ ‘cultural drift’ in host behaviour while hosting guests, but sustained or repeated contact of this type can lead to a ‘genotypic’ shift that implies alterations in the base values of the host society (Burns 1999: 103).

Several authors have written on various ways in which the perceptions of local people regarding their identities, spatial concepts and
social ideals are affected by their involvement in the tourism industry (Crang 1994; DiDomenico and Lynch 2007; Sheringham and Daruwalla 2007). A report on tourism and hospitality in Ngadha, Flores, Indonesia (Cole 2007) found that the local hosts in this village society valued tourists’ visits for the cultural contact and excitement brought to the village whereas tourist guests valued the exotic experience of participating for a short while in the life of the village. The practice of homestay tourism in rural Turkey has changed the rhythm of domestic life, but the conservative customs of the area mean that tourists interface almost exclusively with male members of the host society, minimizing the social and cultural exchange benefits realised by women (Van Broeck 2001). Wallace (2001) describes the development of tourism at Lake Balaton in Hungary as an ongoing process of negotiation between hosts and guests, through which a ‘cultural definition’ of the tourist destination is constructed.

Cohen (1996) has remarked that the first tourists to an area will often be treated as guests in the local society’s host–guest tradition, but that as tourists become more commonplace and invasive, they become increasingly unwelcome. The practice of hospitality becomes less a custom and more a commercial practice. As the level of tourism increases, so does the potential for resentment and irritation towards tourists among local people. This has been articulated by Doxey (1975) in his ‘Irridex’ scale. As local people become more jaded and even resentful towards tourists, the social incentive for hospitality is expected to weaken, and financial gain tends to gain in importance as a motivator.

Telfer (2000: 42–4) has distinguished between three categories of motivating factors in the provision of hospitality. These include ‘other-regarding motives’ characterised by a wish to bring benefit to others, whether out of a sense of duty or compassion; ‘reciprocal motives’ which see hospitality in terms of an economy of exchange, in which accommodation is offered in exchange for tangible (monetary or other material gain) or intangible (making friends, enjoying company) benefit for the host. Burgess (1982) sees hospitality relations in terms of economies of gift exchange (Mauss 1967); and non-reciprocal motives, motivated by self-interest on the part of the host, such as a wish to gain favour with others or satisfy one’s vanity by showing off. Tucker (2003) finds that both hosts and guests in the bed and breakfast industry of New Zealand’s South Island are primarily motivated by the social contact in a domestic setting that such accommodation involves, and in exchange for this contract are willing to enter into implicit contracts of appropriate behaviour that are more restrictive, but also more rewarding for such hosts and guests, than those in conventional hotels or guest houses. In other contexts, though, some local people see the role of host in tourism as intrinsically demeaning, as in the early twentieth-century development of tourism in rural Norway (Pujik 2001).

Selwyn (2000) remarks on the obligatory nature of hospitality in the traditions of many cultures, proposing that hospitality plays an important part in the growth and evolution of societies. The idea of the offering of hospitality as a duty is a component of the societal code of many ‘traditional’ societies, involving issues of honour and duty (Cornwallis 1694; Heal 1990), but tends to become much less prevalent as a society undergoes processes of modernisation. The appearance of increasing numbers of tourists in an area and the emergence of commercial practices of hospitality have been noted to affect a host society’s ideas of the relationship between hospitality and duty (Lashley 2007). In ‘homestay’ situations, which characterise many such nascent tourism environments, the distinction between private and public, commercial and non-commercial becomes blurred, as the domestic sphere becomes a business site or ‘commercial home’ (Lynch and MacWhannell 2000; Darke and Gurney 2000; Di
Domenico and Lynch 2007). Even in developed tourism contexts, where conventional commercial accommodation such as hotels are available, ‘homestay’ and ‘bed and breakfast’ markets are sustained by tourists who value the personal contact with local people and the insights into local domestic life that such options allow (Pearce 1990).

