
Part IV. Maximiliano E. Korstanje's Contribution to Understanding Tourism as a Rite of Passage

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Abstract

This paper examines Maximiliano E. Korstanje's contribution to understanding tourism as a contemporary rite of passage. Drawing on anthropological theories of ritual, particularly the works of Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, Korstanje interprets tourism as a symbolic process of separation, liminality, and reintegration in which individuals temporarily abandon everyday social structures and return transformed through new experiences. The paper explores how tourism functions as a secular form of pilgrimage, providing identity construction, social meaning, and personal transformation within modern societies. It further analyses Korstanje's critical perspective on the commercialization of ritual, arguing that contemporary tourism transforms the search for authenticity, freedom, and self-discovery into marketable experiences. By examining tourism through the lenses of liminality, identity, risk, and capitalism, this study highlights Korstanje's contribution to critical tourism theory and demonstrates how travel operates simultaneously as a cultural ritual, a consumer practice, and a reflection of the contradictions of modernity.

Key Words: Tourism, Rite of Passage, Anthropology, Liminality.

Introduction

Among Maximiliano E. Korstanje's most significant theoretical contributions to tourism studies is his interpretation of tourism as a contemporary **rite of passage**. While much tourism research has traditionally focused on economic impacts, destination

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management, consumer motivations, or mobility patterns, Korstanje approaches tourism as a deeply symbolic and social practice. Drawing from anthropology, sociology, philosophy, and cultural theory, he argues that travel represents a transformative experience through which individuals temporarily leave their ordinary social structures, encounter otherness, and return with a renewed understanding of themselves and their place in society. The idea of tourism as a rite of passage builds upon the anthropological work of Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, who demonstrated that human societies organize important transitions—such as birth, marriage, initiation, and death—through ritual processes. Korstanje extends this framework to modern tourism, suggesting that travel has inherited many characteristics previously associated with traditional rituals. The tourist leaves a familiar world, enters a temporary space of uncertainty and freedom, and eventually returns transformed. However, unlike classical rites of passage, contemporary tourism operates within capitalist societies where transformation itself becomes commodified and consumed. Through this perspective, Korstanje contributes to a deeper understanding of tourism as more than movement through geographical space. Tourism becomes a symbolic journey involving identity, social status, imagination, and the negotiation between familiarity and difference. His analysis reveals that modern tourism performs many functions once fulfilled by religious pilgrimages and traditional initiation rituals, while simultaneously reflecting the contradictions of globalization and consumer culture.

Tourism and the Anthropological Structure of Passage

The anthropological foundations of Korstanje's interpretation can be traced to Arnold van Gennep's classic theory of **rites of passage**. In *Les rites de passage* (1909), van Gennep argued that many cultural rituals follow a three-stage structure:

1. **Separation** – the individual leaves their previous social position.
2. **Liminality** – the individual enters an intermediate state where normal rules are suspended.
3. **Reincorporation** – the individual returns to society with a transformed status.

Korstanje applies this model to tourism by suggesting that travel follows a similar pattern. The tourist separates from everyday obligations by leaving home, work routines, and familiar social environments. During travel, the tourist enters a liminal condition characterized by temporary freedom, experimentation, and altered social relationships. Finally, upon returning home, the tourist reintegrates into everyday life, often carrying new experiences, memories, knowledge, and symbolic capital. Tourism therefore becomes a modern ritualized escape from ordinary existence. The journey is not only physical but existential: it creates a temporary interruption of routine and provides opportunities for self-reconstruction.

However, Korstanje differs from approaches that romanticize tourism as purely liberating. He argues that contemporary tourism is shaped by capitalism, which transforms the desire for transformation into a commercial product. The tourist purchases experiences designed to produce authenticity, adventure, relaxation, and personal renewal. The rite of passage becomes something organized, marketed, and consumed.

Tourism as Secular Pilgrimage

One of Korstanje's important contributions is his comparison between tourism and pilgrimage. Traditional pilgrimage involved movement toward sacred places where individuals sought spiritual transformation, forgiveness, healing, or communion with a larger moral order. Modern tourism, according to Korstanje, preserves some of these symbolic characteristics while transferring them into secular contexts. The tourist destination frequently functions as a modern sacred space. Beaches, historical monuments, natural landscapes, cultural attractions, and heritage sites become locations invested with meaning. Tourists often seek experiences described through religious language: authenticity, discovery, enlightenment, connection, and renewal. This does not mean tourism simply replaces religion. Rather, Korstanje argues that tourism inherits certain social functions previously performed by religious rituals. It provides individuals with moments of reflection, identity construction, and symbolic transformation within increasingly secular societies. The importance of this argument is that it challenges the assumption that modern societies have abandoned ritual. Instead,

rituals have changed form. Tourism becomes one of the ways through which individuals create meaning in societies characterized by mobility, consumption, and individualization.

Liminality and the Tourist Experience

Victor Turner's concept of **liminality** is particularly important for understanding Korstanje's approach. Turner argued that individuals experiencing transition temporarily occupy a space outside normal social structures. During this period, ordinary hierarchies may weaken, allowing new forms of interaction and identity formation.

Korstanje argues that tourism creates a similar liminal environment.

The tourist is temporarily separated from everyday responsibilities, professional identities, and social expectations. A worker becomes a traveler; a citizen becomes a visitor; a resident becomes a foreigner. The tourist enters a space where different rules apply.

Examples include:

- people adopting more adventurous identities while travelling;
- temporary suspension of workplace responsibilities;
- experimentation with different lifestyles;
- encounters with unfamiliar cultures;
- participation in extraordinary experiences.

