English-Language Voluntourism in Tanzania

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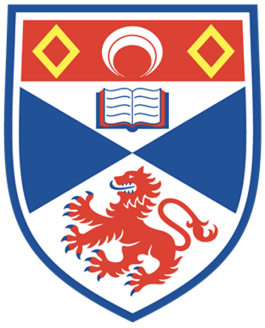

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Introduction

As a university student, hardly a week goes by without an unsolicited email about an exciting opportunity to volunteer in an 'exotic' location depositing itself in my inbox. They seem enticing, too, with their mentions of 'cultural exchange', personal development, and CV-building alongside the promise that their solutions are long-term and sustainable (Friedrich 2019; Deramo 2018: 369). I volunteered on such a program in Tanzania in 2017, and while I certainly enjoyed the experience, the reality seemed quite far removed from what I had expected. Cole (2012, para. 13) describes the White Saviour Industrial Complex (WSIC) as a phenomenon where "a nobody from America or Europe can go to Africa and become a godlike saviour or, at the very least, have his or her emotional needs satisfied", often under the guise of "making a difference". I look specifically at English-language voluntourism programmes, which by definition include elements of English-language teaching (ELT). Voluntourism, a portmanteau of volunteerism and tourism, essentially provides a holiday in a developing country alongside emotional validation derived from doing 'service' as a volunteer. Tourism and volunteering in Africa are often viewed as two vastly different practices, where one is done for leisure, while the other draws on a long history of racial difference and colonization, and revolves around the idea of helping others (van Tol 2015). However, voluntourism is "at the center of new concerns over the ethical consumption of tourism experiences", as a type of development tourism, and essentially combines volunteering and tourism to create a form of tourism in Africa that seems more moral, illustrating a move towards the "privatization and neoliberalization of development more generally" (Mostafanezhad 2013a: 320). Neoliberalism here is an "art of governance" and "a class-based ideological project" that shifts the focus and responsibility from the state to individuals and advocates privatization and free-market capitalism (Ferguson 2010: 166). In this article, I consider the central questions: who truly benefits from English-language voluntourism in Tanzania, and do its benefits justify its risks? My argument is divided into four sections: firstly, I present the methodology and context of this research; following that, I explore the problematic framing of ELT voluntourism I encountered; in the third section, I consider economics and wealth in relation to volunteers; and finally, I investigate the role of corruption and morality within ELT voluntourism in Tanzania.

Methodology and Context

I begin this article with autoethnography to reflect on my positionality and acknowledge my complicity in the reproduction of colonial and economic power imbalances through my participation in an ELT voluntourism programme (Adams et al. 2011). I also use data collected from semi-structured interviews conducted online via video conferencing software and text message conversations with five people who have organized tourism or volunteering programs in some form, or have participated in such programs as volunteers themselves. Whilst I initially

hoped to investigate host communities' perspectives on English-language voluntourism in Tanzania, travel restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic required me to conduct all research online, largely from my home in Singapore, leading me to change my research plan due to a number of hurdles including establishing contact and internet access. Instead, I consider a wider context of English-language voluntourism here, and primarily examine the rhetoric employed by the operators and volunteers whom I was able to contact, as well as some of its potential negative impacts on a broader scale. Although I reached out to a variety of operators to learn more about their work, I only received responses from people whom I knew through the school that organized my Tanzania trip, and the operators with whom I was connected by my friends. As a result, my sphere of contact was limited largely to people who work with international schools, or in tourism sub-fields aside from volunteering. For the same reason, whilst faith-based volunteering is ubiquitous in Tanzania, this article focuses on secular operators and their voluntourism programs. To develop a deeper understanding of volunteering, I draw on literature from a range of disciplines including anthropology, sociology, political science, and tourism studies due to the interdisciplinary nature of volunteering and language-teaching. Even as my research plan has evolved, I continue to address the same central questions.