Tourism in Viengxay

The greater Viengxay area, which includes the town and the 128 scattered villages surrounding it, has a population of just over 30,000. Houaphanh is one of the poorest provinces in Laos. During the U.S.–Vietnam War of 1963–1973, Laos was the site of a parallel ‘secret war’. The country was split into two camps, with the royalist troops supported by the United States controlling the lowlands, and the revolutionary army controlling the north. As the Laotian communist headquarters, Viengxay was a key U.S. bombing target. To avoid the bombardment, some 23,000 people hid in more than 480 natural limestone caves in Viengxay for over nine years. During this time, the caves were used as a ‘hidden city’ and also as the headquarters of the communist Pathet Lao. Many caves had specific functions such as a school, a theatre, government offices, a supermarket, a temple, as well as a hospital where the injured were treated by Cuban doctors (see Figure 1). After 1973, the caves were abandoned and it was not until the late 1990s that a few caves were re-opened for visitors, under the control of the Kaysone Phomvihane Memorial Tour Cave Office, named after the Laotian revolutionary leader and, later, Prime Minister of Laos, Kaysone Phomvihane, who had been a resident of the caves during the war. Because of this significant historical feature, the caves at Viengxay were declared a Laotian National Heritage Site in 2005.

Viengxay is far from the major tourism routes and destinations of the region. Because of the remoteness of the area and the bad state of the access road, tourist traffic volume is very low. In 2005, only 459 foreign tourists visited the district, and 2,180 Laotians visited in the first six months of that year (Pontin 2005: 8). Besides the caves, the area’s main attractions are the natural, unspoiled beauty of the mountainous landscape and the ‘ethnic’ villages (see Figure 2). It is primarily attractive to independent travellers and small groups looking for adventurous travel ‘off the beaten path’. However, a recently opened highway and border crossing to Vietnam at Nam Meo, with Lao visa-on-arrival service, as well as plans for a local airport, are signs that the area is becoming more accessible. The United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) is supporting pro-poor tourism projects in the area to try to optimise the benefits of the expected development of tourism to Viengxay’s poor inhabitants. Members of the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA), SNV (Stichting Nederlandse Vrijwilligers or ‘Foundation of

Figure 1: Entrance to hospital cave
Netherlands Volunteers’), a Dutch development organisation, and the Lao National Tourism Administration (LNTA), plan to develop the Viengxay caves as a tourist destination and a World Peace site.

The first press release promoting Viengxay as a tourism destination was issued on 6 March 2007. From 2006 to 2007, the number of domestic visitors to the caves increased from 4,385 to 11,355 and international visitors increased from 1,355 to 1,860 (although domestic visitor numbers fell to 7,349 the following year, with international visitors increasing marginally to 1,875) (Rogers 2010). In 2007, the PATA Foundation also awarded a grant to the Kay-sone Phomvihane Memorial Tour Cave Office to support the research and development of an audio tour (Mekong Tourism Office 2007), which was put into operation in 2009, receiving international press coverage (Rogers 2010), indicating that the place has been ‘discovered’ by the international tourism circuit.

The LNTA aims to include the Viengxay’s caves in the Heritage Route, which links the World Heritage Site of Luang Prabang to Viengxay and the curious ‘Plain of Jars’ archaeological site in Xieng Khouang. A November 2009 visit of two tour groups totalling about thirty people was the largest single-day influx of international tourists to Viengxay up to that time (Rogers 2010), but larger and more regular tourist flows are foreseen. According to the Tourism Sector Strategy published by the Asian Development Bank, within ten to fifteen years the number of tourists visiting Houaphanh could reach about 100,000 per year and the tourism industry could bring an annual income of US$10 to 18 million. The vision for
Houaphanh is to become one of the top three most visited provinces in Laos (Asian Development Bank 2005). In 2005, there were only 3,175 tourist arrivals in Houaphanh (Lao National Tourism Administration 2006).

**Research Context and Methodology**

The results presented in this article stem from a programme of research undertaken by the School of Hotel and Tourism Management of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University in collaboration with the SNV which provided facilities and non-financial resources for the conducting of the research, as well as establishing contacts and organising access for the researchers. The research involved baseline monitoring and the investigation of the potential for pro-poor tourism development in Viengxay. Field studies were done in thirteen villages in Viengxay during 2006. Focus-group interviews and observations were conducted in each of the villages (see Figure 3), with the goals of determining the current state of involvement of the local population of the villages in hospitality and tourism, as well as villagers’ perception of tourism and tourists, and their aspirations and apprehensions regarding the future of tourism development in their district.

Tourism is a new phenomenon in Viengxay, and remains small-scale and low-impact. The practices and terminology of tourism are still unfamiliar to the local population, necessitating a good deal of explanation and interpretation on the part of the author, who is fluent in Laotian, when trying to discuss impressions and expectations of tourism in the context of focus groups. During the field studies, the

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*Figure 3: A focus group at work. The author is fourth from the right.*
author noted that participants referred to concepts and practices of hospitality within the local culture as a way of appropriating tourism into the realm of the familiar and of constructing a point of reference for the relationship between themselves as ‘hosts’ and tourists as their ‘guests’. This article represents a synthesis of these insights. Except where explicitly cited otherwise, all the insights mentioned below come from observations, conversations and interviews in the course of the field studies in Viengxay.

