

# Tourism as blessing or curse

## The host's view

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CONTEMPORARY TOURISM HAS BECOME big business, both in the developed countries which organize tours and in the countries of the developing world which have to compete for tourists. Tourism is one of the most visible signs of the phenomenon of globalization, the so-called new world order without frontiers. It is high time the feelings and views of the hosts, the receivers of tourists from the rich countries of the North, are articulated. Who is gaining and who is losing from tourism? How do the hosts view the motives, desires and lifestyle of tourists? What impressions do these visitors leave behind? Is the impact of tourism a blessing or a curse or both?

### *Categories of tourism*

It is a common yet dangerous mistake to describe any category of people in terms which are too general. Tourists to developing countries may be categorized by a number of factors – the attitudes, motives, level of knowledge about the countries they are visiting, their lifestyles and the impression they leave on their hosts. Within each of the categories briefly described here there are, of course, a number of divisions in the spectrum according to the particular motivation which guides tourists.

Scholars, researchers and students often come as tourists but with a dominant motive to study and to search for relevant information and understanding. They may well combine such high ideals with popular travel and tourism. This category is not as much feared and dreaded as others, since their motives are genuine and the search for knowledge scientific.

The largest category consists of ordinary people who want to see something exotic, or something simply different from what they find in their ordinary lives. They often come with very little or no knowledge at all about the country and the people they are intending to visit. Nor do they have much interest in the rich history and culture of the people. They come to see the wildlife, nature, the

environment. Or they search out those few ethnic groups, such as the Masai of Kenya-Tanzania and the Karamajong of Uganda, who become for them a symbol of the strange and exotic.

Then there is a category of tourists who make travel abroad the centre of their normal life. They are very rich. They have decided to use their savings to enjoy life, moving from one country to another, enjoying the variety of the climate and the scenery. The final category consists of people who have come determined to exploit the country they are visiting, and who seek only to introduce indecent manners and dis-values into traditional and rural societies – all in the name of globalization.

### *Tourism – the fourth stage of globalization in Africa*

As Peter Henriot of Zambia points out, tourism can be described as an aspect of globalization – the fourth stage of this phenomenon to be witnessed in Africa.<sup>1</sup> The previous three stages have all had a negative impact on Africa. Is there any reason to presume that the latest phase will be much different?

The first stage consisted of slavery and began with the slave trade. Traders invaded the continent and took away the most precious resources. African men and women were enslaved for the benefit of Europeans and Americans. Africa suffered and other continents benefited economically from this inhuman institution. The second stage was colonialism. During this period, Africa was subjected to economic exploitation, environmental degradation, social dependency, and the arbitrariness of borders, all of which continue to contribute to much of the ethnic tension and conflict in the continent. The human dignity of the African was undermined. Valuable objects of art were taken into private collections and rich cosmopolitan museums of the developed countries. Whatever minimal gains Africa received from this period cannot be equated to the great losses to the African personality, the continent's cultural heritage, indigenous religious beliefs and practices and her people's sense of equal dignity within the human family.

The third stage of globalization is often referred to as neo-colonialism. Pope Paul VI described it as 'the form of political pressures and economic suzerainty aimed at maintaining or acquiring dominance'.<sup>2</sup> Africa's political independence did not break the ties that bound it to outside influences. Trade patterns, investment policies, debt arrangements, were simply not beneficial to Africa. These

injustices are to a large extent responsible for the many armed conflicts, dictatorships and the displacement of millions on the continent.

We are now in the fourth stage of globalization, dominated by the free market, an integration of the economies of the world through trade, exchange of technology and information – and extensive tourism. The fashionable cry of one world, one global village, one market, one super-power, one economic system, is hiding the truth that this so-called ‘oneness’ works overwhelmingly for the benefit of the rich, developed countries of the North and in many ways is disadvantageous to poor, developing countries of the South – those in Africa above all. The massive tourism industry is not ultimately to the benefit of the majority of the people in the developing countries. It is rather the manifestation of an economic fundamentalism based on the maximizing of profit which characterizes naked or savage capitalism. Whatever economic resources tourists bring to host countries are, commonly, returned to the countries of those same visitors the next day through the oppressive servicing of external debt.

### *Positive and negative aspects*

Despite this context of poverty and the increasing economic marginalization of the peoples of the South, tourism which is properly organized and undertaken with the right motives can have many positive aspects. Every person should be made to feel that he or she is a citizen of the world. Every person should have the right to enjoy freedom of movement, learn from other countries, and appreciate the beauty and diversity of peoples and nature. This would greatly assist in promoting the sense of human unity and solidarity. It would gradually eliminate the many prejudiced myths people have about other peoples and countries.

