

CROSS RIVER TOURISM, HISTORY AND ENVIRONMENT: A MARRIAGE CONTRACTED IN THE WOMB OF TIME

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ABSTRACT: *Today, it can be safely argued that Cross River State is noted more for its tourism enterprise than for anything else. Since 1999 to date, there have been sustained efforts by successive administrations to re-engineer and rebrand the State as a tourism spectacle and hub not just in the Cross River Region but in Nigeria and indeed, the West Africa Sub-region at large. This paper seeks to show that there is an organic and inescapable relationship between Cross River's current tourism efforts and its history and environment. Put differently, we would attempt to demonstrate that the foundation of Cross River tourism is embedded in its history and environment and it is from these pristine bowels that the current initiatives can truly find rhythm, momentum and relevance.*

KEYWORDS: Tourism, History, Environment, Cross River, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is multidisciplinary subject and different disciplines examine it from their own standpoint. Since I am by training a historian, I shall approach the discourse from a historical perspective.

One of the earliest attempts to define tourism was undertaken by W. Hunziker and K. Krapf in 1942. They held that tourism should be defined as “the sum of the phenomena and relationships arising from the travel and stay of non-residents, in so far as they do not lead to permanent residence and are not connected to any earning activity” (Hunziker & Krapf, 1942:11). On its part, a working party for the proposed Institute of Tourism in Britain (which later became the Tourism Society) attempted to clarify the issue, and reported in 1976 as follows:

Tourism is the temporary short-term movement of people to destinations outside the places where they normally live and work, ... it includes movement for all purposes, as well as day visits or excursions.

The World Tourism Organization (WTO) in its International Conference of Travel and Tourism in Ottawa in 1991 stated that tourism comprises:

The activities of a person travelling outside his or her usual environment ... and whose main purpose of travel is other than the exercise of an activity remunerated from the place visited (WTO, 1991).

Tourism is by no means a new phenomenon. Its historical origins can be located in the ancient cultures of the Greek and Roman social life. It is however difficult to find a precise point in time when tourism as we understand it today began. What we know is that, it evolved through time, building on the needs, and desires of society and the opportunities that were presented. Wealthy people have always travelled to distant parts of the world, to see great buildings and works of arts, learn new languages, experience new cultures, and taste different cuisines. An inscription on an Egyptian pyramid, dated 1244 BC reads: “Hadnakhte, scribe of treasury, came to make an excursion and amuse himself on the West of Memphis, together with his brother, Panahkti, scribe of the vizier” (Casson, 1974:32).

The emerging tourism industry was given impetus by the Greeks who were known to travel far and wide. Their contributions to the development of tourism were several: They established the system of currency exchange as the currency of some city states was accepted outside the Greek City States; the Greek language became the common language in the Mediterranean; the Greeks hosted festivals to attract travelers from all over the world and one important festival was the Olympic Games held to display creative athletic skills in honour of the God Zeus; the Greek theatre was also renowned and people came from far and near to see Greek tragedies and comedies as these were a reflection of the manners and philosophy of the time; scholars came to Greece to debate with its philosophers and to exchange medical skills with physicians and men of science; the city states became attractions for visitors with Athens becoming a renowned destination boasting of hospitality facilities that provided food, accommodation and entertainment like floor shows, dancing girls and gambling; the Greek introduced the custom of hiring a Proxeuros, a native who advised tourist on where to go and how to travel safely (Chakraborty and Chakravarti, 2008:33).

Modern tourism is however associated with the Industrial Revolution in the United Kingdom – the first European country to promote leisure time for the increasing industrial population (Singh, 2008:189). The transition to modern tourism came about principally due to the Revolutionary changes in technology such as transportation and communication; rising personal incomes due to rapid industrialization; and the enterprise of middle class professionals (like Thomas Cook) who began to organize tours for the inexperienced travelers.