Primary data collection began with a pilot study in May 2006 when semi-structured interviews were conducted in three villages surrounding the Viengxay Caves. This method was supplemented by on-site non-participant observation by the authors. From the pilot study it became clear that the villagers interviewed had no concept of the tourism industry and that certain questions were therefore too complex for them to understand. This situation is understandable, as tourism hardly exists in the villages. Therefore, the questions designed for the second field study were carefully formed so that the villagers could more easily understand.

The results of the pilot study formed the basis and preparation for a second field study, which was carried out in June and July 2006 when semi-structured interviews were conducted in thirteen villages surrounding Viengxay town, which are expected to be affected by future tourism development. The villages studied have populations ranging from 202 to 880 people. The focus groups were composed of between ten and seventeen adult villagers. According to Evmorfopoulou (n.d.) four to twelve participants is the ideal range of sizes for focus groups. Morgan (1988) suggested an over-recruitment of 20 per cent to compensate for non-attendees, but non-attendance was far greater in some of the Viengxay focus groups. June and July is rice-planting season in Viengxay and this posed an obstacle to the gathering of villagers for interviews. During this season, many villagers stay in their fields overnight rather than returning to the village, because the rice fields and their houses are often far apart from each other. Despite having made prior arrangements, on several occasions the research team arrived in a village and no villagers were present, except the village leader. In this case, the village leader was asked to gather a group of participants for a rescheduled meeting at a later date.

The focus group interviews were conducted in Laotian by the author and with a Laotian co-moderator who ensured that all the questions were covered. Each interview took between 75 and 90 minutes. The focus-group discussions took the form of meetings with representatives of different social categories. The researcher aimed to get a balance of genders and age groups in each of the villages, as well as to ensure that members of the village committee were part of each focus group. However, there were more men than women members in all groups except in Sammakkhixay, a village of disabled people. The focus groups met in local homes, temples, village halls or schools.

Host–Guest Relationship

Tourists are still a novelty in these remote villages in Viengxay, and tourism and hence commercial hospitality as a practice is foreign to the way of life of the local people. Travel for pleasure is beyond their financial means, and the motivation to seek out stimulation from contact with strange cultures and unfamiliar situations is cryptic to them. Villagers know what tourists like to do when they come to the villages (take pictures, look at nature and culture, experience the local traditions), but the ‘why’ of tourism remains a category of cultural experience for which they have no point of reference.

Though the point of view of the tourist may be a mystery to the villagers of Viengxay, the point of view of the host is not. The first inclination when dealing with tourists in their
villages seems to be to put them into the category of ‘guests’. For example, one participant said ‘We should welcome tourists, be friendly and generous to them, and take care of them. If tourists do not mind, they can always stay with us’. One distinguishing consequence of this perception is that locals often do not think about asking for money for the services rendered to tourists. The above-quoted participant stated, ‘A few tourists stayed with some villagers before. The villagers gave them food also and didn’t ask for money’. Another villager recounted that ‘Some tourists came to the cave and were hungry, they asked if we have food for sell. I didn’t sell food to them, but gave them for free’. They see the provision of sustenance and shelter to strangers in their district as a matter of duty. As one focus-group member stated, ‘It is our custom that when we have strangers visit, we always take care of them’. A participant in another village said that he feels sorry for tourists when he sees them looking around, and feels compelled to offer them something to eat and drink. In his words, ‘I saw tourists waiting for a bus, looking tired and lost. So I offered them food and drink. I just feel sorry for them as we know that transportation here is not good’. Even when discussing the potential of tourism for alleviating poverty – a topic on which villagers are well-versed – focus-group members admit that they do give food and drink to tourists in the village, but do not ask for or expect money in return. The compulsion to offer assistance and sustenance to strangers – even those with whom one can scarcely communicate and whose reasons for passing through one’s locality one does not comprehend – indicates the extent to which Telfer’s (2000) ‘good Samaritan’ mode of hospitality is ingrained in the local societal code.