As a volunteer, I had my doubts about our work and whether it was beneficial to the host community in any real way: we were not trained in teaching or construction at all, and surely, I imagined, the rather hefty price tag attached to our trip would be better spent employing skilled people who were already there. Nonetheless, I did not voice my thoughts as I was not keen to jeopardize a chance to travel somewhere new and do something that I assumed I could leverage while applying for university or internships. As an Indian person volunteering with a racially diverse set of individuals, it was easy to think that we were vastly different from the infamous cases of blinkered white people swooping in to 'save' African people. In retrospect, this makes it obvious that the issues associated with voluntourism cannot be addressed with only a consideration of race and the WSIC: perhaps the most significant uniting factor within my own group of volunteers was the socioeconomic privilege which allowed us to travel to another continent for 'service' and made it possible for us to even consider taking time away from our lives back home to pursue such an extracurricular. In contrast to my experience as a volunteer, English Language Teaching (ELT) volunteers are often described as "native speakers of prestige-variety, or inner-core English… [who] teach language lessons in the Global South on a short-term basis" (Jakubiak 2012: 437). However, for the purposes of this article, I seek to acknowledge the racial and national diversity of contemporary non-sectarian ELT volunteers and focus instead on our socioeconomic privilege and complicity in perpetuating harmful economic and cultural practices through voluntourism. Hence, I define ELT volunteers more broadly as socioeconomically privileged fluent English-speakers who "teach language lessons in the Global South on a short-term basis" (*ibid*).

The Framing of ELT voluntourism

When starting my research, I found it appropriate to reach out to the people involved in organizing my school's trip to Tanzania to learn about their motivations and justification behind running the trip. In reference to parents' expectations and issues around WSIC on the trip, Peter, the person who established the trip at this school, emphasized that our trip is "not about a bunch of well-meaning white Westerners who want to have a good time and justify that by going off to see some poor people somewhere". Indeed, our group of volunteers was not entirely white, or Western. However, despite exhibiting an awareness of the WSIC, this justification illustrates several other problems associated with ELT voluntourism programs: implicit within it is the idea that whiteness and Western origin are not the only qualifying factors for volunteers, as the mention of "poor people" within host communities suggests that the volunteers are, by contrast, not "poor". The importance of money is perhaps a given as the costs of travelling from Switzerland (where this school is located) to Tanzania would be prohibitively expensive for many, but as Mostafanezhad (2013b: 156) notes, "engagements with 'real' poverty have become key signifiers of… success" for volunteers in their search for "authenticity", meaning that economic inequality between volunteers and host communities often forms an essential part of the voluntourism experience. However, even as the person I spoke with recognized whiteness and Westernness as incriminating factors and immediately sought to distance our work from WSIC, he did not similarly problematize class or socioeconomic status, the relevance of which I explore later in this article.

Naturally, if that was a description of what our volunteer work was not, then I was curious to know what my school's leadership thought we were actually doing. Within the same conversation, Peter continued, "it's about trying to go and find out what can be learned from a different culture, different experience, different religion, different background, different life, compared to ours". The passive voice here deflects responsibility from the volunteers who remain unnamed, but it is they who do the 'going' and 'finding out'. Hence, even as the rhetoric surrounding this act of volunteering shifts from saving communities of colour in the Global South to volunteers now learning from the place they visit, volunteers remain the subjects of volunteering while the host communities continue to be talked *about* rather than included in the conversation. Friedrich (2019: 37) illustrates a similar phenomenon through a broad analysis of the discourse on voluntourism websites, in which the volunteers' mobility and agency is typically emphasized, while host communities are framed as "passive receptors of the volunteers' transformative support". This marginalizes the host communities' agency and obscures them entirely through their monolithic representation. Peter repeatedly emphasized how "different" the community we visited in Tanzania was, while a past volunteer I talked to noted how his experience "emphasized how some people are living in worse conditions than we

are", evading any self-contained description of the host community or people. Dogra (2014: 12-13) describes Mudimbe's work on the colonial invention of Africa and 'othering' i.e. "the construction and maintenance of difference", which was influenced by Said's (2003) idea of Orientalism, and is evident in the use of binary oppositions and comparison. This allows 'the West' to define itself, and understand and represent Africa in a way that continues to inform development discourse now (*ibid*). As Mostafanezhad (2013a: 332) notes, this ultimately means that "[v]olunteer tourism… works to map out a geography of compassion that extends imperial legacies of colonialism and uneven development". In this case of ELT voluntourism, the enduring perception of difference remains unchallenged, and our constructions of Tanzania as "different", "poor", or "worse" help to justify our travels (Keim 2019: 8). While my conversation with Peter illustrated that the leadership at my school seek to move away from WSIC, the volunteers remain the primary concern and greatest beneficiaries of ELT voluntourism.

