

Developing Heritage Tourism in Imo State, Nigeria: Socio-Economic and Cultural Gains

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Abstract

The Igbo area of Nigeria and other parts of Africa has unique natural environment coupled with the rich socio-cultural characteristics making one of the notable beehives of heritage tourists. This is peculiar to areas with harnessed heritage tourism potentials. The major challenge has been the knowledge of the availability of heritage tourism potentials, indispensable contribution of heritage tourism to socio-economic development, and sustainable development and management of heritage resources for tourism promotion. Imo, as one of the 36 states of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, is distinguished amongst other states in the Igbo area of Nigeria with great potentials of heritage tourism development. This is made manifest in the availability of various classes of heritage resources that are evenly distributed amongst various communities in the state. This paper had an in-depth study on the heritage resources in Imo State and their various classes. The paper also looked at various developmental stratagem and models towards ensuring a sustainable heritage tourism development in the state for socio-economic development and preservation of the heritage resources and rich value system of the people.

Keywords: Imo, Sustainable tourism, preservation, heritage resources, heritage tourism, socio-economic development, Cultural gains, TCIM Model.

Introduction

In recent times, tourism of recent has become of great importance to the growth and sustainability of world economies. This premise is made manifest in the economies of many nations where tourism growth and sustainability has been given precedence in the national economic planning and implementation (Nwankwo, 2007). Nations, regions, states, localities, communities, etc, who have come to realize the economic implications of developing tourism, have established policy frameworks and feasible structures that initiate and sustain tourism as part of the bedrocks of their economies (Page and Connell, 2006; Smeral, 2006). This has shown great positive manifestations in advanced economies like USA, UK, UAE, China, France, Holland, etc. In Nigeria, states like Cross River, Akwa-Ibom, Lagos, etc, are typical examples.

However, heritage tourism is an aspect of tourism that relies more on using the natural and cultural relics of a people to promote tourism in their area for a better economic growth and sustainability. This aspect of tourism has proven more viable in Africa owing to its rich cultural and natural heritage. Policy makers in Africa, who observed this, have dwelt more in developing this aspect of tourism to boost their economies. This is an aspect of tourism where Africans and some other developing nations of the world have a comparative economic advantage over their western counterparts. The implications being that Africans have much respect and regard to their natural and cultural environment which has made them unique and distinctive from their closest neighbours (Ugwu & Ugwueye, 2004; Nwankwo & Ukaegbu, 2011).

In Nigeria and Imo state in particular, there are unique and interesting aspects of their heritage resources that have been undeveloped over the years owing to ignorance, abuse and neglect. This attitude towards the rich heritage resources is painful mostly at this time when the government is looking for avenues of diversifying the economy to boost employment generation and better standard of living for the people. A closer and articulated observation has revealed that every community in Imo state has a minimum of two major and viable heritage resources that can conveniently boost the economy of these communities if well harnessed and properly managed. Effort of the government of Imo state should be applauded in their giant stride in investing at Oguta Lake, Nekede Lake, cultural festivals (see Figure I) etc. These developing sites are just few of the available heritage resources in Imo State with great tourism potentials. Culturally, Imo people have unique cultural heritage that are gradually going into extinction owing to the great forces of modernity, neglect and abuse. Imo people have a unique and distinctive cultural attributes when compared with other states in Southeast Nigeria. People from other parts of the Southeast Nigeria have great respect to the culture of Imo people which is seen as the base and origin of the Igbo culture. This situation has raised questions on the existence, significance and development of heritage resources in Imo state. The question on development and sustainability of heritage tourism in Imo state amongst other issues is what this public lecture tends to address.



Fig. 1: Masquerades displaying during Ikeji festival in Arondizuagu (one of the notable festivals in Imo state, Nigeria)

Brief Note on Imo State

Imo state is among the five states of the South-eastern geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The state which was created in 1976, has twenty-seven (27) local government areas with Owerri Municipal as the State Capital. Due to the pivotal position of the state in the South-eastern Nigeria, Imo state is nicknamed 'The Eastern heartland'. The population density of people of Imo state varies between 230-1400 people per square kilometer, with about 4.8 million human populations according to the 2006 National Population Census of Nigeria.

