

Name: Olatunji Offeyi

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Student no: 2214724

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Title: Dark Tourism: Business or Morality?

This essay examines the concept of Dark Tourism (DT hereafter) from the perspective of business in the tourism and heritage industry, while considering the issues of morality that have plagued DT. Dark Tourism connotes different meanings to different people. To some, it is another form of mainstream tourism, whereas others might view it as an unusual tourism business model. Against this background, this essay attempts to critically examine DT. First, a few definitions will help us find a pathway to understanding the rationale behind the phenomenon.

According to Fonseca, Seabra and Silva (2016, p.1), 'Dark Tourism is understood as the type of tourism that involves a visit to real or recreated places associated with death, suffering, misfortune, or the seemingly macabre'. Similarly, Tourism Teacher (2023) states that DT is also known as black tourism, morbid tourism, thana tourism, or grief tourism, as this is 'tourism that is associated with death or tragedy'. Arguing that the act of DT is somewhat controversial, some view it as an act of respect, and others as unethical practices. It is important to gain a further understanding of the idea by looking at the historical background of DT. Dark tourism entered the language and lexicon of tourism studies in 1996, when it was first designated as such (Lennon, 1997, p.1). Since then, this term has been used to describe sites with a history of genocide, as in the case of Rwanda; as well as assassinations, imprisonment, holocaust concentration camps, and crime scenes, etc.

Function of DT sites

The phenomenon can be found in several tourist destinations worldwide, and points to the similarities and unifying elements across different layers of societies and political regimes. The typical DT sites serve different purposes for different people, who interpret them differently based on individual or collective perceptions of place, which can be due to ideological beliefs and faith. Above all, they serve as a meeting place for history. The apartheid story in South Africa, for instance, is incomplete without the mention of Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela and his comrades in the liberation struggle were incarcerated for many years; perhaps this explains why the camp is highly visited, despite its dark history. Deacon (1996, p.1) argues that the Island might be the most important historical site in South Africa because it reminds us of not only the repressiveness of the apartheid regime, but also the strength of its opposition. This aspect suggests that DT might not necessarily be about doom and disaster, but places that offer hope for the future, reminding a people of how far they have come.

DT sites are also expected to provide authenticity and historical facts, which are sometimes juxtaposed with other tourism facilities. However, this can be argued as mixing business with solemnity – for instance, in the case of historical cemeteries, where visitors are ideally expected to observe the site quietly, with a sense of reflection. Ironically, this is not always the case. Paraskevopoulos (n.d.), in explaining the reasons why visiting cemeteries is important, uses words such as ‘You will be charmed by the inscriptions on the graves of famous personalities’ and ‘you will be moved by the artistic expression of the sculptured monument’ – this clearly negates the moral principle, especially if we are to apply the normative theory-considering that emphasis moral ethics (Manning, 2018, pp.292–305). This situation more resembles a business approach that removes the importance of the dead from the purpose at such a site.

In addition, falsehoods are perpetuated by tour hosts, many of whom knowingly give a different version of history. For example, a friend of this present writer shared his shocking experience when he visited the statue of Madam Efunsetan Aniwura, a historic domestic slaver in Ibadan, Southwest Nigeria. Members of Yoruba Nation, a nationalist movement, were holding rallies around the statue of the late murderous tyrant, and invoking her

‘Yoruba kindred spirit’ to give the Yorubas domination over other tribes in Nigeria. However, this is a false account of history: the site of the statue is not the location where Madam Efunsetan was murdered, so her spirit should not be there in the first place. Moreover, the Yoruba Nation activists were misusing her reputation to give a non-existent undeserved glory, to rally the people against non-Yoruba inhabitants of Southwest Nigeria. In reality, Madam Efunsetan was a warmonger, described as ‘a dreadful feminine monster in Ibadan history and Yoruba race at large’ (Okunola & Ojo, 2012, p.198), rather than a Yoruba hero as the nationalists portrayed her. Everything about this DT site is purely political, rooted in populists’ ideas of exploiting and twisting heritage for political gains. The Nigerian government should take over the statue site to prevent further misuse and falsification of true accounts; it should prevent visitors from being engaged ‘with a narrative that may well be positioned, augmented, and structured to engage, entertain, or discourage further inquiry’ (Lennon, 2017, p.1).