In addition to food, drink and accommodation, Viengxay villagers also said that they have shown tourists around the local attractions, most notably the caves, without asking for any compensation in return. One participant said, ‘Sometime we showed the tourists the cave and did not ask for money’. The locals are aware that the caves and their ethnic traditions are unique distinguishing characteristics of their district, and members of nearly every focus group said that to have foreigners come from so far away to see their area is a source of pride, even if locals do not understand the motivations of the tourists. These are the examples for the impression of the villagers: ‘Tourists come to take a look at the caves … maybe. We don’t really know why they come … maybe come and take pictures?’; ‘Tourists come to visit us, we want to make the world know about us’; ‘We are happy and proud to see tourists. Tourism can make our place famous’; ‘We are happy and proud. Even though we are very far away, they still come to see our place’. Most of the participants said they are happy and proud to see tourists come to visit Viengxay, despite its remoteness. This demonstration of pride of place by showing guests around one’s home area is another familiar aspect of hospitality in the host–guest social relationship.

As discussed, the host–guest relationship implies a code of etiquette for both parties, and the pleasure that the Viengxay villagers derive from playing the host should not be interpreted as subservience. Guests are expected to respect the customs and mores of the host’s culture as well. In some of the focus groups, annoyance was expressed at tourists who transgress these boundaries in some way, either by going to places where they do not belong, taking pictures of inappropriate subjects or of local people without asking, or when they are doing manual work or bathing in the river. Most villagers expressed sentiments of this type. For instance, one villager said, ‘When tourists take pictures, we would like to know the purpose. We would like to ask why they take pictures, but we can not speak English’. Another villager said ‘We don’t want them to take pictures when we take a shower or when we work in the rice fields. They might want to take our pictures and criticise us’.
Addressing Cultural Differences

Though contact with tourists is still a relatively new and small-scale phenomenon in Viengxay, local people’s attitudes towards tourists are already undergoing a significant transformation since the isolated conditions and xenophobic atmosphere of the not-too-distant past. One focus-group participant revealed, ‘When tourists started to come in 1999, we thought they might be spies. When they asked where the caves are, we did not tell them because we were scared for them to find out about our strategic places, but now we have no fear’. As in the case of Sumba, Indonesia, where a history of Dutch slave trade led local people to perceive tourist photography as a sinister and predatory act (Hoskins 2002), the traumatic period of the secret war instilled a deep-seated mistrust of foreigners arriving unannounced.

This attitude is changing, through increasing contact with foreigners visiting for peaceful, if cryptic, reasons. All focus groups in the Viengxay villages reported that they valued and welcomed current and future tourism development in their area as a way to gain contact and communicate with people from other cultures. As one villager said, ‘Cultural exchange and learning new knowledge are important. It is meaningful because we can learn and know about them and understand their culture’. However, there is also an expectation of reciprocal guest etiquette. One participant stated, ‘Tourists should also follow our tradition and our culture’ when staying as guests in the village, but this is not to imply that the villagers expect tourists to completely adopt the local way of life while they are guests in their villages.

There was a general acknowledgement among the focus-group participants that tourists and the villagers themselves represent two separate cultures with different needs and behavioural patterns. They see understanding and accommodating these different needs as part of the hospitality they would like to provide. A participant mentioned, ‘We would like to develop tourism, but the problem is we do not know if we could provide them what they expect such as food and a place to stay. Maybe it is not up to their standard’. Different respondents expressed wishes to learn how to cook the kind of food that tourists like to eat, make the types of handicrafts that they like to buy as souvenirs and provide the kind of accommodation standard in which they feel comfortable. Despite no prior knowledge of the tourism and service industry, the villagers nonetheless intuitively understand the need for meeting tourists’ requirements. They acknowledge the importance of hospitality training, with statements such as ‘It is impossible to run without training. We want to learn everything’; ‘If we don’t have any training, and when we cook food, tourists might not eat it’; and ‘We need to learn more about agriculture and raising animals so that we don’t need to buy vegetables or meat from outside to prepare food for tourists’.