Imo state is culturally homogenous, although with minor differences in dialects from various sections of the state. The people have rich natural and cultural heritage which is envisaged in their indigenous dress pattern, indigenous music and dance, festivals, arts/crafts, lakes, rivers, caves, etc. Geographically, Imo state covers an area of about 5.100 sq. km. and lies within Latitude 4°45'N and 7°15'N, and Longitude 6°50'E and 7°25'E. Climatically, the state witnesses the same climatic condition like what is obtainable at other parts of Igbo area of Nigeria. The state witnesses variations in rainfall which usually varies from 1.990mm to 2,200mm. The mean annual temperature of the state is 20°C with months of January and March always the hottest periods in the year.

Conceptualization of Heritage Tourism

Heritage tourism is the bases for this paper and it is pertinent at this juncture to look briefly at the concept to aid in the assimilation of the major arguments and premises of the paper. First and foremost, heritage resources are those natural and cultural attributes of a people which they inherited from their patriarchs and have been transmitted through generations (Nwankwo, 2013). These heritage resources are what make people distinctive from their closest neighbours and develop a sense of belonging and pride in their origin and peopling. Heritage resources have cultural, natural and built manifestations inherent attributes of a people; hence they establish the bases for their existence in a particular locality (Gunlu, Yagci & Pirnar, n.d). Although modernity and belief system which are amongst the major hindrances to the sustainability and values of heritage resources, are still inherent, the values and presence of heritage resources is still evergreen mostly at the indigenous communities and some other urban localities where respect for ancestral and indigenous values are still held tenaciously (Nwankwo, 2013).

However, heritage resources are categorized into three categories; natural, cultural, and built. *Natural heritage resources* are those distinctive aspects of the environment that are endowed by nature. Man has no hand in their existence, although they can be slightly modified by man. Their existence is traced to the activities of various natural formations or causes that are beyond human comprehension, though scientific explanations can be sorted for. These natural heritage resources are further classified into tangible and intangible natural heritage resources. Tangible natural heritage resources include all the natural heritage resources that can be felt by human touch i.e. Mountains, hills, caves, lakes, rivers, streams, vegetation, rock over hangs/rock shelters, etc. Intangible natural heritage resources are those that cannot be felt by human touch i.e. weather, climate, temperature, humidity, etc. Their existence is only felt but cannot be touched.

Cultural heritage resources- this is a distinctive aspect of people's cultural lives that has made the people identical and different from their closet neighbours. Cultural heritage resources are products of mans thoughts and prowess, designed to fill a particular gap in basic necessities of man in his environment. They are aimed at making people live happily and satisfactorily in their environment. Cultural heritage resources are further classified into two distinctive categories; tangible and intangible. Tangible cultural resources include indigenous food typologies, architectural pattern, traditional dress code, cultural objects like *Ikenga*, *Ofor* mask etc, while intangible cultural heritage resources include all those aspects of a peoples culture that can be felt but cannot be touched. They include belief systems, indigenous value system, language, dance, festival, traditional ceremonies, culinary skills, etc.