Therefore, what a site celebrates, interprets and develops should ideally be carefully chosen by the management, and dilemmas of commemoration of the unacceptable and acceptable are reflected clearly in the condition, nature and content these sites offer. These DT attractions have become mainstream tourism sites in some parts of the world, because some of them serve as places of commemoration of war, general history, and records. They provide the visitor with a narrative that is well informed, augmented, and structured to engage them or encourage further inquiry into the past; however, some sites have witnessed numerous tourists smiling and taking selfies for social media posts. Sharma (2020, p.273) opines that Dark Tourism ‘provides ample spaces to tourists who regularly find themselves in morally challenging situations, some of which they handle well, others, not’. Therefore, the moral issues depend on the behaviour of the individuals who visit the sites, and on tour operators telling genuine narratives – rather than creating sensationalist and false accounts, to attract customers and profit from human pain.

In order to assess both sides of the question, it should be noted that tourism attractions only function based on demand. People visit DT sites for different reasons: some seek closure for their relatives who were involved in tragedies; others visit for philosophical reflections, such as trying to interrogate death. Some do so out of curiosity, while others

want to understand the pain of victims of a tragedy. Many people might visit Ground Zero in the USA, for example, to connect to a historical tragedy of great magnitude; but for a victim's family, it could be a place of closure and sober reflection.

Whichever perspective leads a tourist to be interested in DT, it is the site management's responsibility to justify how they conduct their business. A possible approach is to redefine and categorise the sites properly. As an example, the Holocaust sites should be designated as 'roots tourism', also known as 'genealogy tourism', instead of DT, as this type of tourism is unique to diaspora people visiting places where their ancestors once lived (Feng & Page, 2010, pp.246–281). Retracing their footsteps can sometimes be very emotional; this can explain why African Americans would often break down and shed tears at sites of slave trade routes in Africa. Therefore, protecting such solemn sites from general tourists can help to deter fun- or DT thrill-seeking individuals from visiting. Similarly, Holocaust tourism (Reynolds, 2020, pp.347–364) relates to destinations connected with the extermination of the Jewish people (and other groups) during the Holocaust in World War II. These sites deal with sensitive issues of Jewish martyrology, such as Nazi death camps and concentration camps, some of which have now been turned into state museums. This history cannot be trivialised in the name of profit-making, as the public would be unimpressed by fun-seekers trooping in there for self-gratification. This essay argues that to reduce controversies, DT sites should house a knowledge-based museum; this can educate visitors to stop them from being carried away by momentary thrills, and give them time for deep thinking while visiting. Theoretically, Locke's personal identity theory indicates that our sense of self or identity 'has nothing to do with the body or soul but is only based on memory and awareness'. To simplify Locke's theory, it can be likened to African beliefs in ghosts hovering around burial sites, whose soul can be troubled if their burial site is desecrated; it is the body that dies, but the dead exist at burial grounds, still fully conscious. Hence, tourists must learn to treat the dead respectfully, by at least bearing in mind the psychological continuity of the departed ones (Better Help Editorial, 2023).

Findings by Brown (2013, p.5) call on shops within DT sites to evaluate the retail operations of dark tourism at their premises, as these are highly complex matters fraught

with potential issues relating to morals, decency and ethics. Thus, museums located at sites of death – be they sites of shipwrecks, neolithic tombs or medieval castles – should have restraints on the types of merchandise they can stock and sell. However, it is not just the locational identity of the museums that should dictate the types of shop they can operate, but also their subject matter, and the way this subject is approached in the gallery space. Importantly, how do they spend the profit made from these shops and entrance fees? This is the crux of the matter in this debate. At Auschwitz, for example, the profit generated from the sales of souvenirs is used to maintain the site by the Polish government. This can be justified; but what of the larger profit to the German economy, from the over 1.4 million people visiting its DT sites? (Hodgkinson, 2013, p23) It could be argued that the country is profiting indirectly from the miseries of the extermination of approximately six million European Jews killed by Nazi Germany in occupied territories between 1933 to 1945 (Leitz, 2004, p.12).

To further analyse DT as a phenomenon as it relates to the aforementioned question, this essay will next examine its operations in a few selected countries, to gain a better understanding.