Many tourists of this period travelled to the tropics, both in the summer and winter. Places of such nature that were visited include: Bali in Indonesia, Colombia, Brazil, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Malaysia, Mexico, the various Polynesian tropical islands, Queensland in Australia, Thailand, Saint Tropez and Cannes in France, Florida and Hawaii in the United States, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, St. Lucia, Saint Maarten, St. Martin’s Island in Bangladesh, Saint Kitts and Nevis, the Bahamas, Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Aruba, Turks and Caicos Island, and Bermuda (Allan, 2002:13).

In the aftermath of World War II, the long and deprived war years led to an increased desire to travel to foreign destinations, although the ability to do so was limited for many, restricted by both political barriers and inadequate finance. Nevertheless, the war had given rise to a curiosity among many travellers especially of British extraction to witness the sites of battles such as those fought on the Normandy beaches and at St. Nazaire, while North Americans and Japanese alike felt similarly drawn to sites of conflict in the Pacific like Iwo Jima and Guadalcanal (Holloway, 2006:58). The surplus of aircraft in immediate post-war years, itself a function of a benevolent political attitude towards the growth of private-sector airlines, and

the appearance on the scene of air travel entrepreneurs like Harold Bamberg (of Eagle Airways) and Freddie Laker aided the rapid expansion of air travel after the war (Holloway, 2006:49). It need be specifically stated that in the post-war years, aircraft has become more comfortable, safer, faster and, in spite of relatively high prices in the early 1950's, steadily cheaper by comparison with other forms of transport.

Today, tourism has become a popular global leisure and socio-economic activity. From its humble beginning in the ancient period, tourism has undergone various stages of development and has become generally recognized as "an activity essential to the life of nations with its direct effects on the social, cultural, educational, and economic sectors of national societies and on their international relations ("Manila Declaration on World Tourism", World Tourism Conference, Manila, Philippines 10th October, 1980:1-4).

In the light of the foregoing, Nigeria as a country has invested its own fair share of time, resources and energy to find a foothold in the global tourism circuit. Generally, there are three opinions on the development of tourism in Nigeria. The first traces the history of tourism in Nigeria to 1472 when the first Portuguese merchant landed in Lagos on a mercantile mission. The second claims that tourism started in 1953 when the Colonial Antiquity was established during the colonial era. The Colonial Antiquity Commission (CAC) was designed to manage tourism resources in Nigeria. The third view traces tourism as presently structured to 1962 when a group of Nigerians with interest in and commitment to the promotion of tourism set up a body known as Nigerian Tourism Association (NTA) (Uya, 2012:678). The NTA received some grant-in-aid from the government and earned membership of the International Union of Travel Organization which later became the Spain-based World Tourism Organization. However, the entrance into the IUTO did not achieve much for the take-off of tourism, even as an effective national past time. As a result, the euphoria soon died down. In 1971, government appointed the African Development Bank (ADB) to conduct a feasibility study on the potentials and the viability of Tourism in Nigeria. The report of that study showed that Nigeria possessed great potentials for the development of tourism as a viable economic sector. This led to the replacement of the NTA – a private voluntary association of interested Nigerians, with a government Public Board established by Decree No. 54 of 1976. The Decree transformed the NTA into a full fledged Parastatal known as the Nigerian Tourism Board (NTB). The Decree of 1976 empowered the NTB to: Encourage people living in Nigeria to take their holidays therein and people from abroad to visit Nigeria; encourage the provision and improvement of tourist amenities and facilities in Nigeria, including ancillary facilities; provide advisory and information services; promote and undertake research in the field of tourism; grade or classify hotels in such a manner as may be prescribed.

The NTB had a chequered history, and consequently failed to create any meaningful impact on the country's tourism industry. The disturbing trend was however to be reversed from 1989 when the Federal Government of Nigeria came to the full realization that tourism as an industry needed to be fully developed owing to its growing socio-cultural economic and international relevance. Accordingly, several conferences were organized. At the seventh National Conference on Tourism which took place on March 15, 1989 in Maiduguri, Borno State, various factors militating against the development of tourism in the country were discussed. It was agreed at the Conference that for tourism to be given a boost in the country, the operational capability of the Nigerian Tourism Board needed to be enhanced through the

reconstitution of the Governing Council of the Board and through the commercialization of its operations.