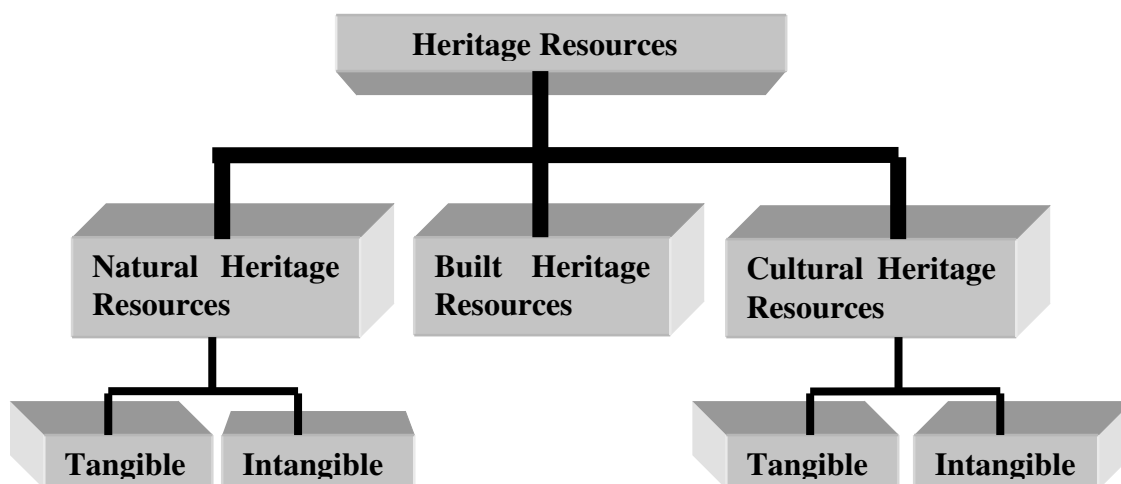


Fig. II: Illustrating major divisions of heritage resources for tourism studies.

Built Heritage Resources- this is another aspect of heritage resources that is carved out from natural and cultural heritage resources. Built heritage resources are those aspects of a people's heritage resources that are constructed by man to give cultural significance, protection and promotion to a people. They are equally distinctive by way of peculiarity to a particular people. They include museums, monuments, cultural centers, village squares, cultural exhibitions, etc. They also represent a people by giving them a unique cultural identity.

Moreover, the understanding of heritage resources and its various categories and sub-categories as illustrated in Figure 1, will aid in the comprehension of heritage tourism as a concept. Succinctly, heritage tourism can be defined as the preservation, development and packaging of distinctive heritage resources of a people for tourism promotion in the area. Heritage tourism does not only enhance the socio-economic aspect of a people. It equally aids in the preservation and promotion of a peoples cultural values and identity, according to their global significance.

Developmental Stratagem

It is regrettable to state at this juncture that amongst the major problems to heritage resource development in this part of the world is poor developmental strategies and management inefficiency. This aspect of the paper dwells more on giving sustainable development to heritage tourism, so as to serve as a guide for a sustainable heritage tourism development in Imo state.

- a. *Stakeholder identification and involvement* – the first step is to identify relevant stakeholders that are peculiar to a particular heritage resource in a given location (Inskeep, 1991). These stakeholders should be articulately identified using majorly ethnographic method. After identification, they should be grouped into direct and indirect stakeholders. The first group refers to those stakeholders which are going to be directly affected by the proposing project while indirect stakeholders are those that are going to have minimal direct effect from the proposing project. For instance, stakeholders could be leadership of the community, the youth , age grades, vigilante, Nigerian Police, Nigerian Tourism Development Cooperation (NTDC), State Tourism Board (STB), Local Government Tourism Committee (LGTC), relevant Non Governmental Organizations (NGO's), respected individuals in the community, traditional groups, etc. These people should be adequately identified and involved in the project. Their level of involvement might be a function of skill acquisition, educational background, etc. This will reduce possibility of hostilities arising against the project in a particular area. This identification and involvement of stakeholders should be done by an expert towards ensuring quality management.
- b. *Phasing the project*- the project should be properly phased into three distinctive phases; Pre-project development stage, project development stage and post-project development stage. The first stage has to do with stakeholders' identification and consultation, and the second stage has to do with the development of the project where stakeholders' involvement is sorted for and effectively utilized. The final stage is what happens after the heritage resources must have been developed and begin to function. At this juncture, stakeholders' involvement is also necessary towards ensuring the sustainability of the project in the area (see Nwankwo, 2012). This final stage which does not have a limit unlike the two previous stages involves proper management of the project through a committee that will represent the interest of all the stakeholders identified in the first stage. The operations or activities of

the committee can be guided by an outsider who should be an expert from relevant government agencies.

