

# **The Cultural and Political Ecology of Rural Tourism Development in Ghana**

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## **1. Abstract**

Since the last three decades most countries in the Third World have adopted tourism as a tool for economic development. However, underneath this shift are several problems. One of these is that many places have found detrimental aspects of social and cultural change coinciding with the growth of their tourist trade. While there has been some studies on social and cultural changes in highly visited tourist areas, less popular and infrequently visited tourist destinations such as Ghana has often been ignored. This paper contributes to the pioneering efforts in understanding cultural, social, and ecological changes associated with tourism development in non-popular destinations using a political ecological approach. It evaluates how rural communities have changed over time; and the political, economic, and social constraints that influence these changes with empirical case studies from two local communities.

## **2. Introduction**

Those who favor tourism development argue that tourism as an invisible export has a comparative advantage by providing the exporting country a greater degree of control in establishing prices of tourist goods and services. They also argue that tourism adds diversity to the export base, provides foreign exchange, can help reduce foreign debt, and has potential for providing employment and economic development (Matheison & Wall 1993; Cooper & Boniface 1994). Tourism development has been used as a means of economic regeneration in most developing countries. Although, tourism can help lift the face of the economy in a number of destinations, it has its own ramification on the economy, the ecology, the host and the political interface of destinations. Faced with economic difficulties, and reflecting the current worldwide neoliberal agenda promoted by major capitalist agencies such as the World Bank, most developing countries have embraced these perceived benefits without serious questioning.

In 1974 the government of Ghana through the Ministry of Trade and Tourism undertook a study of tourism potential in the country. The objective was to catalogue and classify the potential tourism resources for development plan. The study concluded that Ghana has the potential to compete with other parts of Africa to attract tourists; and that tourism could provide a potentially expanding outlet for the utilization of labor; provide strong

linkages with other labor sectors like agriculture, construction, and handicraft; and provide an increased source of foreign exchange to promote growth and development (Addo 1975; Hoff & Overgraad 1975).

A decade later, and partly as a result of the 1974 study, the government embarked on activities to promote tourism and made it one of the five main sectors to be used as a tool for economic growth. In the national strategic development plan, tourism was earmarked as a potential for generating foreign exchange, employment, stimulation of economic growth in rural areas, and expansion of investment in infrastructure. To achieve these objectives, an integrated national tourism development plan (1996-2010) was formulated to serve as a guide for the development of Ghana as a destination for special interest tourists (Ministry of Tourism, 1996). This was prepared within the framework of Ghana's long term guide for development, vision 2020. Two decades later, tourism became the third major foreign exchange earner contributing about 283 million dollars to Ghana's GNP.

Despite these achievements, tourism's role in social, cultural, and ecological change cannot be overlooked. Tourism has been known to destroy cultural traditions, and resulted in over dependence upon an unreliable industry. A number of researchers have criticized the reliance on tourism as a strategy for development (De Kadt 1979; Shaw & William 1994; Potts & Harrill 1998). According to De Kadt tourism is usually associated with a dependency upon external sources of capital and expertise. Economic conditions in the tourist's home country and perceptions of the situation and status of destinations also make choices of tourist destinations susceptible to volatile fluctuations.

This study examines tourism development in Ghana with case studies from two communities. Using a political ecological approach it seeks to understand the relationship among tourism development, and cultural, social, and ecological changes.

### **3. Approach and Methods**

Political ecology is a rapidly growing research approach that emerged as a reaction to environmental narratives of traditional and state-based approaches, especially those associated with economic growth in less developed countries (Bryant & Bailey 1997). The origin of political ecology dates back to the 1970s when the term was coined to think about ways in which questions of access and control over resources were indispensable for understanding the forms of environmental disturbance and degradation (Watts 2000). Blaikie and Brookfield's (1987) definition of political ecology as incorporating ecology and broadly defined political economy is the most widely accepted. However, Wolf (1972) is credited with the term in his work which brought to light the importance of analyzing local land use under a political economic context that links the local with wider social, political and economic forces (Peet & Watts 1993, 1996; Stonich 1998; Dagert 2001). The roots of political ecology in geography occurred with the evolution of ecological concepts in human geography. These concepts moved geographical thinking from basic formulations of human adaptations to the role of ethnicity, social, and political power in influencing human behavior and its relation with the environment (Zimmerer 1994).