Whilst accepting the differences between tourists and themselves, members of most focus groups were concerned with maintaining a clear division between the ‘two cultures’ and were apprehensive about their younger generation being tempted to emulate some aspects of the lifestyles of visitors. Some saw a need to strengthen the cultural education of their children to protect them from what could be termed ‘cultural contamination’. When asked if they are aware of the potential negative impacts of tourism that could have a bad influence on their culture and their children, people from all thirteen villages agreed that they must build awareness about their culture in their children. King et al. (1993) have noted a tendency in tourism situations for hosts to accept and accommodate the cultural norms of tourists, while taking measures to protect their own culture from the influences of tourists’ cultures. Statements include: ‘We are different people, dress and eat differently. However, we must build awareness in our children, and tell
them that tourists are from foreign cultures and that we have our own culture'; ‘Negative social impact might happen. We need to preserve our culture and tradition'; ‘Teenagers might copy the Western culture, but we need to tell them that our culture is different than that of the Westerners. We need to build awareness. Our country is developing and a lot of people are coming in and we are going out, so we might have problems with drugs and prostitution, maybe tourists want to go out with a married local woman, so she might leave her husband’.

Hospitality Economics

The initial satisfaction in providing hospitality to tourists had more to do with the locals’ pride of place and desire for cultural contact than any expectation of financial gain, but this is by nature only a temporary situation. All focus groups expressed an awareness of the potential of tourism development to bring money to their village and spoke of aspirations to learn how to reap the economic benefits of tourism. Several villagers saw the income from tourism as a means to improve and preserve their heritage sites. For instance, one villager stated, ‘We have the hospital cave. We are very happy that tourists are interested in our historical sites. We always want to improve and conserve the hospital cave, but have no money. The only thing we can do is to get rid of the grass along the path. If we could improve the site, we might get more tourists and the income from the tourists could help alleviating poverty’.

Whilst not averse to opportunities to gain monetary income, the local people of Viengxay do not perceive this goal as a matter of urgency or top priority. Although they subsist on what might be considered by outsiders to be very meagre material means, their own culture’s conception of well-being is based on abundance of rice rather than possession of money. Thus, with reliable and sufficient rice crops to feed the society without reliance on outside sources, villagers do not think of themselves as impoverished (Suntikul et al. 2009).

Monetary economics therefore does not play a great role in the lives of the inhabitants of these villages and, when asked, most also do not conceive of the goods and services that they could offer tourists/guests as having an economic value. One should not see this as a self-disparaging attitude. Rather, it is indicative of the fact that money is not currently the central paradigm of value used in their society. Hospitality is perceived in terms of the social economy of the local society, rather than a monetary economy. However, the vocabulary of the host–guest relationship and the seller–consumer relationship mixed freely in the focus-group discussions, indicating that the present may be the crux of a transition from the conception of hospitality as a social act to that of hospitality as an economic sector.

Some of the focus-group members showed indications of beginning to integrate these two interpretations of hospitality into their practices. An earlier-quoted participant who had given food to tourists for free, further explained his action by saying that this expression of goodwill might encourage the tourist to come back another time and give some money. This scenario avoids framing this relation as an economic transaction and instead depicts it as two reciprocal acts of goodwill and kindness, with each participant giving the other that which he has and the other lacks. Another said that he refused to ask for money for food and homestay accommodation as a matter of pride, but knew that tourists would pay without being asked. The author asked whether that tourist paid before they left, the villager had big smile on his face and stated ‘No, but maybe they come back next time and they might give some money. They might tell their friends about our hospitality’.

Similarities can be discerned between the values at play in the hospitality relationship in Viengxay and those described in Cole’s (2007)
report on tourism and hospitality in Ngadha, Flores, Indonesia. The villagers do not expect money in exchange for their hospitality but feel that tourists should be obliged to ‘fit in’, and become annoyed when tourists transgress their local customs, for instance by declining to eat food offered to them. It could be hypothesised that such patterns are characteristic of relations and expectations in hospitality in nascent tourism cultures.

**Issues in the Future Development of Hospitality in Viengxay**

Tourism is still in the very early stages of development in Viengxay. The predominant type of tourist in the area is independent and appreciative and sensitive of the natural and cultural landscape of the area. Tourism is low-impact and small-scale. The local people’s concept and practice of hospitality is no doubt heavily conditioned by all of these factors, and can be expected to evolve as the novelty effect of tourism wears off and different types and scales of tourism emerge in the area. The potential advent of higher-impact mass tourism, tourist enclaves from which local people are excluded, and development of tourism infrastructure that compromises the local cultural and natural heritage could lead Viengxay natives to perceive tourists in a different way. At present, tourists come alone or in small groups to experience the local culture as guests, whereas future larger tour groups may be more intrusive, less sensitive and less likely to stay in the very basic facilities offered by the villages. Today the villages are the providers of all available amenities for tourists whereas future tourism development may bring about a situation where the villages become sites to be visited and consumed by tourists, who would then retreat to their hotels. This is not the context in which to discuss the economic implications of these and other possible developments, but it is to be expected that they would have an effect on the nature of the perceived host–guest relationship and thus the nature of hospitality in the villages of Viengxay.