Economics and Wealth

I also reached out to the operator, Noah, who worked with my school to organize our trip. His company works largely with schools seeking to take their students on trips abroad, including 'service' trips. My school, like many of Noah's other clients, is an international school with students from corporate or diplomatic 'expat' families (a term that is also heavily coded as white, in contrast to 'immigrant' or 'migrant'). Consequently, a vast majority of volunteers from these schools, including me, inevitably grow up in an environment filled with immense social and economic privilege, and pervasive (yet rarely acknowledged) neoliberal beliefs. The spread of free-market capitalism and neoliberal globalization has increasingly pushed considerations around managing inequalities onto consumers, and as middle- and upper-class students who have benefited from these ideologies, the "individual acts of compassion" which constitute volunteering continue to be beneficial to us as "useful addition[s] to the curriculum vitae (CV)" that demonstrate our cultural awareness and initiative, and further consolidate our place of privilege in this economic system (Jakubiak 2016: 247; McGloin & Georgeou 2015: 403).

More broadly, too, international volunteering "revolves around personal narrative and 'making a difference' through individual lifestyle and consumption patterns", but in practice, addressing the symptoms rather than root causes can prevent volunteers from truly 'making a difference' (Schwarz 2016: 19). A past volunteer I spoke with shared that he was aware some would say that it was a "small thing we did that doesn't really affect the major problem", but he felt that "doing anything that can make one individual person happy, it's all that matters… as long as you're helping in some way, it means the life for them". His motivations seem altruistic, and reflecting on my volunteer experience as well as sifting through my classmates' social media posts about their experiences suggests that many of us thought we were making a difference on *some* level. In our minds, any proficiency in English could allow students to

continue their education and access better opportunities, even if posting about our work could be seen as inherently performative. However, an "interrogation of power relations and distribution of wealth", or the hegemony of English, was noticeably "absent" in our approach to volunteering and English teaching, and this could have led us to reevaluate our approach to development and choice to volunteer (Deramo 2018: 11-13). Moreover, the captions accompanying my classmates' posts seemed to "romanticize the poor as happy despite their privation", a particularly pervasive idea in relation to the African continent, with perhaps the worst offender being an image of two students at the school we visited captioned "always smiling" (*idem*: 11).

Perhaps we truly did make them happy for a fleeting moment while we visited, but our aims were long-term and linked specifically to helping students develop a proficiency in English through teaching and ensuring that they continued to learn after we left. As Jakubiak (2012: 437) notes, however, "[n]either formal educator credentials nor familiarity with language pedagogy are generally required" to volunteer, and my group had not even completed high school at that stage, casting doubt on our ability to teach at all. Everyone I spoke with acknowledged this, and noted that the opportunities that become accessible with any level of proficiency in English are incredible nonetheless. Noah elaborated that exposure to different accents is a useful thing too. ELT voluntourism discourse seems to frame English as a "magical cure-all" which functions as "symbolic capital", has "ostensible pragmatic use", can help in "leaving the rural" and "escaping poverty through employment", as well as facilitating "personal empowerment" (*idem*: 448). However, this reinforces certain ideas that "reflect neoliberal prerogatives", placing "people in constant motion, people as competitors, people as individually responsible for all aspects of their lives", and pushing certain ideals and values onto the host communities, even as we hope to enact positive change (*ibid*).

Unfortunately, the construction project my group of volunteers completed was not as effective as we had hoped either. When I asked Noah about the kindergarten we had finished building, he told me that a year after its completion, they discovered that the kindergarten teacher who was working there had not received their government salary for nine months due to the time taken by the government's bureaucratic processes, and hence was likely to leave. Despite our good intentions as volunteers and operators, neither our teaching nor our construction project ultimately benefited our host community, largely due to our lack of attention towards the very systems that created the circumstances we sought to 'fix' (Deramo 2018: 11-13). Deramo (*idem*: 14) specifically notes that when volunteers have "no specialization", as was our case, "any gains for the recipients are ephemeral, lasting only as long as the volunteer's visit" and the risks and benefits "tend to balance" for them as a result. Nonetheless, I was not aware of how things had developed in the community that hosted my

group, but this did not prevent us from using this as a key experience on our CVs, and interviewers only ever asked me to share my own learning and takeaways from the trip.

