

Touring the Periphery: The Unequal Exchange in Tourism

A Specific Look at Zimbabwe

Miri Gubler

University of Utah

TOURING THE PERIPHERY

Abstract

This paper looks into how tourism is a privilege afforded to the hegemonic core powers in the world-system. Tourism businesses and other opportunities in third-world countries, or periphery nations, are reserved for entrepreneurs and leisure-seekers from the core. Tourism itself is becoming less of an experience and more of a commodity to be capitalized on that is furthering the inequality gap between rich tourists and local communities. Revenue streams from tourism are misrepresented by the indirect costs of development leaking out of the country with only a small-percentage flowing back into the community bearing the tourist burden. This paper looks specifically at Zimbabwe and how their perception of tourists, conservation projects, and cultural identity is affected by tourism in the world-system where benefits enhance the whole rather than considering its individual parts.

Keywords: Zimbabwe, world-systems, tourism, periphery, core, and unequal exchange

TOURING THE PERIPHERY

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A Specific Look at Zimbabwe

As a tourist, Zimbabwe caught my eye with one of the best rafting rivers in the entire world...the Zambezi River. A holy grail of sorts for those who love to raft and an experience bound to make even Grand Canyon rafters envious. The apex of rafting experiences is located in the canyon of one of the world's largest waterfalls, Victoria Falls. With rapid names like Stairway to Heaven, Devils Toilet Bowl, and Commercial Suicide, it promises good things...things that would be hard to find in the United States. A quote by Outside Magazine about rafting the Zambezi was especially attention grabbing, "if this [river] were in the litigious U.S., it's likely no outfitter would have enough liability insurance to commercial run it." That's a hell of a recommendation! With offerings for leisure seekers and high-adventure seekers, Zimbabwe is on travel bucket lists everywhere.

How lucky am I to be able to save money and make such a trip in about 3-4 years if I so choose! That is exclusively a westerner privilege. It is easy to forget that systems in place make it easier for one to save, even at a \$10/hour job that seems low. Traveling is not a privilege for the entire world. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the very bottom of basic human needs is physiological needs: food, water, sleep, etc. The second step is safety needs: security of employment, resources, family, health, property, etc. For a lot of the world, the second most basic set of human needs aside from food, sleep and water does not get fulfilled. Seeking leisure and travel isn't a need one thinks about if they barely have access to food or a job.

Privilege is highly embedded in the tourism industry, which leads back to core, hegemonic powers that have set the standard for the way that the global market is run and its connections that keep themselves at the forefront of development and policy decisions, often at

TOURING THE PERIPHERY

the expense of periphery nations. Among the ways the core keeps the periphery disenfranchised, is inadvertently through tourism and travel done by the core to periphery states which only adds to the gap in inequality and social injustice.

Tourism can claim to be an economic savior for communities that aids in preservation of the environment by bringing more revenue than extraction companies. Yet a closer look into tourism and one can see that it isn't the economic savior that many hoped it would be, myself included.

Tourism is often synonymous with an escape from every day life in a glorious trip where one can seemingly return to nature for her bounties of leisure and recreation while touting soul-healing properties. A shift from our inherent connection with nature, core nations rely heavily on the natural landscape for resources to develop in the accumulation of profits while conserving other parcels to play on later. This view of conservation and nature is not a global phenomenon amongst different cultures who remain in close contact with their natural surroundings for spirituality, sustenance, recreation, energy, and development, while keeping a close eye on sustaining the land and resources since their livelihoods depend on it.

World-Systems and World Travelers

This westernized approach to conservation and protected natural space is inherently rooted in the world-systems analysis because it touts conserved land as a gift to the world as a whole, where anyone can have access, which ultimately isn't a bad idea but it fails to recognize individual systems. The issue with a world system is the domination of ideals and values from one area that is applied to other areas where the same ideas and values do not coincide. By relying on the system as whole, we can justify the creation of preserved space for the benefit of

TOURING THE PERIPHERY

everyone while sacrificing the livelihoods of locals whose access gets restricted so that the majority can benefit.