Yet this positive aspect is often compromised by the nations of the North in their policies towards travellers of all categories from the developing countries. While people from the developed countries, whatever the purpose of their travel, are accorded virtually free entry to most of the developing countries, people from the latter are very restricted, being discriminated against in obtaining visas even for a brief stay. Britain, for instance, has imposed what it calls an ‘area transit visa’ on many countries, including Uganda. In order to change planes at any of the British international airports, one

needs to pay for a visa in one's country of origin. Yet there is no requirement of a prior visa for a British citizen coming to visit Uganda; the visa is issued automatically at the point of entry to the country. What may explain this difference in practice? There is undoubtedly widespread suspicion and fear in countries of the North, encouraged by irresponsible media, of illegal immigrants. But the policies have restrictive repercussions far beyond monitoring illegal entry, resulting in all legitimate travellers experiencing strongly implicit racism. To get a visa for Italy for a Ugandan priest or religious – even the Cardinal himself – one needs a special recommendation from the papal Pro-nuncio in Uganda. Examples are endless. In terms of tourism, what is happening is simply this: global tourism is seen as the preserve of people from the North, one which should be denied to people from the South, presumably because of their economic poverty. This double standard is not only dangerous to the tourist industry but also quite discriminatory. Many enlightened people from the South, including myself, have stopped visiting those countries, whether for business or for leisure, where discrimination and racism is manifested towards visitors.

But where tourism is properly managed, it is capable of enriching people's experience and knowledge. An African proverb says: *To visit is to see, to return is to narrate.*<sup>3</sup> Another proverb says: *The one who has not travelled widely will always think his or her mother's cooking is the best.*<sup>4</sup> According to African wisdom, people need to travel with open minds in order to learn, to compare and contrast if they are to return home enriched and exchange their newly acquired experience with others. Unfortunately this truth seems to be taken up by very few tourists from the North.

Many of them come with a superiority complex, feeling the mistaken sense of being better persons, richer and more knowledgeable. With such attitudes one cannot learn, appreciate or respect hospitality. Many tourists come with false images and myths and return without much critical assessment of their actual experience. This is one of the main reasons why the majority of tourists do not include in their programme much by way of interaction with the people in the countries they visit. Their minds are on wildlife, the climate and the environment. To many tourists the indigenous people do not matter. They come and exploit, consciously or not, the natural beauty of the countries they visit. Several governments of the North have offered aid in order to save rare animal and birds species – seemingly for the good of their own nationals.

Promoters of the tourist industry in both the North and the South share one predominant motive: economic gain. The travel business is growing each day in developed countries. In the South governments are busy seeking ways of promoting tourism through fully fledged ministries. Yet both seem to have failed to move beyond the motive of economic profit to embrace an integral approach to tourism. In a move involving decisions by both local authorities and overseas agencies of tourism, beautiful beaches of Mombasa, for example, have been sealed off from the citizens of Kenya for the exclusive enjoyment of foreign tourists. As long as travel bureaux abroad get their money and the host state imagines that tourists have brought foreign exchange into the country, both groups seem to be satisfied.

It is important to examine critically the impact of the income brought in by tourists on the majority of the citizens in a given country. Several governments in the South are used to ranking tourism among the main sources of foreign exchange. Often the call for more tourists is made. It is now the fashion of the day to increase the number of foreign exchange bureaux in Third World capital cities and other important centres. To some this is a clear indication that tourists are indeed bringing into the country massive sums of dollars, sterling, Deutschmarks and, soon, euros. My personal view is more sceptical. The promotion of tourism in some countries of the South involves a political commitment. As long as a country receives many tourists, it is regarded as stable, peaceful, democratic, respecting human rights, and fully committed to the new globalization. No politician would wish to miss such a chance to promote his or her country's image abroad. However, the promotion of tourism in many instances may be no more than a cover-up for a dictatorship within the country itself, such as with Daniel Arup Moi in Kenya, or the late Mobutu of former Zaire.

A good number of tourists too, have very limited resources to spend within the country visited. Consequently they choose to sleep in one-star hotels or in simple hostels or even under tents. They travel as cheaply as possible and eat on the streets, trying out any means to eke out their resources. It is worth noting that this particular group of tourists represents the biggest number within the industry.