- c. *Project analysis*- necessary studies are made prior to the commencement of the project towards ascertaining the feasibility and the socio-economic implications of the project in the area. These analysis can be made under the following headings;
- i. TCIM Model. This model was developed by A.E Nwankwo (2013) to aid in studying issues bordering on safety and threats in the heritage industry. The acronym stands for Threats, Causes, Implications and the Measures;
 - Threats (T): this is the careful identification of both available and potential threats that are peculiar to a particular heritage resources that is about to be developed. The threats are further grouped into major and minor after identification to enable for effective analysis and considerations.
 - Causes (C): this is the identification of causes of those identified threats, placing them side by side with their peculiar threats for explicit understandings and considerations. These are also grouped into major and minor causes. This aid in the identification of causes that demand urgent attention.
 - Implications (I): the emphasis at this stage of the analysis is on the various implications of all categories of threats that were identified. These implications are further grouped into direct and indirect implications. Direct implication has to do with those threats that have direct implications on the destination's image and direct stakeholders. They demand greater consideration and attack.
 - Measure (M): this is the outlining of measures that will aid in the management of the identified threats with respect to a particular heritage resource. These measures should be grouped into control and proposing measures. In control measures, the study will be considering various designed measures that are in place to control identified threats; analyzing their strengths and weakness for their effective evaluation. Proposing measures are aimed at filling the loopholes created by control measures. Proposing measures are further categorized into eradicating (aimed at complete removal of threats) and mitigating (aimed at reducing possible impacts of threats) measures. This analysis is further completed in a TCIM Model Table for explicit illustration with respect to a particular heritage resource (Nwankwo, 2013).
- ii. Analysis on funding- Funding of the project is very significant in ensuring the effectiveness and sustainability of the project. Funding at the three principal stages of the project should be analyzed accordingly. There should be an established source of funding for these major stages of the project. Concrete and sustainable decisions are paramount during analysis on funding for the project.
- iii. Analysis on carrying capacity- this is having a quality analysis of the heritage site and its carrying capacity. Carrying capacity in tourism studies refers to a given population of tourists a particular tourist site or destination can comfortably accommodate without unleashing unnecessary safety and security threats to both heritage resources and its visitors. A quality study of carrying capacity will ensure the preservation and sustainability of a developed tourist site. This will drastically reduce the risk of destructions, defacement, vandalism, theft/smuggling activities on the site. After the establishment of the carrying capacity, it should be meticulously managed during the final principal stage of the project.

Socio Economic and Cultural Implications

It will be pertinent to look briefly at the various socio-economic and cultural implications of sustainable heritage tourism development to the good people of Imo state. These implications which are on the positive dimension are motivators to imminent sustainable heritage tourism development in Imo state for socio-economic and cultural empowerment of the people. These implications are discussed below;

a. *Job creation/employment opportunities*- Unemployment is amongst the major impediments to sustainable economic development in Nigeria with Imo state not being an exception. Various governments in Nigeria today, sort for avenues of creating job opportunities for the teeming unemployed youths who need to be engaged meaningfully in the labour market not only to improve their standard of living but also to reduce the degree of potential and available social vices. Sustainable tourism development creates much job opportunities both to the members of the host communities and outsiders (Cooper, Fletcher, Fyall, Gilbert & Wanhil, 2005; Okpoko, 2006; Agboeze & Nwankwo, 2013). This is owing to the fact that people are needed to manage the project, work in the site, satisfy the needs of tourists to the site and engage in other economic activities in and around the site. This is why most developed nations in the world i.e. USA, England, Sweden, Holland, France, etc do not relent in making huge investment on tourism development.