An important element in political ecological analysis is that access to resources and its control are connected to larger scale political and economic forces (Neumann 1998; Sachs 1993). Understanding nature-society relations by analyzing access and control over resources and how they affect the environment and human life has been the pre-occupation of political ecologist (Watts 2000). Researchers adopting this approach recognize historical processes as a contingent factor shaping current environmental change; view broader political, social and economic forces' impact on local resource utilization decisions; and view as important differences in

human capacity and relative ability to respond to environmental change (Bryant 1992; Zimmerer 1994; Dagert 2001).

There are many variants in political ecology. Offen (2004) grouped the characteristics of the political ecology approach in geography into five categories. These included elements that focus on livelihood production and reproduction as the key investigative site; those that looked at the relationship among social, economic, and environmental change; those with a focal point on international, colonialist, state, and corporate intervention at the community level as well as the uneven consequences and responses (e.g., conflict over resource access, changing gender relations); variants that center on causes and consequences of social-environmental marginalization and its remediation; and political ecologist whose center of attention is empirical field and historical research (Offen pp. 22-23).

There are many variations in application of political ecology approach but a major emphasis has been on poverty that results from development policies (Stonich 1998). These development policies have resulted in diminished access to natural resources and the poor are the most affected. The underlying issue for environmental destruction and human poverty, according to political ecological research, is policies that institutionalize and exacerbate unequal access to resources (Carney 1993; Painter & Durham 1995; Stonich 1998).

Applying the political ecological approach to tourism provides an analytical framework to understand the social causes and consequences of tourism-related problems within a specific context; allows the integration of concerns regarding how tourism evolves over time, why it evolves the way it does, and the consequences of such evolution in a particular context; and enables exploration of power relations, uneven capital accumulation, and adverse environmental change associated with tourism development in specific areas (Dagert 2001).

Information on the study was collected from books, journals, government documents and informal conversation with officials from the Ghana Tourism Authority and the Regional Planning Unit of the Ashanti Region of Ghana. The study began with an intensive review of literature from both published and unpublished sources. Two districts from the region were purposively selected for the study. The districts were the Kwabre District and the Bosomtwe District. These districts were selected based on their potentials in cultural and eco-tourism resources. Officials of the two district Assemblies were interviewed through a specifically designed interview guide. The result from the interview was used to guide the selection of one community from each of the district for the study. These communities were Ahwiaa in the Kwabre District and Abono in the Bosomtwe District. These communities were identified as “hot-spots” and highly marketed as tourist destinations by the government.

After the initial conversations and identification of study communities, we interviewed fifty tourists, forty tourism business owners, and sixty heads of households with interview guide. Some of the questions relate to attitude towards tourism development; access to economic, political and natural resources; and gendered division of labor and use of resources.

Based on the collected responses, certain individuals were later selected for an in-depth historical interview. These were the people who were identified through the survey as very well informed about the history and current events in their community. Since oral history has been a source of environmental narrative in Ghanaian societies, five elderly people from each community were interviewed to record their perspective on social, economic, political, and environmental changes in their community in particular and the districts as a whole.

#### 4. Tourism Development in the Area

Ashanti Region is one of ten administrative divisions in Ghana. The region is divided into districts including the Kwabre and Bosomtwe districts. The two districts selected for study are located within latitudes 6.27 degrees and 6.50 degrees north of the equator and longitudes 1.20 and 1.45 degrees west of the Greenwich meridian (Figure 1). The area has an annual rainfall distribution of about 127-178 cm and the temperature averages about 27 degrees Celsius. The total population of the study area as of 2000 was 905,207. The composition of the population is as follows; 45.7 percent are under 15 years of age, 51 percent are between 15 and 64 years of age, and 3.5 percent are over 64 years of age. It is estimated that about 67.5 percent of the population in the two districts live in the rural areas. Until the development of tourism in the districts, the main economic activity was fishing and farming.