Throughout the 1990's the Nigerian government held important conferences on tourism which stimulated Nigeria's representation at many International Conferences. A comprehensive Tourism Policy has been developed with the aim of generating rural-urban integration as well as cultural exchange between Nigeria and other countries (Uya, 2012:679). Decree No. 36 was promulgated in 1991 which established the Chad Basin National Park, the Cross River National Park, the Gashaka-Gumti National Park, the Kainji Lake National Park and the Old Oyo National Park as part of the tourism package. By 2005 the tourism sector of the Nigerian economy was identified as one of the six priority areas for development in Nigeria and since then, several efforts have been made to secure Nigeria's place in the tourism map of the world.

The Donald Duke administration (1999-2007) in Cross River State would deservedly be remembered for many achievements, yet everything appears to pale into insignificance when compared with its audacious adventure into the world of tourism. As can be gleaned from the chequered history of Nigeria's involvement in the sector and the unsure steps of its stakeholders, tourism was speaking seriously, up to that time, a vastly uncharted territory. Donald saw the infinite possibilities in tourism and released his boundless youthful energy into its pursuit. He spent what appeared to be a horrendous amount of money to bring his dream into reality. Many sneered and viewed with skepticism and even cynicism, the pursuit of this new rave, which in their judgement would end up a dismal fiasco. But like every true leader, Donald Duke remained undaunted, persuaded by his conviction that the tourism effort would yield constructive transformational fruits for the benefit of the broad generality of Cross Riverians. By the time he left office, the fruits derivable from tourism, could certainly not be adjudged transformational, but one thing stood out for sure, there was a radical shift from cynicism to accommodation of the tourism idea by a broad generality of the citizenry who had come to the realization that tourism was after all, not a crazy and wasteful adventure.

The tourism initiative under Donald Duke was predicated essentially on a tripod: the Tinapa emporia, the Obudu Ranch Project and the icing on the Cake, the carnival extravaganza. The Tinapa emporia was constructed to showcase Donald's vision of tourism as a healthy mix of leisure and business. With huge business and leisure facilities rolled into one ambitious complex, Tinapa was created to benefit from the possibilities of the Export Free Zone (EPZ). It was envisioned to be a repository of an endless flow of goods and services unhindered by the regular bureaucracy and bottlenecks of international trade and commerce. This inflow was expected to meet a captivated and leisure-driven audience of revellers and businessmen who were primed to spend good money by the enchanting ambience of Tinapa.

The Obudu Ranch is one of God's unique gifts to Cross River State. It is part of Cross River's history and heritage. The Donald Duke administration boldly set out to re-engineer and re-brand it to meet its tourism projections. Accordingly, the entire architectural outlay of the Ranch was transformed with a plethora of new buildings, state-of-the-art facilities and even more importantly, a befitting presidential wing that was meant to accord the ranch the status of a "Camp David" of sorts. To ease access to the facility, the Beebi Airstrip was constructed and a shuttle service from Calabar introduced and to give the final journey to the

Ranch the aerie intensity that it deserves, a cable car network reputed as the longest in Africa was introduced. From its dizzy heights the cable car permitted its users the uncommon enjoyment of the entire splendour of the beautiful Obudu landscape in one exotic gaze – a true tourists' delight. To this day, the Ranch remains arguably, the most exotic resort in this country.

Carnival Calabar stands out as the most celebrated and sought after package of the tourism enterprise in Cross River State. Touted as the biggest street party in Africa, it became an instant favourite with the people soon after its introduction by the Duke administration. Since then, the carnival has grown in leaps and bounds, attracting participants and observers from across the world.

