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Tina Esh and Illith Rosenblum's Tourism in Developing Countries- Trick or Treat?

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BOOK REVIEWS:

REVIEW ESSAY: *TOURISM IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES - TRICK OR TREAT? A REPORT FROM GAMBIA*, by Tina Esh and Illith Rosenblum, Research Report No. 31, 1975, (Uppsala) Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 76 pp.

For more than ten years, the Scandinavian Institute of African Studies has promoted research and scholarly exchange on topics of critical concern to Africa. Perhaps, the most significant aspect of this contribution has been the Institute's record in sponsoring debate on topical and sometimes even controversial issues. The report under review here is among the first scholarly attempts to investigate the impact of tourism in an African country. Given the dearth of literature on the subject, this report is more than welcome, if only because of the controversy surrounding the efficacy of tourism in promoting economic development in poor countries. The subtitle of the report, 'Trick or Treat?' could not therefore be more appropriate.

In recent years, tourism has almost achieved the status of a 'sacred cow' in established thinking on economic development in the Third World. Regarded as a dependable source of earning badly needed foreign exchange, tourism is vigorously promoted by international financial interests, bilateral aid agencies and optimistic government planners. Fortunately, tourism in the poor countries relies on the sun which as one observer noted, has long been blamed for the 'scourge of tropicality' which was held responsible for the Third World's grinding poverty. (See Louis Turner, *Multi-national Companies and the Third World*, New York: Hill & Wong, 1973, p. 210). But today, aided by the increasing demand for leisure activity in the developing countries of the west, sun-drenched tropical beaches have become a bonanza; attracting vacationing industrial workers, sun-worshipping nudists and world-bumming hippies-- all seeking a temporary, even if only partial, escape from machine age society to indulge in fun, food, frolic and exotica.

Tropical tourism is big business to astute and lucky investors, and it can also be a big earner to governments. Not surprisingly, its promotion has become the latest "numbers game" where profitability is reckoned by the volume of air traffic to the nation's airports, the number of hotel beds available, bed occupancy rates, length of stay of the visitors and their local expenditures. But the usual tourist statistics can be deceptive; often public investment in tourist infrastructure is discounted; the argument being that since these are social services they would ultimately be provided by the government to the public anyway. Yet, few of such services are often provided except in the tourist areas. In any case by providing such services to tourism, the government is effectively subsidizing the cost to the investor at the taxpayers' expense.

The touristic fortunes of countries are admittedly varied, depending on their proximity to the countries of tourist origin, the relative level of integration of the industry into the national economy and the country's own resource endowment, among other factors. Generally net earnings seem to be highest in the least poor countries with rationally integrated and least dependent economies. Yet the logic of tourism can be extremely enticing, especially to poor countries without any real alternative for employment or foreign exchange earnings. As Esh and Rosenblum observe, it is very difficult for such countries to turn down advice from institutions such as the World Bank, UNCTAD or the ILO which are promoting tourism in one way or another. Gambia is a fitting case, but the situation is not much different in many African countries where tourism has been discovered.

Once referred to as an "improbable nation," Gambia is a quixotic little country with puny resources. Peanuts and peanut products are the main export commodity, contributing more than 95% of the total value of exports in 1973/74. It is hardly surprising therefore that great euphoria should have ushered in the "discovery" of Gambia's palm-thronged, virgin beaches in the mid-1960's by a Swedish holiday travel entrepreneur. Since then the number of hotel beds has multiplied more than six times. But all the new beds, 80% of the total are owned by foreign charter companies who needed extremely generous incentives to invest in Gambia. These include 31 year leases on land, five year Development Certificate comprising tax exemptions, permission to import duty free all capital goods needed to sustain the industry and freedom to export profits and equity. A large number of consumables are also imported duty free and the hotels have priority in purchasing local consumer items which often leads to shortage and induces food price inflation during the peak tourist season.

But a little hardship would be acceptable if the tangible benefits of tourism were significant. The performance of tourism as an employer is notoriously unimpressive. Direct employment in Gambian tourism is a paltry 0.537 jobs per bed and will most likely decline as labor becomes more skilled and efficient. Yet even for the few employed there is hardly any security of employment. Statutory labor regulations such as exist are less than faithfully implemented if not totally flouted by the employers. Contracts are practically unknown and during the five months slack when hotels are closed all local labor is laid off except the lowest paid maintenance workers.