Yet Korstanje emphasizes that tourist liminality is not completely free from social structures. Unlike traditional rituals controlled by religious or community institutions, tourism is organized by corporations, governments, and markets. The tourist experience appears spontaneous but is frequently carefully designed and managed. Hotels, tour operators, airlines, theme parks, and destination marketers create controlled environments where transformation can occur safely and predictably. The tourist is

encouraged to experience difference while remaining within systems of commercial regulation.

Authenticity and the Search for Transformation

Another major theme in Korstanje's analysis is the relationship between tourism, authenticity, and identity. Many tourists seek experiences perceived as authentic: local cultures, traditional lifestyles, natural environments, historical places, or encounters with communities different from their own. Following scholars such as Dean MacCannell, tourism can be understood as a search for authentic experiences within modern societies where everyday life often feels artificial or disconnected. Korstanje expands this discussion by arguing that authenticity itself has become part of the ritual structure of tourism. Tourists often travel because they believe transformation is possible through contact with places, cultures, and experiences outside ordinary life. However, capitalism creates a paradox. Authenticity becomes something that can be packaged and sold. Destinations construct narratives of uniqueness, heritage, and cultural difference precisely because these qualities attract visitors.

The tourist therefore searches for experiences outside capitalism while participating in a highly commercialized system. The desire for escape becomes one of the mechanisms through which capitalism reproduces itself.

Tourism, Identity, and the Construction of the Self

For Korstanje, tourism is fundamentally connected with identity formation. Modern individuals increasingly define themselves through experiences rather than fixed social roles. Travel provides symbolic resources through which people construct personal narratives.

Photographs, memories, souvenirs, social media posts, and travel stories become elements of identity. To travel is not simply to visit places; it is to create a biography of experiences.

In this sense, tourism functions as a contemporary ritual of self-creation.

The individual communicates:

- who they are;
- what they value;
- where they have been;
- what experiences distinguish them from others.

Korstanje links this process to consumer capitalism, where identity becomes increasingly expressed through consumption choices. Tourism allows individuals to purchase experiences that symbolize freedom, cultural knowledge, sophistication, adventure, or social status. Thus, the tourist journey becomes both personal transformation and social communication.

The Dark Side of the Tourist Rite of Passage

Although tourism may appear as a positive ritual of discovery and transformation, Korstanje emphasizes its contradictions. The same processes that allow tourism to create meaning can also reproduce inequality, exclusion, and commodification. The tourist often enters spaces where local cultures are transformed into products designed for external consumption. Communities may adapt traditions, landscapes, and identities according to tourist expectations. The ritual experience of the visitor can therefore depend upon the economic and cultural transformation of the host society.

This tension is particularly visible in dark tourism. Sites associated with death, disaster, war, and terrorism become destinations where visitors seek knowledge, reflection, or emotional experiences. Korstanje argues that these forms of tourism reveal how contemporary societies increasingly transform even suffering and tragedy into ritualized experiences. The tourist journey becomes a confrontation with mortality, vulnerability, and collective memory. However, it also raises ethical questions concerning commercialization and consumption of human suffering.

Tourism, Risk, and the Fragility of the Rite of Passage

Korstanje further develops the concept of tourism as a rite of passage by connecting it with risk and insecurity. Traditional rituals were often protected by cultural frameworks that guided individuals through transformation. Modern tourism, however, occurs within a world characterized by terrorism, pandemics, political instability, and environmental uncertainty. The tourist journey therefore contains an inherent tension between adventure and vulnerability. Travel promises liberation from routine but simultaneously exposes individuals to unfamiliar risks. This contradiction explains why security has become increasingly central to tourism. Travelers seek transformation but also demand protection.

Korstanje argues that contemporary tourism increasingly combines two opposing desires:

- the desire to encounter difference;
- the desire to control uncertainty.

The tourist wants to leave the familiar world but does not want to completely lose the security associated with home. This contradiction explains the growth of controlled tourism environments such as resorts, cruises, theme parks, and guided experiences.

Contribution to Tourism Theory

Korstanje's interpretation of tourism as a rite of passage contributes significantly to tourism theory in several ways. First, it expands tourism research beyond economic analysis by emphasizing symbolic and cultural dimensions. Tourism becomes a meaningful social practice rather than simply an industry. Second, it connects tourism studies with classical anthropology and sociology, demonstrating that modern travel continues ancient human patterns of transformation and ritual. Third, it explains why tourism remains socially significant despite changes in technology and globalization. People continue to travel not only because they can, but because travel fulfills deeper psychological and cultural needs. Finally, Korstanje's approach reveals the

contradictions of modern tourism. Travel promises freedom but operates through commercial systems; it celebrates difference while often standardizing experiences; it offers transformation while being carefully controlled.

Conclusion

Maximiliano E. Korstanje's contribution to understanding tourism as a rite of passage represents an important development in critical tourism studies. By connecting tourism with anthropological theories of ritual, pilgrimage, liminality, and identity formation, he demonstrates that travel is not merely physical movement but a symbolic process of transformation. For Korstanje, tourism reproduces many functions historically associated with traditional rites of passage. The tourist separates from ordinary life, enters a temporary liminal state, experiences encounters with otherness, and returns transformed. However, unlike traditional rituals, contemporary tourism is embedded within capitalism, where transformation itself becomes commercialized and consumed. His analysis reveals tourism as both meaningful and contradictory: a search for authenticity shaped by commercialization, a pursuit of freedom governed by security systems, and a modern ritual that reflects the hopes and anxieties of contemporary society.

By interpreting tourism through the lens of passage, identity, and social transformation, Korstanje has contributed a powerful theoretical framework for understanding why humans travel and why tourism remains one of the defining cultural practices of modernity.

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