It would be premature to offer a prognosis regarding the path that this development will follow in the specific case of Viengxay. The relationship between motivations for hospitality and the particulars of the practice of hospitality in a given context is doubtless a complex one. At present, this research indicates that among the motivators for hospitality for the villagers of Viengxay are pride of place, desire for cultural contact, curiosity and local traditions of host–guest relations (Suntikul et al. 2010). The future trajectory could be towards more economic motivation, but this need not be contradictory to the initial motivators. According to focus-group participants one of the reasons for seeking income from tourism is to fund the preservation of historical sites such as the caves, or to develop local handicrafts and encourage the continuation of ‘traditions’.

Tactics for avoiding friction caused by culturally inappropriate guest behaviour are part and parcel of the skills of hosts in more developed tourism destinations, such as the practice of New Zealand bed and breakfast hosts telling guests amusing stories of past guests’ behaviour as to establish an understanding of accepted norms of behaviour while establishing a friendly mood of interaction (Tucker 2003). However, more obstacles must be overcome before this is possible in a context such as Viengxay where the language barriers, social distance and cultural dissimilarities between guest and host are so pronounced.

The host–guest relationship is usually a transient one, with often little chance of long-term or future relationships. As hospitality moves from the realm of tradition and etiquette into the realm of economics, there is a greater propensity for hosts to exploit the relationship for maximum gain, even through dishonesty or crime. Cohen (1996) remarks on this phenomenon and identifies ‘professionalism’, or ‘staging’ of a culture for tourists as a strategy
for resolving the dual nature of hospitality and thus diffusing potential conflicts. One detrimental consequence that can be anticipated is that the local people could begin to perceive their culture as a commodity to be put on show for financial gain, leading to a staging of ‘folk hospitality’ for the sake of tourists that compromises the authenticity of ‘traditional’ practices.

Conclusion

The dual nature of the concept of hospitality, as a social obligation and as an economic activity, need not be seen as representing polar opposites. Different practices of hospitality contain elements of both of these aspects. Even in the early stage of development present in Viengxay, locals express their aspirations regarding hospitality both in terms of cultural norms and in terms of economic gain and developmental improvement. Consequently, it can be expected that the future development of hospitality in the district of Viengxay will continue to be characterised by a negotiation between different motivations and expectations. This study has identified ways in which Viengxay locals are balancing concerns for cultural integrity and preservation against a desire for economic betterment and curiosity about the outside world in the forms of hospitality that they practice, and the way that they perceive their own roles as hosts within the hospitality relationship.

The fact that the words ‘guest’ and ‘host’ are used in common parlance to describe the key roles in all types of hospitality relations is indicative of the common root of these relations in economically dominated as well as culturally dominated guises of hospitality. This commonality of concepts has provided the villagers of Viengxay with a point of reference for their relations with tourists in these early days of tourism development in their district. The ongoing performance of hospitality relations will likely reinforce some cultural forms but will have a transformative effect on others. Future developments in the practice of hospitality in these villages will depend, in part, on the evolution of how local people perceive and define what they have to gain from playing the host in this relationship. These perceptions will, in turn, be largely influenced by multiple factors such as local people’s success in negotiating an acceptable and sustainable balance between preservation of core cultural values and acquisition of new cultural gains; reliance on currency to acquire materials necessary to accommodate tourists; the potential emergence of materialist values through increased access to money and the demonstration of affluent lifestyles by tourists.

This research has explored the ways in which the host–guest relationship is being negotiated within a specific cultural and developmental context. This study of Viengxay, Laos, has demonstrated that blunt distinctions between commercial and cultural understandings of hospitality oversimplify the relation and mask the complexity and malleability of hospitality practices.

The hospitality relationship can be viewed as a type of intercultural communication, and as such has the likelihood of bringing about change in a culture, as contact with and understanding of other cultures intensify. As contact with visitors from foreign cultures becomes more commonplace, and the exoticism of early contact wears off, the relation between guests and hosts in this relationship may also change, possibly breaking down cultural barriers and making it more difficult cognitively to separate the local culture from the tourism culture. As ‘understanding’ increases, many of the current motivations for locals in the host–guest relationship may also change, although it would be premature to conclude whether this change would be primarily for the better or for the worse.

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