A particular merit of Esh and Rosenblum's study is that it sought to investigate the qualitative social aspects of Gambian tourism. Their analysis begins to peel off the mystification of tourism as a means of understanding between cultures. Although

"exotic" to the Nordic majority of the visitors, the Gambian tourist environment is carefully husbanded to provide a familiar surrounding - a kind of "environmental bubble" within which the tourist is protected and the vantage point from which he can watch the natives. This environment features familiar food, interior hotel decor and furniture and Scandinavian managers, all of which enable the visitor to remain in touch with his real world. A radio station in Gambia even broadcasts Swedish music, sports results and tips to tourists in Swedish.

Needless to say, all managerial and supervisory jobs in the hotels are held by Europeans. This is rationalized by pointing to the lack of skilled personnel among the Gambians, but it may as well be conditioned by an underlying Eurocentric prejudice which characterizes the natives as lazy, prone to pilfering and racist unservility. In the words of one manager "white people had to be present in order to influence the Gambians with 'high moral thinking'." But such an attitude which prefers the recruitment of a European lumberer over the promotion of a Gambian employee to a supervisory position cannot encourage excellent labor relations. It is not surprising then that a certain amount of hostility tempered with racist sentiments may characterize the generalized attitudes of Gambian hotel workers toward tourism.

But as the attitude surveys by Esh and Rosenblum suggest, hostility to tourism in various shades may be more widespread. This is hardly surprising, for evidence from some Caribbean islands indicate a positive correlation between the density of tourists as a proportion of the local population and hostility toward the holiday visitors, a development which may partly be attributed to the rigid racial stratification in the industry. It is typical of tropical tourism that the majority of the indigenous people serve the industry in subservient roles; hardly a commendable formula in these times of nationalist upsurge in the Third World.

One generalized criticism of tourism is its association with social and cultural pollution; the introduction and encouragement of the most decadent western values and behavior. A case in point is male and female prostitution. In almost all the major tourist centers in the Third World, exotic sex has tacitly been added to the list of attractions, and it can be shown that the number of prostitutes and their earnings fluctuate according to the volume of tourist traffic. Indeed, there are indications that some promoters may in fact be promising the visitors some sensuous tropical adventures. No wonder then that an increasing number of Third World critics identify waiters, taxicab drivers, pimps and prostitutes as the real benefactors of tourism.

Given the social and economic costs of tourism, both direct and indirect, it is not clear that any tropical country boasting palm-thronged sunny beaches can turn it into a dependable foreign exchange earner and employer of labor any more than would be the case if comparable investment were made in, say a textile factory. According to Esh and Rosenblum a conclusive statement for Gambia is not possible. Gambia's national statistics are such that it is not easy to evaluate the benefits of tourism even within the narrowest precepts of quantitative gamesmanship and GNP growthmanship. But the suggestion is clear that the Gambia may have been had.

The Gambian case, however, even if extreme, illustrates the situation in several other African countries, perhaps in less objectionable forms. Given that close to 60% of the cost of most holidays comprises travel and accommodation, the facilities of which many poor countries hardly have a share, it is amazing that the scramble for tourism by Third World countries should be so intense. For the bigger part of the remaining 40% is not sure to remain in the country anyway, unless all food and drinks are not imported. The value of the local handicraft trade alone cannot very well justify mortgaging a country to tourism.

Clearly national planners and their advisors in the World Bank, ILO and UNCTAD have not been critical and imaginative enough in designing strategies for tourism development in the Third World. Solutions which generally subscribe to gradualism and marginal incrementalism, in a situation where the industry is oligopolistic, hardly integrated in the national economy, racially stratified, and exploitative, cannot do.

Esh and Rosenblum's study, despite the limitations of scope, conditioned by their own choice and lack of certain pertinent data which should have made it more comprehensive, is to be commended as a first step at a systematic qualitative evaluation of tourism in Africa. Hopefully, it will generate more debate and stimulate further and more thorough research on the topic and all its related facets.

-S.E. Migot-Adholla

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