Corruption and Morality

Another example Noah shared was of a project in another Tanzanian school where they hoped to bring books and computers to provide internet access. The project advanced to a stage where the books and computers were shipped to Dar-es-Salaam, but upon their arrival, the port officials required the payment of an additional, undocumented fee, which the operators knew to be a bribe. Due to a strict "no corruption policy" adopted by both the operator and the school sending volunteers, they refused to pay this fee, and eventually, as no other resolution was reached and the costs associated with keeping the container at the port approached the fee itself, the container was returned to its country of origin. While Noah did "know we did the right thing", he shared his moral dilemma and noted, "because of our moral stance on that, the school in Tanzania did not get the computers. They are no closer to being computer literate than they were before". Corruption is not solely an African issue, but the commonplace frequent discussion of 'corruption' in relation to Africa is heavily informed by misconceptions and convenient misrepresentations of the continent "to maintain dominance over Africans" (Dogra 2014: 12; Keim 2019: 8). de Sardan (1999: 38-9) explores how gift-giving as a "thanks for services rendered" is a common feature of everyday life in various parts of Africa, tracing back to the exchanging of kola nuts in the Sahel. This gift often takes the form of money now, and while it may be seen as bribery from a Western perspective, it is primarily considered a "moral duty" locally (*ibid*). This moral economy of corruption contrasts against the moralities of the economy of development, where uncompromising anti-corruption policies are an example of the Western assumptions embedded in development.

Here, the port officials act as "local development brokers" who are "the social actors implanted in a local arena… and who serve as intermediaries who drain off (in the direction of the social space corresponding to this arena) external resources in the form of development aid", illustrating one way in which the moral economy of development infiltrates that of conflicting local moral economies (Bierschenk et al. 2002: 4). The power relations that organize development also contribute to this moral imposition. The altruism and assumption of nonreciprocity associated with voluntourism suggest that the time and money that volunteers selflessly give is a "pure, disinterested gift", but this gift links "the relatively rich middle class of the North with the poor of the South" and ultimately asserts the differences between "the rich giver and the poor receiver" and their cultural and geographical affiliations, linking back to my previous discussion of Mudimbe's work (Stirrat & Henkel 1997: 69, 72). However, the pure gift leaves recipients (the host communities) in a "position of indebtedness and powerlessness" while the volunteers, as the "ultimate beneficiaries" of ELT voluntourism, receive the "gift of

self-realization" (*idem*: 73). Hence, voluntourism undoubtedly benefits volunteers, at the very least in the form of emotional validation, fitting Cole's (2012) definition of the WSIC, but it carries the risk of imposing Western morals and values upon host communities, as well as propagating harmful stereotypes (Deramo 2018: 6). This suggests that strict anti-corruption policies do not necessarily face up to the realities of Tanzania, and can contribute to the uneven distribution of benefits from voluntourism and perpetuate the "same system of production, exchange, and distribution that produces the poor who receive these gifts" (Stirrat & Henkel 1997: 80).

Conclusion

I began writing this article hoping to explore: who truly benefits from English-language voluntourism in Tanzania, and do its benefits justify the risks? Through my exploration of the problematic framing of English-language voluntourism in Tanzania, economics and wealth in relation to volunteers, and the role of corruption and morality, I have highlighted some ways in which the volunteers are the primary beneficiaries of English-language voluntourism in Tanzania, and that this practice may indeed pose some risks to the communities that host volunteers due to the practice stripping them of their agency, romanticizing their lives, and imposing the morals of development on them. However, my positionality, research constraints, and the limited existing research into host community perspectives on English-language voluntourism mean that I have not delved significantly into the perceived benefits and risks within Tanzanian host communities themselves. Consequently, I believe the question of whether the benefits of English-language voluntourism justify its risks would be best answered by members of the host communities who have experienced it first-hand. As Mostafanezhad (2013a: 333) suggests, however, we must consider "alternative[s] to the current privatization and depoliticization of geographies of compassion in the West" in the meanwhile, and ask: "[w]hat role can volunteer tourism play in helping to rematerialize political action?".

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