Data collected from the field indicates tourist arrival and revenue were increasing. Contrary to what has been reported elsewhere in the tourism literature (Shaw & Williams 1988), most of the sampled tourists indicated their interest in local dishes and craft. About ninety percent indicated they enjoyed the dishes offered by the catering services and more especially the Ghanaian dishes. This is good for the economy of the area since the demand could have a “multiplier effect” on other linked sectors. For instance it was revealed at Ahwiaa that craft shops increased from 30 craft shops providing employment to an estimated 100 craftsmen in 1994 to 53 craft shops providing employment to about 168 craftsmen in 1997. In the same period, revenue generated from the craft shops to the Kwabre District Assembly in the form of special levies increased from 600,000 to 1,325,000 cedis (\$1 = 1.95 Cedis) per annum (Kwabre District Assembly 1998).

Despite these benefits, tourism development in the area has also been accompanied by social, cultural, and ecological changes. Oral history revealed that as more families come to settle within an already established area, the father in the pioneer family becomes the head for the cluster of families. As time goes on, other men in charge of their own extended families are arrayed under his authority and made responsible to him. He then becomes the chief, whose authority extends to custodian over common pool resources (Agbemabiese 2002). The common pool resource rule amounted to an institutionalized separation of community resource management from outright individual ownership. The rationale for adopting this system in rural communities was to contain any tendencies toward the individualization of resources. Klein (1981) has earlier observed in a study of energy regime in Akan societies that, the system of community resource ownership was so successful to the extent that the “notion of any actual piece of land as belonging to individuals was quite unknown and was in fact almost inconceivable” (Klein pp. 20).

This system of community resource use persisted in most rural communities and began to change as new values were injected into the traditional system after the introduction of tourism. As we found out in the study, through information diffusion these rural communities have become increasingly committed to western ideas about economy and politics to the level where individualism and profit maximization is the ultimate goal. Whereas the previous economies were pervaded by a sense of community, the new economies are individualistic. The concept of commons-based subsistence as the means to the achievement of community welfare and security has been replaced with one that stresses the creation and accumulation of individual material wealth.

Contrary to the commons-based subsistence practice of the pre-tourism era in which sharing was a built in responsibility, individualistic profit-making rationality has become the governing convention guiding the current individual behavior. This has created differences in access to and control of social and economic resources.

A survey about business ownership in the study area indicates the dominance of local entrepreneurs, but men mostly own them. The local people own about 90 percent of the businesses, but women, who form about 52 percent of the population, own only about 5 percent of businesses. Local ownership is an indication that earnings from tourists are less subjected to the 'leakage effect' (De Kadt 1979). However, with a male-dominated industry, it has further strengthened the existing gender inequalities between men and women.

Through a household level study, it was revealed that men have greater access to resources, capital, entrepreneurial education and training than women. Ghana does not have a comprehensive and reliable credit information system available to lenders thus making them rely solely on borrowers for information. To obtain a small business loan, for instance, requires collateral security, which in the rural areas is often land or a house. However, the chief as custodian, regulate the use of resources for community members. In the current individualistic economies, they have allocated to themselves the power to contract deed on community resources with tourism investors in the local economy. Since they are also "legal" custodians, some of them have also assumed the authority to contract loan to develop the communities' resources. Access to capital consolidated their position, and with their new status, they became the contacts for NGO's and state officials in the local community, thus further increasing their power and influence in the local political economy. These men were the first to obtain entrepreneurial education and training in the two communities and are still the owners of most of the businesses in the area.