Nigeria

Nigeria is a country that has experienced many political and social upheavals. Thus, it has numerous DT sites, such as the Okija Shrine in the east, Chibok Town in the north, and the Oke Afa Canal in the south (Lagos, to be precise). Amongst these three, only the Oke Afa Canal has been developed for visitation. The Oke Afa Canal tragedy was an offshoot of the Ikeja military cantonment's accidental bomb blast, due to a fire incident inside the armoury – an experience that shook Lagos to its very foundation. This present writer experienced this event, which occurred on 27 January 2002. The houses vibrated, and we all ran outside the house; unfortunately, many died in the stampede, as people ran into the canal for safety, where many sadly drowned. The response of the Lagos State Government is an instance where DT can be seen without controversy: it decided to build a befitting cenotaph in honour of the victims of that fateful day that has come to be known as a 'Black Sunday', at the site of their mass burial in 2002. The street adjoining the canal was renamed as 'January 27' to further preserve the memory of the tragedy. The

government also seized the opportunity to create a bridge linking the canal to neighbouring towns, also named 'January 27', so that when people look back in pain, they are grateful that something positive has emerged from the tragedy. This is a great acknowledgment that the victims did not die in vain (Olaiya, 2022). To date, the site is well maintained, and people usually visit it quietly, with respect for the victims.

The site managers have been able to avoid what Dale and Robinson (2011, p.205) describe as the 'Disneyization' and 'McDonaldization' of dark tourism sites; simply put, there is no business set up in or around the Oke Afa Canal memorial site. This is arguably a good example of where DT has been successfully practised. As another instance, the Nigerian Government's deliberate refusal to transform the Okija Shrine in the eastern part of the country is morally sound. Considering that this was a scene of mass murder in a ritual killings exercise, which allegedly involved politicians who are yet to be prosecuted, opening such a site will generate no benefits other than to reawaken the pains of the past that have yet to find closure, due to lack of justice for the victims.

Rwanda

The Rwandan genocide of 1994 is arguably one of the darkest episodes of mankind's history, especially that of the African continent. This was a tribal war with ethnic cleansing intentions, in which there were around 500,000 to 662,000 Tutsi deaths, and women were subjected to sexual violence on a large scale (Guichaoua, 2020, p.125), in the most gruesome manner. It was perpetuated by members of the infamous Hutu militia groups, known as the Interahamwe, and civilians alike. They killed not only the Tutsi, but also some moderate Hutus and Twa who refused to support the ethnic cleansing. Looking at all that happened in Rwanda, it is morally responsible for the government to document this macabre history for the new generation to learn from, as this history is written all over the country. A Nigerian journalist, Dele Momodu, who has carried out research extensively in Rwanda post the genocide era, revealed that almost everyone in that country has lost someone or knows casualties of that avoidable war. He candidly captured the true essence of the DT, whichever side of the argument one supports: 'I was stunned when I visited the genocide museum. It brought home the grim reality of war in a way that

history books, documentaries, and other works of art can never do' (Momodu, 2018). This emphasises the importance of DT, despite criticism. He continued: 'We must commend the government and people of Rwanda for preserving this important moment in the country's history.'

However, Momodu's narrative of his driver's emotional and psychological reaction near the museum points out that whilst DT helps closure for victims, it can also re-traumatise, perhaps through the memories that a memorial embodies. This is not necessarily a positive experience for victims' families, as it can make them relive a traumatic experience rather than bring closure. His driver Emmanuel's refusal to enter the museum is a perfect example of this potential. When Momodu asked him why, his response below summarises the impact such a site can evoke: "I have both my parents there..." I didn't understand him at first. I thought they worked in the place. I prodded further, and he told me sadly that he lost his parents to the senseless war, and they are buried in that museum' (Momodu, 2018).

Conclusion

This essay has copiously evaluated the business versus morality question in relation to DT; it proposes that there is nothing morally wrong with a DT site as long as it is not profiting from tragedy in a purely financial sense. Profits made should be donated to charity or spent on causes that can prevent tragic events such as those that have brought about the existence of such sites.

It also concludes that regardless of where the site is located – such as Chernobyl in Ukraine, Ground Zero in the US, or Cambodia – a unifying factor is that the sacredness of places of death should be acknowledged by all visitors and management of DT sites. Hence, tourists should be banned from taking selfies with bodies or skeletons, human skulls, or any sensitive materials that might call into question the morality of the human race. Some dangerous and sensitive sites can also be digitalised, so that people have no reason to physically visit such places and can view them online instead. Overall, if these fine balances are taken into consideration by governments and management of DT sites, the controversies will subside, and DT can soon become a mainstream form of tourism globally.

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