Beyond this tripod, there was generally a broad-based and enthusiastic attempt to bring to life all aspects of the Cross River story that was worth selling on the platter of tourism. This explains the development of the slave museum, the “resurrection” of Mary Slessor, the illumination of the archaeology and architecture of the monoliths etc.

The administration of Senator Liyel Imoke, himself a co-visioner with Donald Duke, has done a lot to deepen, consolidate and expand on the gains of the tourism enterprise in Cross River State. For instance, painstaking efforts have been dedicatedly deployed to ensure that the dream that propelled the establishment of Tinapa is not allowed to wither and die. A group of serious minded and private-sector driven entrepreneurs are being wooed to come and take-over Tinapa and make it that quintessential hub of business cum pleasure as originally envisioned. These efforts have borne great fruits and it is hoped that very soon, Tinapa would come alive in all its full glory and splendour. Meanwhile, a number of the facilities in Tinapa are currently being put to maximum usage – the Tinapa hotel is one of the most proficiently and profitably run leisure outfits in the State; Studio Tinapa has been acquired by a private Radio/TV Station that should come on stream soon; a knowledge city also called technology park inhabits one of the emporia. It provides digital facilities and services that promote software development, manufacture of computers and general incubation of ICT knowledge that can be used for multi-dimensional purposes.

An Ultra-modern International Conference Centre fitted with the most current state-of-the-art facilities that are hardly available in any such centre in the country is presently being erected in an area immediately contiguous to Tinapa. An International Golf Course is being developed alongside the facility while a conservation sanctuary to host our own rare species of drills, monkeys and other endangered species is being created in the same vicinity. Perhaps what would make all these sweeter for the tourists is that a new ring road is being constructed into the area in such a manner that reduces the travel time from the Calabar Metropolis to Tinapa from thirty to ten minutes. All these projects are meant to give added value and impetus to Tinapa in such a way as to galvanise into its vicinity that unending flow of traffic which a true tourism destination should attract with all the attendant positive consequences for the socio-economic well being of our people.

Truly, it can be safely said that the Senator Imoke led administration has expended the frontiers of the tourism enterprise in Cross River State. New vistas have been opened and higher standards set, all in a bid to meet the twin goals of promoting local initiative and talent

as well as positioning tourism in Cross River State in the global tourism circuit as Africa's warmest welcome.

The success recorded by the tourism enterprise in Cross River State has stimulated interest in tourism in a number of other States in the Country. The attempt however by most of these States to resemble Cross River in this regard has either been still-born or less than successful even when these States are more financially endowed. The reason for this, in our view, is not far to seek. Cross River history is rich and replete with milestones upon which the tourism enterprise can be fittingly predicted. Cross River has played host to a plethora of first in Nigerian history. Calabar was the first Capital of what is today called Nigeria. It was King Archibong III who was the first king crowned in Southern Nigeria with foreign regalia sent by Queen Victoria in 1878. The first Military Barracks in Nigeria was established in Calabar just as the first General Hospital (the St. Margaret's Hospital); the first Post Office and one of the earliest botanical gardens in Nigeria as well as the first Social Club, the African Club are all located in Calabar. Calabar played host to the first competitive football, cricket and hockey games in Nigeria. First Roman Catholic Mass was held at 19 Boco Street, Calabar. There was also the establishment of the oldest Presbyterian Secondary School, Hope Waddell Training Institute by the Presbyterian Mission in 1895 in Calabar. Alumni of the School include the first President of Nigeria, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe and Professor Eyo-Ita, first Nigerian Professor. The State has produced the pioneer black African Professor of Archaeology, Bassey Andah and the first and only Director-General of the Nigeria Commission for Museum and Monuments, Professor Ekpo Eyo, whom we are honouring today. Other historical feats include: First Inspector-General of Police, Sir Loius Edet; Chief (Mrs.) Margaret Ekpo, first female member of the Eastern Regional House of Assembly; Hogan "kid" Bassey, first Nigerian World Boxing champion; Etebom Oyo Orok Oyo, premier football administrator and first Nigerian to be elected into the Executive Committee of FIFA (1980-88) and first African to be made an honorary Vice President of the Confederation of African Football (CAF) from 1988 until his death. Finally, Calabar shares the pre-eminent distinction only with Lagos, of being the first place where the seeds of contemporary democracy were laid in Nigeria.

