6.0 Tourism: Africa’s Culture Industry

Tourism has been earmarked by a number of African countries, including South Africa, as a way to gain recognition or comparative advantage within the world city system. As pointed out earlier, even the Department of Arts and Culture has specifically acknowledged the importance of this industry. However, the economic realities of tourism, and especially cultural tourism, play a large part in determining just how Africa packages and defines itself in order to gain this advantage within the highly competitive global tourism market. It is argued that the need to compete for primarily Western tourists leads to a process whereby Africa is once again defined by the perceptions of what is appealing to the West. Often these definitions of what is “African” for the tourist market are the products of hundreds of years of negative or over-romanticised Western perceptions of Africa as previously demonstrated.

It is necessary to explore briefly the specific role of tourism as a function of the attempts by African destinations to make their mark within the global system. But first it is necessary to look at the tourism industry as a by-product of the capitalist system. Tourism, within the global perspective,

fits in with trends in economic development towards service based, consumer oriented industries associated with the production of symbolic or cultural capital rather than material goods. The role of culture in this process is multi-faceted culture is simultaneously a resource, a product, an experience, and an outcome. (Craik, 1997: p. 113)

Within this post-Fordist economic situation, countries wishing to attract tourist revenue need to create ‘experiences’ through the “tourist production system.” (Britton, 1990, p. 19) This system, according to Britton is in-itself intrinsically neo-liberal capitalist as “it is simultaneously a mechanism for the accumulation of capital, the private appropriation of wealth, the extraction of surplus value from labour, and capturing of (often unearned) rents from cultural and physical phenomena (especially public goods) which are deemed to have both a social and scarcity value.” (Britton, 1990: p. 19) That the tourist industries are officially supported by aspiring world city local governments should come as no surprise.
In order to thrive, a tourist destination needs to achieve status of a “tourist site”, whereby the space itself becomes commodified and the site itself becomes symbolic in its own right. (Britton, 1990: p. 23) These spaces become crucial as physical and symbolic spaces of consumption and economic development. In Africa, these spaces also are highly symbolic as it is often indigenous (authentic) culture that is used to imbue these physical spaces with the meaning that is so attractive to tourists. Therefore, apart from the potentially exploitative structure of the industry itself, the way in which identity and culture are commodified for the Western tourist’s gaze is also often problematic. This process once again perpetuates Africa's role as receptacle for the West's quest for its own identity as pointed out in Chapter Four. This process is described by Hall who states:

The current tourist interest in indigenous societies is perhaps reflective of a desire for authenticity in Western society and of the role that heritage plays in establishing identity the desire for authenticity and the implications that has for the presentation of certain social realities for the tourist gaze have significant political significance. (Hall, 122)

Tourist attractions are obviously constructed with the needs of the tourist market in mind. In recent years the demand within the industry has been more and more for so-called authentic experiences of the “other” or non-Western indigenous peoples. As Hall goes onto point out, “the dominant Eurocentric vision has important implications for the manner in which indigenous peoples are perceived.” (Hall, 122) For South Africa this has meant that it has to recast the negative perceptions of tribalism and violence as “an authentic primitive innocence.”(Rassool & Witz, 1993: p. 337) Rassool and Witz claim that to position itself within this global tourist market, South Africa is “reinforcing stereotypes ....through staged primitiveness and modernity.”(Rassool & Witz, 1993: p. 365)

Tourism as an industry is in the business of producing cultural symbols and content for consumption. The less obvious point is that the symbols, attractions, and commodities produced by the industry have an impact on shaping social reality and urban physicality. The power of the tourist industry to construct social reality and transform urban spaces should not be underestimated. Linked to this process is the fact that, in the course of attempts to re-construct an African identity, culture becomes “commoditized”, [in that] “the once ‘authentic’ public ritual became a staged performance, a cultural ‘commodity’”. (Cohen, 1988: p. 381)
These rituals and cultural activities may then “be adopted to the tastes of the tourists.” (Cohen, 1988: p. 381) This commoditization of space can lead to situations as in Johannesburg as described by Mbembe, in where

more than ever in its history, Johannesburg’s city space is a product that is marked, measured, marketed, and transacted. It is a commodity. And as such its representational form has become even more stylised. (Mbembe, 2004: p. 393)

“Africa”, as a distinct identity for a destination, has thereby become a stylised product for the foreign visitor. This newly constructed notion of African culture then becomes a tool for city planners to overcome the stereotypically negative perceptions of African cities. However, the experience of the tourist, will not necessarily achieve the goal of constructing a new African identity. As Craik points out, for tourists, “the advantages, comforts, and benefits of home are reinforced through the exposure to difference.”(Craik, 1997: p. 115) In other words, cultural tourism can actually continue to perpetuate stereotypes that Africa is inferior to the West. Craik also points out, that despite the intentions of cultural tourism practitioners to create so called ‘authentic’ experiences that will construct a new cultural identity,

Cultural experiences offered by tourism are consumed in terms of prior knowledge, expectations, fantasies and mythologies generated in the tourist’s origin culture, rather by the culture offerings of the destination. Moreover, while cultural tourism and cultural components of tourism may revitalise an existing tourism industry and cultural production, such developments can also threaten the culture of the destination and longer term cultural integrity. (Craik, 1997: p. 118)

A consequence of cultural tourism is that the cultural product becomes frozen in time and while staged as real and authentic, the meanings of the arts and culture simply become products within a system of economic exchange. This process has serious implications for the development of local arts and culture within a given environment. So while cultural tourism is perceived by many Third World countries and cities as a panacea for a host of economic problems and as a way to develop the arts, it is not without its own serious consequences.
It is clear that the aims of promoting cultural tourism are two-fold; firstly they are economic in the sense that city planners believe cultural tourism can stimulate economic growth, and secondly they are symbolic, with the aim of constructing a new African identity. This new identity is then in turn supposed to attract visitors and investment and lead to further economic growth. Cultural tourism is seen as a key cultural industry that can assist a city in achieving world city status.