And what do they receive in return? Many tourists decide to spend their money on items from which they benefit greatly. They take photos and videos for both private and public or commercial

consumption back home. They buy cheaply local crafts, hand-woven clothes, decorations, works of art, and other religious and cultural items which may have a greater value back home. Because of ignorance, illiteracy and stifling poverty, many people in the South often have to sell cheaply in order to survive. Before we parade around with the statistics of foreign currency earned from the tourist industry, it should be the responsibility of governments to compare such returns with the potential monetary value of objects taken from the host country. If this is not done quickly, it will be discovered sooner or later that, at least in the worst cases, contemporary tourism has simply been looting Africa of the valuable remnants left over from earlier forms of colonialism.

### *Tourism and the local cultures*

Culture in all its totality is the soul of the life and vitality of Africans and most other people in the developing continents. Culture embraces their history, their identity, religion, moral values and – above all – their way of life. Culture is the umbilical cord that ties together the living, those we call the living-dead and those who are yet to be born. Their culture defines the world-view of these people, the link between the world above, the world inhabited by the living and the world beneath; it is culture which unites humans with the other living beings and non-living substances. This culture is and always has been dynamic, adapting itself to given epochs and contexts. At least some part of it always critically examines itself to see practices which need modification, those which demand substitution and those few which may need total elimination. In this ongoing process, cultural values and cherished practices are maintained, protected and promoted.

One crucially important factor to consider in relation to African culture – a factor often ignored, though it should be central to the tourist industry – is its capacity to ‘colonize an especially hostile region on behalf of the entire human race’.<sup>5</sup> According to the renowned African historian, John Iliffe, about 1.8 million years ago *homo erectus* existed in parts of eastern and southern Africa. About 400,000 years ago, *homo sapiens* appeared in the Omo valley of Ethiopia and parts of South Africa. Between 140,000 and 290,000 years ago, the genetic compositions of human beings are found among the ‘Bushmen’ of South Africa. The accepted conclusions of contemporary archaeologists concur in asserting that Africa did not

only colonize its own region and environment but also became the source of human life for the whole world. This has been the greatest contribution of Africa to the whole world – a contribution for which, concludes Iliffe, Africans ‘deserve admiration, support and careful study’.<sup>6</sup>

It is only from such careful study that we can discover and understand Africa’s source of energy which has enabled her to survive, to conquer nature, hostile as it has been, and successfully to resist all attempts during the first three stages of globalization to crush and eliminate her.

Nevertheless, many tourists ignore such a history and knowingly or otherwise try to undermine the cultural values of their hosts. Many come with prejudices and the attitudes of intolerance learned from childhood and from false myths. Many are interested only in the externals, the exotic and the abnormal; it is on these aspects of life which their cameras focus. Culture is undermined by the disrespect shown to what is regarded by local people as sacred. I have seen tourists resisting having to remove their shoes before entering shrines and monuments. The religious is desecrated, the holy regarded as profane, the ceremonial ridiculed or treated with contempt. The behaviour of some tourists shocks ordinary people and scandalizes children. More than a few tourists come in search of exotic sex. Couples sometimes act as if they are on an extended ‘honeymoon’, taking for granted that their kissing in public and their indecent forms of dress are perfectly acceptable. Children gather round to be amused, older people to become disgusted, and the gullible to copy as ‘modern’ whatever comes from abroad.

Tourism is rapidly becoming a tool for bringing about a single global culture – and a powerful tool for the renewing of cultural imperialism, especially through technology. The only hope is that as the promoters of international tourism are busy discovering new ways to de-Africanize the people of the continent, there is arising a new class of Africans trying their best to re-Africanize their compatriots. The struggle continues.

### *Towards a responsible and desirable tourism*

The host countries are being profoundly affected by electronic communications, by computers, by cellular phones, faxes, e-mail and the internet. In some people’s minds it is already an assumption that this is a one way process: that developed countries will always transfer

information and knowledge to the developing world and the latter will accept always to be the receivers of ideas, theories, values and fashions from outside. Tourism has become one of the main means for this technological transfer. This mindset of 'one way traffic' may explain the point alluded to earlier – the reluctance of the developed world to accept tourists from the South. It is not impossible, however, to respond effectively to this problem by making tourism a two-way process, a dialogue instead of a monologue, a rich exchange of views and ideas instead of a one-way communication.

It is for this reason that this article has not advocated a halt to tourism, but rather a radical change in the vision and promotion of tourism to the developing countries. There must be a switch from irresponsible to responsible tourism. The tourism industry, both abroad and at home, needs to rethink its promotion by giving it a human face, moving it from concentration on economic gain to a more integrated model where the environment, religious and cultural values and human solidarity all stand to gain.