There is no denying the fact that this cornucopia of firsts, uniquely nourishes the tourism landscape of Cross River State. Properly harvested and with the right stories told by well groomed people around these milestones and with the right symbols, artefacts and illustrations to drive home the messages, this rich past can titillate and enchant tourists both within and outside Nigeria.

In addition to the foregoing, is the fact that at the core of the State's socio-cultural fabric can be located experiences that make Cross River Peoples one of the most hospitable people in the world. In this regard, it need be stated that early commentators on the Cross River region were eager to give the erroneous impression that Cross River peoples were distinct, disparate and disunited. In fact, they described the area as a "splinter zone" (Anene:1966) whose inhabitants hardly related with themselves owing to the fact that the Cross River which was supposed to be a conduit for socio-cultural and economic intercourse was rather an obstacle (Patridge: 1905). Thus, Cross River peoples had in their opinions, no socio-cultural and linguistic relationships whatsoever (Abasiatta: 1990). Uya, Erim and Essien writing much later have sufficiently exposed the falsity of this position, demonstrating rather that the very opposite is indeed true. They have shown that Cross River peoples are far more intimately

related than portrayed and that the Cross River was truly a highway of healthy commercial, cultural, linguistic and spiritual interaction amongst Cross River peoples – an interaction that left in its wake, a graphic commonality in socio-cultural and linguistic patterns that are evident to this day (Uya 2012:785). A later generation of indigenous scholars including Effah-Attoe, Onor, Majuk, Ewah etc. writing on the same broad theme using specific case studies have consolidated on the truth articulated by their intellectual forebears. Onor, for instance, writing on the subject of intergroup relations between the Ejagham and other Cross River peoples maintained *inter alia* that:

*... the Boki who inhabit an area immediately bordering the Ejagham people in Ikom to the North-east, have after a long period of relationship typified in inter-marriages and trade with their Ejagham neighbours, acquired certain Ejagham traditional institutions, prominent among which include **Mgbe Monikim** and **Obasinjom**. A number of Ejagham people, on the other hand, presently speak Boki in the same way as most Boki people understand and speak fluent Ejagham. This situation is symptomatic of the general picture of healthy inter-group relations in the State today. Thus it is not surprising that the Baakor, a sub-group of the Ejagham are in many ways related to the Mbube in the same way as the Bekwarra are related to the Bette and the Yala to their Ejagham, Mbembe, Yatche and Ukelle neighbours (Onor, 1994:151).*

It is gratifying to note that Achebe in his last book, **There was a Country** lent credence to the fact of these healthy exchanges amongst Cross River peoples and even between them and their relatively far flung neighbours when he asserted that:

*Nnokwa is a little known ancient village that played a vital role in Igbo cosmology and in the development of its civilization. The townsfolk were particularly noted for their role in the transmission of the knowledge of **Nsibidi**, an ancient writing first invented by the Ejagham (Ekoi) people of South-Eastern Nigeria, and then adopted and used widely by their close neighbours – the Igbo, Efik, Anang and Ibibio. The very existence of this alphabet, dating back to the 1700s without any Latin or Arabic antecedent, is a rebuke to all those who have claimed over the centuries that Africa has no history, no writing and no civilization (Achebe, 2012:192).*

Today, it is easier to understand from the prism of the afore-discussed history, the healthy network of relationships between individuals and groups in the geo-political configuration christened Cross River State. Germinating from this healthy intercourse and manifesting in present-day society are values of love, friendship, good-neighbourliness and hospitality. Cross River peoples are generally known to radiate a gorgeous balance between the material and the spiritual, thus they are less desperate and more content with their personal achievements and God's blessings. The net effect of this is that socio-political and economic tensions are less prevalent in the State, giving way to the effortless enthronement of peace

and security as common features of the people's daily existence. This is the classic environment that stimulates, promotes and sustains tourism.

