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The Nasty Side of Tourism Development: an example from Trinidad and Tobago

Trinidad and Tobago, the most southerly isles of the Caribbean has not had a history of tourism. The development of hydrocarbon reserves in the republic stymied the promotion of tourism. Despite the fact that the twin-island state has fair offerings for the tourist industry, the country refrained from developing this sector because of the political “mandate” given by Eric E. Williams, its first prime minister. However, with its changing fortunes, due to the volatility and uncertainty of the oil market, tourism became the panacea for sustaining Tobago’s economy. Such development has brought in its wake death, anger, and grief.

Keywords: right-of-passage, neo-colonialization, tourism development

Purpose of Study:

The intention of this paper is to place focus on what can happen to locals when the political directorate allows the large-scale development of tourism without the establishment of the “right-of-passage” to the citizens or natives of the said territory. Trinidad and Tobago is in the embryonic stage of the tourism industry when compared to its other Caribbean neighbors such as Barbados, Grenada or Jamaica. In view of this, the majority of nationals of the twin-island state take many things for granted with respect to beach and hotel development.

Findings:

Observations in certain Caribbean tourist spots such as Tobago, Grenada, Saint Vincent, and Barbados, show that locals appear to be in very subservient positions within the tourism industry. They also tend to accept what is “given” to them by tourists. Many locals would even give up their places on certain beaches because of tourists. It is agreed upon that without tourism many Caribbean states would go “belly-up” but it does not mean that any native of any particular island should be made less of a human being, even to the point of being shot to death in his/her own territory.

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A perfect pair

Trinidad and Tobago, the twin-island, English speaking democratic state makes a perfect pair in terms of offerings for the tourist industry (Kurtz, 1995; Deitcher, 1993). Trinidad on the one hand, is the cosmopolitan center of commerce while Tobago is the nature lover's haven (U.S. News and World Report, 1985). According to Travel Weekly, (1996), the southernmost Caribbean state is a land of distinctions. The country is the birthplace of the Steelpan, the only new percussion instrument invented in this century. It is also the host of the largest celebration of carnival in Caribbean. To strengthen their economies tourism was encouraged. However, the republic has always shunned the idea of tourism development because there were other means available for sustaining the economy. Oil and gas production are the mainstays of the economy (Coomansingh, 1990). With special emphasis on the development of Tobago, tourism became the panacea for the republic's demise with regard to its economic woes (Henry-Kunzel, 1994). Compared to other Caribbean islands, the tourism industry in Trinidad and Tobago, the most southerly isles of the Caribbean region, is underdeveloped. However, the government took steps to attract hotel investors, especially in Tobago (Henry-Kunzel, 1994). There were more attempts, within recent times, to lure more tourists from both Europe and North America (Spritzer, 1991).

Late start

Starting late in the blocks with respect to the tourism race was not any fault of the masses. It was due to the "mandate" of the first Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago and leader of the People's National Movement (PNM), Dr. Eric E. Williams. Henry-Kunzel (1994) explained that Trinidad and Tobago under the leadership of Williams (1956-1986) were discouraged from developing tourism. Williams perceived that there is a tendency for tourism to place inhabitants of the host community in a subservient position. Williams did not want Trinidad and Tobago to

become another victim of neo-colonization, neither for citizens to become a nation of janitors and busboys (Trinidad Express, 2000). Instead, the political directorate promoted forcefully, the development of energy resources, and energy-based industries. The development of energy resources and energy-based industries in “oil-rich” Trinidad was in the forefront, while Tobago grew more and more dependent on the central government for financial assistance (Weaver, 1998). In 1986, Arthur N. R. Robinson, a Tobagonian by birth, democratically wrested political control of Trinidad and Tobago. It was under the leadership of Robinson that tourism became a priority (Henry-Kunzel, 1994). Was tourism development helpful? According to Fidler (1997), Trinidad and Tobago has always had only a small share of the Caribbean tourism market. Tourist arrivals in Trinidad and Tobago have increased gradually. As an emerging tourism destination (investtnt.com, 2000), tourist arrivals totaled 260,000 in 1995. Freeman (1997) stated that tourism is becoming increasingly important as evidenced by the establishment of a separate ministry for tourism. However, Fidler (1997) disclosed that it would be difficult to boost tourism in Trinidad and Tobago because of a lack of tourism tradition coupled with problems on how to position Trinidad in the market.

Right-of-passage, and death

Despite the late start, tourism is becoming increasingly important in Trinidad and Tobago. Would this increasing importance meet the needs of the masses? Will the tourism development plans be all inclusive? Will citizens suffer as second-class people? Will the people be compelled to give up their “right-of-passage” to accommodate corporate giants and tourists? The mad rush to develop beaches and resorts, to manipulate the environment in Trinidad, and especially in Tobago, is now meeting with some opposition. Who would like to find their child lying dead on one of Tobago’s finest beaches? One does not have to go far for an answer.

Naomi Elliot found her son fatally shot on Pigeon Point Beach, Tobago. Shot to death by a security guard was boat cleaner and straw-hat maker, Michael Theophilus Melville. The Pigeon Point Beach Club, owned and operated by the ANSA/McAl Group of Companies employed the security guard. The problem arose because the Pigeon Point Beach Club denied citizens their right-of-passage to the beach (Trinidad Express, 2000). The killing of Melville is just one of the many incidents involved in the gestation period of tourism development in Trinidad and Tobago. The dispossession of Tobagonians in their own island has been a long-standing problem, even before the Pigeon Point Club development issue. *"I meet him lie down in the sand you know, in the sand, in the sand there cover up. It hurt me to see that. For what? Nothing!"* These were the words of his mother, Naomi Elliot (Maharaj, 2000). Mingled with Naomi Elliot's anger was grief when she viewed the body of her dead son on the beach.

Changing landscape

The landscape of Trinidad and Tobago is changing rapidly because of tourism development. Expatriates with financial resources, and multinational corporations have gained access to exquisite areas for tourism development. Typical citizens such as Melville stand little chance of enjoying such developed environments. There is always the fear, that of being shot, or crudely expelled from "forbidden territory." Who will fight for the rights of the masses? Naomi Elliot also said, *"We have nobody to fight for our rights. As fast as you see they get the money, money talks and bulls... walks"* (Maharaj, 2000). Such is the scenario with respect to tourism development in Trinidad and Tobago. Should the development of the tourism industry in Trinidad and Tobago, or in any other place for that matter constitute a mixture of blood, sand, tears, and fear? Nobody wants such a scenario but this is a world driven by development, and profit making. To say that tourism development in Trinidad and Tobago does not have a nasty

side would be just as good as saying that man never landed on the moon. For shaving off every blade of grass, for hewing down every towering tree, for cutting every new road, for draining every swamp, and for “privatizing” every beach a price is paid. However, the price paid should not be the blood of citizens.

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