The study also uncovered ecological changes in the communities as a result of introduction of tourism. In rural communities there was a belief of the future as identical to the past. In line with this belief, nature and society were regarded as the common possession of all members of the community. Each individual, subject to established rules and customs, was restrained from exhaustive use of community resources. This practice of restrained use was inspired by a desire to minimize society's negative impact on natural environments. An example of restrained use included restrictions on the amount of harvest from a given locality and prohibitions against the harvesting of particular habitat patches, such as sacred streams or forest grove's (Agbemabiese 2002). These beliefs about mutual coexistence between nature-society provided the framework that guided the communities' regulation of natural resource and their interaction with the local environment.

Given the community's experience in resource management, one would have expected a policy that took into consideration the social structure and local knowledge of resource management. With the development of tourism, the practice of restrained use of natural resources was replaced with a new practice of material accumulation. Abono, for instance, was a very small fishing community until the development of Lake Bosomtwe as a tourist site. Prior to this development the indigenous people used farming, fishing and hunting for subsistence. The practice of restrained use assured availability of resources throughout the year. Yet, tourism development resulted in increased demand for fish from tourists. With no effort to replenish the fish population, the village is now experiencing a depletion of fish resources.

The study further uncovered tension and potential conflict between the local authorities, residents, and tourists. We were told that the District Assembly and the Ghana Tourist Authority are planning a resettlement of the Abono village along Lake Bosomtwe to insure its use as a tourist attraction. Most of the native inhabitants interviewed opposed the scheme and threatened to resist their removal from their ancestral land should the scheme be carried out. To the local people, the lake is not just a body of water, but a god that is worshipped and revered. The lake derived its name from two Akan words; *Bosom* means "god" in Akan, and *Twe* means antelope. Literally translated, *Bosomtwe* means "antelope god". It is the belief of the native inhabitants that the gods created the lake

after a local hunter shot an antelope. This antelope kept running until it vanished at the location where the lake is today. The lake, therefore, is a symbol of spirituality for the people. It has religious significance that is misunderstood by proponents of tourism development in the area.

Related to the above, there is a strong belief in rural communities that the welfare and security of societies are made possible by the power of ancestors who had previously used the natural resources now being overseen by the present generation. Ancestral power is regarded as embodied in the present community resources and the people whose needs they satisfy. These ancestral teachings are believed to be indispensable to the productivity and welfare of present communities (Agbemabiese 2002).

According to the local inhabitants the very existence of the lake depends on their obedience to the lake and the god it represents. To them, the longevity of the people and the lake are positively correlated. The inhabitants offer annual sacrifices, keep the lake clear of filth, do not fish in the lake on sacred days, and avoid immoral behaviors (such as kissing, smoking or intimacy) in the lake or along the shore. They do this to assure that their ancestors will reward them with long life and not dry up the lake, insuring the availability of resources. Most of the natives interviewed were of the view that the lake is drying up as a result of the promotion of tourism. To them, most tourists disobey the commands of their ancestors and dump waste into the lake or practice immorality even on sacred days.

Again, it was revealed from the study that tourism development has impacted the social organization of the communities. This impact can be seen at the household level. Studies have shown that the introduction of relatively high paying jobs, like those provided by tourism, tend to displace the energetic labor force from farming, with detrimental consequences. The replacement of subsistence economies with cash economies, such as tourism requires, results in internal reorganization of the domestic unit as a way to adapt to the new conditions (Dagert 2001).

It was found that in all two communities, males and females both farmed together before the promotion of tourism, although their roles were different. Since the last two decades, however, most males are now in the villages working in craft shops and hotels while women and children farm. The displacement of men from agriculture to tourism has created labor scarcity, reduced productivity, and has led to food insecurity. About 75 % of the households interviewed that receive tourism income do not produce any crop or engage in farming, while only about 15% produce for subsistence.

In summary, new social and cultural lifestyles, and economies have become a visible expression of the spread of outside influence within the communities in the study area brought about by tourism. Importation of foreign products and foods has accelerated this transition from a traditional communal-based economy to one that is individualistic and capitalist-oriented.

## **5. Conclusion**

From the analysis above, it can be concluded that aspects of social and cultural change in the two communities coincides with the promotion of tourism in the area. Although, it was not clear whether every negative change could be attributed to tourism's development, there is the possibility that change in these communities may be from other factors as well.