Tourism in Cross River State can so far, be adjudged as successful. However, this success can only be measured in relative terms – terms completely relative to Nigeria. But the goal of Cross River tourism is different. It is meant, *ab initio*, to be benchmarked against international standards, and if so, the State is certainly and thankfully not where it used to be, yet surely far away from where it is envisioned to get to. Tourism, in our view, can be truly considered successful when it provokes an unending stream of visitors to the tourist site(s) in a manner that can palpably change for the better, the socio-economic dynamics of the visited area(s). The intermittent visits of a few tourists or the “December surge” of visitors to Cross River State cannot be representative of the lofty tourism dreams of the State.

It is clear that the fundamental reason for the non-maximization of Cross River's tourism dream is the fact that it is located within the South-South Zone of Nigeria. The image of Nigeria as presented by the international media is that of an insecure place which foreign embassies are in a hurry to raise the “red flag” before any of its citizens that has interest in visiting. This is more so as the State is within the fiercely troubled Niger-Delta area. I am not about to give justification for this treatment meted out to Nigeria because statistically speaking, some of these countries that demonize us may not after all be more secure. But this is the reality that we currently face and we must confront it if Cross River tourism must work. The current effort at brilliant and beautiful adverts of Cross River tourism resources and its re-branding of “**Destination Cross River**” as Africa's warmest welcome may marginally help but would surely not dramatically improve the situation.

To attract the world to Cross River State in that manner and magnitude that can radically change Cross River State via tourism, the State must sell something to the world that is irresistible. Simple economics teaches that the world thrives on comparative advantages. Cross River must offer something to the world that is uniquely exciting; something they can not readily find in their climes; something that would amount to an exciting discovery and an experience of a lifetime. That is what would motivate tourists to cast down the artificial walls erected in the name of insecurity and percolate into Cross River State that is in truth, a Peoples' Paradise.

The experience with Carnival Calabar has proven that this is truly achievable. In spite of the terribly disturbing signals about Nigeria's insecurity, the carnival is growing in multi-faceted ways, attracting an ever-increasing stream of visitors nationally and globally. This is because the carnival is obviously a good show of international standard with local ingredients and innovations that are compelling to participants and eyewitnesses.

It is our considered view that if we look deeply into Cross River history and environment, we can harvest the answer to this challenge and that answer is clearly embedded in eco-tourism. Cross River is blessed with a prodigious expanse of tropical rainforest. Currently, it is estimated that only about 10% of Nigeria's rainforest is left undegraded and of this, Cross River alone boast of over 50%. This forest, more importantly has been certified as one of the world's best twenty-five biodiversity hotspots playing host to a rare and amazing collection of plant and animal species. (Dates J. *et al*: 2007)

At a time like this when the world's interest in the environment is on the ascendancy and this is not likely to ebb any time soon, Cross River State must find relevance and fulfillment in

eco-tourism. Properly re-engineered, re-positioned and re-branded, the State can advertise its forest resources to the world in a manner that would sell her tourism across the world to unimaginable proportions. The State must wake up to this realization and dig deep into the eco-tourism potentials embedded in its history and environment, if it must re-invent her tourism and attract to its shores, that unending flow of tourists that are witnessed elsewhere with all its concomitant benefits.

We have in this paper, concerned ourselves with the relationship between Cross River history, environment and tourism development in Cross River State. Accordingly, we have examined, even if briefly, the evolution of tourism globally and nationally as well as placed the tourism experience in Cross River State in proper historical perspective. We maintained that the relative success of tourism in Cross River State is derivable from the strength it draws from the invaluable ingredients ensconced in its history and environment. We also held that if the State must live to the full realization of its tourism dreams, it must turn to the direction of eco-tourism as therein lies, the unique treasures that would attract the world to its shores in this era of avid global environmental concerns and interests.

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