The Privilege of Leisure Travel

Tourism “remains predominantly a ‘white man’s thing” (Briedenhann, 2004, p.78). A trip to Zimbabwe would be incredible...if one has about five-grand to spare. While the economy in the core remains strong, citizens can have the disposable income needed for international travel while those in periphery countries fight for ancestral homelands, food, and economic opportunity while cleaning hotel rooms that are nicer than their homes.

Unequal Exchange and the Tourist Dollar

A problem with tourist development is known as economic leakage, where industry numbers are showing high return from tourism yet a significantly smaller percentage is actually flowing back into the host community. Since the periphery is in a chronic state of impoverishment, it is harder to implement a tourism economy that is heavily based in initial investments for the development of tourist infrastructure and hospitality amenities they seek. The importation of certain goods like lifejackets and boats for river companies are often not manufactured in Zimbabwe but from foreign providers, often in the core. Hotels are a great example because of the materials needed for their development like elevators and bathtubs.

Foreign investments and loans also come with high interest rate repayments. Plus, once step one in the expensive process, the development, has succeeded they move on to the next costly endeavor in advertising and marketing. These costs are high, especially if trying to promote in core countries (which is the main tourist market) where advertising is already a large and competitive industry. Often, foreign investment leads to monopoly ownership of tour

TOURING THE PERIPHERY

operators who own more profitable lodges and touring agencies because they have the advantage of self promotion through advertising and cheap tourist-packages.

“These leakages and transfers of foreign exchange may be considered justifiable costs only if, on balance, it can be shown that the host country has made significant economic gains from tourism such as tax revenues, earnings by local operators, stimulation of agriculture and light industrial production to meet the demands of the tourist sector for food and other consumer goods” (Brown, 1998, p. 239).

Often tour operators and entrepreneurs are foreigners who take their profits out of the country. Locals are aware that many of the higher paying tour companies are owned by white Zimbabweans or other international operators who can afford the start-up. This can mean that the money poured into that company from tourism is immediately leaving the country to another.

“Only a few people have prospered with the opening up of tourism in our area. Most of these come from outside the community: the businessmen, entrepreneurs, merchants from the north who have the money to build hotels, tourist agencies, and souvenir shops. Even the staff who run the hotels, the guides who ferry tourists around the area are not locals since the owners of the new establishments favor their own people over the original inhabitants” (McIvor, 1994, p. 19).

Money spent by tourists can also be determined by the types of tourists like: charter tourists, photographic tourists, or trophy hunting tourists.

Tourists often look to travel companies in their home country to help them plan a trip that is bundled with the flight cost, hotel accommodations, activities and tours, and a few meals.

There “charter tourists” once in their destination, limit their spending for things like souvenirs.

TOURING THE PERIPHERY

Photographic tourists are often referred to as the “high-volume, low-value” tourist. This term arose because this is the typical tourist that arrives in massive groups to book safaris and take pictures of the wildlife and landscape. Since you can’t charge for photographs, especially now that we are in the digital age, the outcome is an incredibly small portion of economic benefits.

Trophy hunting tourists are the favorite in Zimbabwe. There are big fees attached to almost every stage in this process. Tourists pay for a hunting permit, guide service, land-access, and a final trophy fee. Hunting guides are almost always locals and the money spent here flows back into the community along with the meat of killed animals.

Zimbabwe and African Tourism

Zimbabwe is slightly luckier than other tourist destinations throughout Africa. They try to keep their tourism sustainable which they know low-volume tourism is key. However, by being sustainable in tourism one is capping the potential for profit maximization, which is the trend of the world-system in which accumulation of profit is the ultimate goal. However, they have implemented some positive policies to keep tourism as much of a benefit as possible while being sustainable.

The Zimbabwean government has made big strides to assist the locals find jobs in the tourist economy by providing more training and specialized education than other countries. There is even the existence of a hotel training school in southern Zimbabwe that offers training in hotel management and other hospitality jobs like catering and administration. This cultivates tourist jobs to locals rather than importing skilled workers (McIvor, 1994, p. 21).