There are many aspects to such change on both the institutional, government, and individual and personal levels. For example, tourism needs to be more people-oriented as well as wildlife-centred. The people visited should be respected, their hospitality reciprocated. To put people at the centre of the visit requires more adequate preparation and education of the tourists before they leave their own countries.

Proper appreciation of their destination and its people involves visitors understanding something of the history, culture and behaviour of their hosts, and in turn, the basics of what their hosts expect of them. If tourists are assisted in reflecting on differences, they may be encouraged to appreciate what is different in the host culture. The motives for travel need to be given more adequate consideration, and signs of prejudice, intolerance, racism and discrimination identified and addressed.

In this the host countries can make an important contribution. Once tourists are made fully aware that their hosts watch them critically and pass judgement on them, they may become more self-conscious, aware of their own human dignity and of the image which they leave behind. The apparent silence of hosts should never be taken for the absence of any reaction or mere inarticulacy. Local host cultures usually discuss visitors when they have disappeared. Then they can reflect on the strangeness of the visitors and, all too often, list the scandals and the indecencies they have perpetrated.



*Protecting the vulnerable*

It is in their own interests for countries of the South which promote tourism to realize the importance of looking after their own people first. It is the local people who will create the environment which is conducive to tourism. Ideally, too, they would be the first to enjoy the possibilities for tourism within their own countries. The moment tourism becomes a pastime reserved exclusively for foreigners, people will feel excluded from the very places which God made so beautiful for them.

In particular these countries need to take the necessary steps to protect the vulnerable sections of their communities. These include persons with disabilities, ethnic minorities and the very poor. Policies are necessary to prevent child prostitution, exploitation of the weak, and forms of disrespect towards the dignity of different groups. Ethnic minorities have been transplanted from their ancestral homes so that a wildlife park may be created and no one has raised their voice in protest. Wild beasts, which can become a threat to the local people, are protected for the sake of tourists. And tourists can often offend against standards of decency without their being any public condemnation. For the most part human rights activists have left this area unmonitored, and they need to wake up and treat more critically the tourist industry and the moral problems it raises. It continues to exploit the economic poverty of the hosts, draining far more from the receiving countries than is ever given in return.

Every industry and business needs to be guided by a moral code, and the tourist industry, one of the biggest in the world, ought to be run on universally accepted norms. It cannot be left to be controlled by its own internal mechanisms. It needs constant guidance and research, especially in those areas that touch on spirituality, culture and morality. As tourism has come to stay, then it needs to become active in promoting those fundamental values on which all human society should be constructed. The sooner this industry is carefully monitored and guided, the better for all parties concerned.

*The globalization to be welcomed*

The only process of globalization which can positively contribute to the needs of the host countries will be one which values human solidarity, makes a clear option for the poor, and promotes human dignity and equality. Is it too much to ask that the tourist industry

define its moral attitudes and motives? What sort of a vision would this entail? It is an ambitious one.

The industry needs to aim at nothing less than building a peaceful and just world – a vision consonant with the Christian ideal which values the legitimate aspirations of all people, rich and poor. It should never be seen as the promoter of enclaves of poverty and lack of development, a world preserved for the exotic entertainment of a few rich visitors. The industry should support and promote the right of people to be different, to enjoy their own cultural values, to appreciate and value diversity for its own sake. The globalization needed is one committed to peace everywhere, to the protection of life and the ecology, and one opposed to any system, ideology or structure which enslaves any person or any element of society. Such a globalization values the integral development of every individual in society and is committed to the full liberation of all vulnerable groups.

The tourist industry can be made to work to the advantage of the hosts if it is critically planned and integrally implemented. It has the potential to offer considerable advantages to both hosts and guests, receivers and received. But it needs to be more adequately directed. Left on its own it is likely to continue being exploitative, badly monitored, and to operate with detrimental results to the hosts. Concerted action is needed now.

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#### NOTES

1 Peter Henriot, 'Globalization and Africa', *Leadership* (April 1998), pp 14–21.

2 Pope Paul VI, *Populorum progressio* (1967).

3 Luganda proverb: *Okukyaala kulaba, okkuda kunyumya*.

4 Luganda proverb: *Atanayitayita, y'atenda Nyinya okufumba.*

5 John Iliffe, *Africans: the history of a continent* (Cambridge: CUP, 1955), p 1.

6 *Ibid.*