Despite the uncertainty, what is clear is that with tourism came more interaction, and local communities were exposed to other cultures, leading to social and cultural change. Although most of the tourists visited the area for its cultural attractions and interacted with the people to learn more about their cultural traditions, the study revealed that the local culture is evolving as it adapts to and interacts with other cultures. The process of social change has exacerbated inequalities in the area as it has been accompanied by the growth in power of a few individuals whose actions affect the livelihoods of the two communities and the districts as a whole.

In conclusion, tourism development has socially, culturally, and ecologically transformed the communities. These changes have increased some individuals' control of the local political economy. The result is increased tension from uneven distribution of the benefits of tourism development. Although tourism development did not institute disparities in the area, there is reasonable evidence to suggest that it has exacerbated the existing inequalities.

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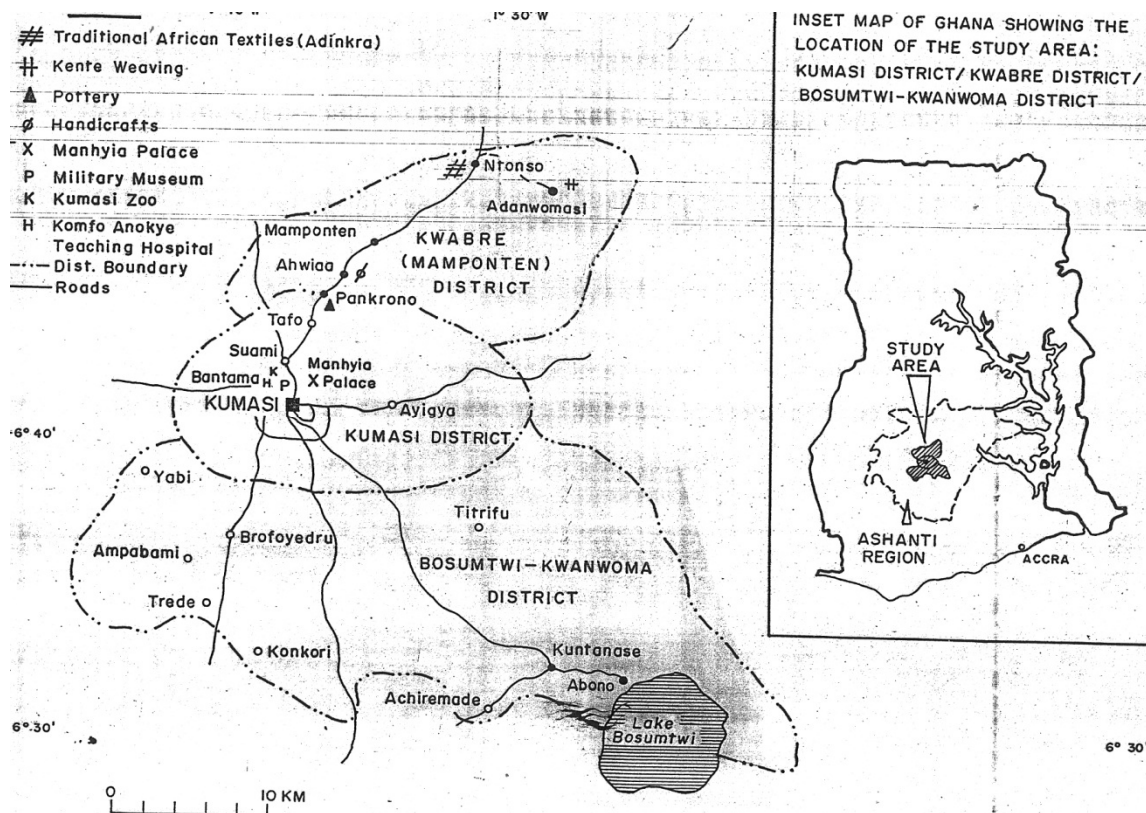
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Figure 1: Study Area





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