Lack of access to resources has been a common theme for contention in African countries with the establishment of national parks. Before the western conservation ideas took over, local

TOURING THE PERIPHERY

communities treated wildlife with respect, utilizing an entire animal if killed and leaving pregnant female animals in peace. Killing elephants was rare and reserved for a select few and upon that special occasion the entire community would celebrate and benefit from the kill.

Wildlife continue to pose a threat to local agriculture and can trample crops and leave people to go hungry, especially with current restrictions on hunting. Due to heightened conservation, herd numbers have gone up which can force some herds onto local farming land regardless, which now can leave locals with no option to hunt or to successfully grow crops.

With more foreign interaction with animals this has led to an increase in wild animal related deaths which lead to more unnecessary and fruitless killing of wildlife as elephants knock over cars in the quest for oranges and hippos have their personal bubbles invaded. Other effects tourism has on wildlife can be seen through disruption of mating and hunting behaviors which are thrown off by tourist crowds.

Some local schools have benefitted from rafting on the Zambezi while young boys would often wait for trips to end and carry boating equipment up the steep river gorge. Transportation back to the city crossed communal lands that didn't have any kind of fee or accessibility system in place so rafters donated those funds to a local school.

The CAMPFIRE project, Communal Areas Management Program for Indigenous Resources, was started in 1989 in Zimbabwe to help give rural communities more control over the management of their land and resources while providing more economic benefit to local households. This program helps the environmental sustainability of the area while investing its funds into community development projects from a portion of the game hunting profits.

Local Experience

TOURING THE PERIPHERY

There is a great deal of separation in tourism in the periphery which a lot of tourists do not see the difference between the tourist accommodations and local life. *“The stark difference between the air-conditioned hotels, concentrated mostly in capital cities – ‘completely divorced from reality of the country’ is cause for further tension”* (Brown, 1998, p. 242). It is unlikely that the majority of tourists break out of the perimeter of the beach or hotel to get a true taste of the “local culture”.

In the 1995 motion picture, *“Zimbabwe: Tourism along the Zambezi River”*, you see a local housekeeper in the tourist town of Victoria Falls. He is cleaning a modern looking room with bright lights, running water in a sink, and a television. At the end of his shift he walks the ten minutes to his home where there is no electricity, no kitchen, and an outdoor bathroom. This housekeeper is aware of the amenities that foreign tourists are used to and knows it is unlikely that he will ever be able to afford electricity on his wages. He says that his particular borough hardly sees tourists venture into the neighborhood. His words echo a strong message, *“people that visit have a better life than we do, we want our children to be able to have lives like the tourists.”*

Conclusion

Growing up in an era where international backpacking was considered the best thing a young, recent college-grad could do, I’ve always looked forward to the day I graduate so I can start wandering around the globe with nothing but a dirty backpack. I envisioned taking small jobs in each town to keep funding my trip while gaining a better perspective of the local communities instead of staying on the typical tourist path to stay for a week or two and leave with little authentic interaction. This attitude was flawed because I’d not only be taking away a

TOURING THE PERIPHERY

local job but I would be taking the money earned to get myself to another place and spend it there rather than in the community where I got it.

As graduation approaches, I'm aware of how much animosity surround the white, photographic, "valueless" tourist, who even in hostels have access to better amenities than many local inhabitants. Perhaps tourism can be turned into a better industry when we start to act as a global society rather than a global system, where mindfulness and travel are used to break down inequalities rather than enforce them through the commodification of "cheap" experiences and inauthentic interactions with locals where mass visitation is forcing them to abandon traditions and reducing their dignity as they become destitute in their homeland.

Former President Hyerere of Tanzania stated: *"To have visitors is a special honor, and to treat a visitor well and hospitably is an act of good manners. A visitor comes to Tanzania, stays for awhile, and leaves praising this country, is a good ambassador of us abroad, and he is an ambassador who costs us nothing"* (Ankomah, 1990, p. 12). This quote is the ideal perception of what tourists need to be centered around to see the individual parts working together in a world society as global ambassadors who reach a heightened understanding of another place, culture, and people with their own unique struggles and history along with their natural resources.

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TOURING THE PERIPHERY

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TOURING THE PERIPHERY

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TOURING THE PERIPHERY

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