

The Diaspora and Tourism in South Africa

There was a writers' conference in Harare in the 1980s not long before the death of the iconoclastic young Zimbabwean writer, Dambuzo Marechera. Ngugi wa Mirii and myself were on the same panel. Our participation at that writers' conference must have disturbed, perhaps even extremely annoyed, Marechera. While the panelists were being introduced Marechera intervened: "You, wa Mirii, what are you doing up there because that panel is for writers?" Then he left it there as if it was a rhetorical question and proceeded to deal with me: "And you, Kgositsile, you know we have a lot of respect for you. You keep coming in and out of Zimbabwe and you know that Mugabe is destroying this country but you do not say anything about it. How do you propose we keep respecting you if you are not prepared to say anything about what they are doing to this country?" If Marechera had known that I had crossed the border from Lusaka illegally because immigration would not give me a visa, would it have made a difference to him? I doubt it. His conscience demanded that I take a principled position as a writer and a cadre of the liberation movement; to hell with anyone who didn't want to be confronted with some bitter, naked truths.

What does the above have to do with what I am expected to address myself to today? It seems to me that no South African with any sense of social responsibility can stand up on a public platform and hope to make a statement of any relevance so soon after what we witnessed in our parliament last week making without any reference to clearly

what must be preoccupying the whole nation and, hopefully, its collective conscience. I will not bore you by regurgitating the details of the unpalatable melodrama that broke out at the SONA last week Thursday. I am convinced those who did not watch it on television and/or read about it in the print media, must have heard it talked about any and everywhere South Africa. The supposed debate of the president's address this week has also remained virulent. "How did we get here?" seems like one of the questions one might readily ask in disbelief. A member of the National Executive Committee of the ANC that was elected at the 1991 Conference in Durban reminds me that later that day when I found a group of them relaxing, I said to them, with a mischievous grin: "Comrades, you have now been elected to be our leaders. Do you have any idea where you are going to lead us to?" We all laughed then. Perhaps that question should be asked now and I don't think anyone would find anything laughable about it. There is no doubt in my whole being that we are unarguably in the depths of a serious national crisis that calls for an urgent intervention lest we destroy everything positive we have achieved since the advent of our democracy. There is no doubt that what happens in parliament, the meeting place of men and women charged with the responsibility of making laws that serve our society, is of interest both domestically and internationally. The unwavering eye which gazes on the goings-on in that august chamber, transmits information to the man and woman at home and abroad, and helps them determine whether or not they'd like to set foot in our country. Or even if they'd like a continued identification with this country.

Whatever we do has a bearing on our topic: “The Diaspora and Tourism in South Africa”. Historically the African diaspora has been thought of as the dispersal of people of African descent in communities outside of the African continent as a result of scourges like slavery. However, it seems to me that, with our post-independence experience, the concept or conceptualization of the African diaspora needs to be revisited. Today, in a number of African countries like South Africa, for instance, for various and diverse reasons, there are a number of communities from other African countries with histories, cultures, collective experiences distinct from those of their host country. They make contributions to the development of South African culture and artistic expression in the same ways that those who ended up in the Americas, and anywhere else, made and continue to make valuable contributions. Let me share an example of what I’m talking about: A few years ago I was invited to an arts festival in Mbombela. What fascinated me about the performances of young artists based in Mpumalanga, especially those by young dancers and musicians, was the dynamic, seemingly organic fusion of East, West, and South African elements in their work, giving it a remarkable freshness. And when I found out what had made it possible I was very excited by what I saw as what could be the future of the arts at national level. Instead of giving artists small grants (which are never enough, by the way), what the Mpumalanga government did was to establish partnerships between the province, metro and the private sector to make what the artists needed to work available – musical instruments, accommodation, instructors, and so forth. That, for me, was sustainable support for the arts. What I’m also trying to get at is: Would it be faulty to see

the dispersal of those East and West African communities – there are more from other parts of the continent all over South Africa, in the cities and the rural areas - as part of the diaspora in the 21st century?

Towards the end of **BLACK SKIN WHITE MASKS**, Frantz Fanon's seminal work on devastated colonial mentalities, he asserts that he will never stop reiterating that "man is a *yes*.

Yes to life. *Yes* to love. *Yes* to generosity

But man is also a *no*. *No* to scorn of man. *No* to degradation of man. *No* to exploitation of man. *No* to the butchery of what is most human in man: freedom."

He goes on to say: "To educate man to be *actional*, preserving in all his relations his respect for the basic values that constitute a human world, is the prime task of him who, having taken thought, prepares to act."

My thinking on the diaspora and tourism in South Africa as we celebrate the **2015 International Tourists' Guide Day** is informed by my sense of the need, as Fanon clearly tells us, for us to preserve, in our relations, those "basic values that constitute a human world." Our cultural and natural heritage, along with the legacy of our struggle heroes and heroines, including the unsung ones, cannot be destroyed by the toxic melodrama acted out in parliament by those who have failed to represent this nation; by those whose dangerous appetites allow no room for respect for the basic values referred to above. But chaos in parliament can obviously have a negative effect on tourism.

Culture and heritage are among the major attractions for the development of tourism. In Zora Neale Hurston's powerful novel, **Their Eyes Were Watching God**, first published in 1937, the protagonist is a determined, proud and beautiful African American woman. On the hot evening that she returns home to Eatonville, "The people all saw her because it was sundown." The people, on their porches, "made burning statements with their questions, and killing tools out of laughs . . . What she doin' coming back here in dem over-halls? Can't she find no dress to put on?" And they go on and on in that evil, foul-mouthed fashion. But not Pheoby Watson who has remained a true friend. Pheoby is convinced Janie must be hungry; so she follows her home with a plate of food. After eating Janie is ready to tell Pheoby why she is back. And she explains to her, "... 'taint no use in me telling you something unless Ah give you de understandin' to go 'long wid it."

The task of the tourist guide in interpreting cultural and natural heritage to the tourist is similar to what Janie Crawford explains to her friend. The tourist guide must be trained and knowledgeable enough to give the eager tourist from the diaspora the understanding of our cultures and heritage they seek for self-affirmation, as Africa is the cradle of humankind, against the brutality of stereotypes on the one hand, and the obscurantism of those who will not stop talking about "the glories" of the African past, on the other. The role of the tourist guide in transferring cultural understanding by interpreting cultural and natural heritage should never be under-estimated. This makes our tour guide the critical conduit through which the cultural

exchange or cross-pollination between our cultures and those of the diaspora takes place. In addition to the artefacts that the tourist from the diaspora purchases as souvenirs and gifts, they would also be likely to seek to see and understand themselves through our cultures and heritage.

The impact of tourism on the economy must not be left out of any discussion of the diaspora and tourism in South Africa. In addition to its direct contribution to the GDP tourism creates employment in a number of other industries, for instance, travel, airports, accommodation, entertainment and recreational services. Hotels, airlines, travel agents, to mention just a few, are examples of industries that deal directly with tourism. In addition to government investment in tourism, which you are certainly more knowledgeable about than I'll ever be, there are cultural industries, as well as the restaurant and leisure industries directly supported by tourism. Tourists from the diaspora arrive in the country eager to explore our cultural resources from archeological sites and distinctive landmarks to books and arts and crafts, and spend money. In this way culture has become a major pillar of sustainable development.

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