b. *Improvement on social amenities*- initiation of tourism development in a given locality also brings about improvement on social amenities in the area. i.e. pliable roads, electricity, medical services, learning centers, security network, economic centers etc. This is because tourists need these provisions to have a comfortable stay while in the tourist destinations. This implication is more pronounced at rural areas after development of tourism

projects. Indigenous communities experience the wind of civilization in their communities owing to the existence of tourism projects. This is because investors of such tourism projects will make necessary provisions to ensure that comfort of tourists are guaranteed while in tourism trips to the area.

d. *Preservation of indigenous values*- traditionally, Igbos have great respect for indigenous values and other traditional practices that are not separate from the culture and tradition for the people. In Imo state, indigenous values are held tenaciously mostly in the rural areas. Some aspects of these indigenous values are embedded in most of the heritage resources of the people which are being threatened by influence of modernity and materialistic lifestyles. For instance, at Arondizuogu Ikeji festival is not separated from the culture and tradition of the people. Outright development of these heritage resources for tourism purposes will not only preserve these heritage resources but will equally preserve the indigenous value systems of these indigenous communities. This is because during the planning stages, tourism project planners make necessary consultations in the community in focus and ensure that the proposed tourism project does not hamper the culture and traditions of the people to avoid unnecessary antagonism against the project. Efforts are made towards ensuring the sustainability of the project and preservation of culture and tradition of the people.

e. *Cultural Promotion*- the people of Imo state have unique cultural lifestyle that has socio-cultural value when packaged and projected. This ranges from unique cultural festivals, dances, dress code, language, dietary systems etc. When these are developed and packaged for cultural tourism, it will not only make the state a beehive of tourist activities but will equally project and promote the rich cultural values of the people of Imo state. It will promote and protect the total image of the state far beyond the four walls of Nigeria to other parts of the world. Tourists from all over the world will appreciate the culture of Imo people and aspire to attend any of the cultural events in the state for enjoyment and enlightenment. For instance the Argungu fishing festival at Kebbi state is before the global village to the extent that the state witnesses huge tourist traffic during the festival. Tourists all over the world have come to appreciate the festival and wish to register their presence during the festival. Imo state has unique cultural attraction that can promote the rich cultural values of the people far beyond what Argungu Festival has done to the cultural image of people of kebbi state.

f. *Cultural tolerance/relativism*- Nigeria is a nation blessed with many ethnic groups. Even amongst the major ethnic groups like Igbo, there is a multiplicity of various cultural traits that differs from one community to another. In Imo state, there are varying cultural traits scattered amongst various communities in the state. Development of rich cultural resources from various communities in the state will not only guarantee cultural promotion but will equally bring the knowledge and understanding of a peoples cultural values to others for appreciation and tolerance. It will bridge the long misinterpretation of indigenous cultures of a people for public appreciation and tolerance. This will equally usher in cultural relationship amongst the people where people will start to appreciate relationships between cultures of various indigenous communities in Imo state. Cultural relativism is the establishment of cultural linkages amongst two or more different cultural groups or communities. These established cultural linkages will increase the rate of tolerance and appreciation of other cultural traits from other people. It will encourage love and a peaceful atmosphere amongst various indigenous cultures in Imo state and at the same time promoting unity in the governance of the state.

Challenges and Prospects

Looking at the various strategies and implications in the sustainable heritage tourism development in Imo state for socio-economic and cultural empowerment, one would conceptualize the possibilities of rising challenges owing to so many factors. Succinctly, some of these challenges shall be looked into so as to equally serve as guides to prospective tourism developers in Imo state. For instance, funding could be a challenge owing to the capital intensive nature of most tourism projects. Owing to the developing nature of the economy of this part of the world, it is only the public sector and few private sectors can comfortably finance such tourism projects. Although this issue of funding could be a challenge in Imo state but it is strongly advised that the state government should partner with some private sector establishment in developing gigantic tourism projects, mostly those multi-nationals that are domicile in Imo state. There is also a possibility of poor management of developed tourism projects in Imo state owing to the experiences of some other state governments in Nigeria who had made huge investment on tourism projects in the past. This challenge can be managed by the establishment of local management committees in each of the host communities who are meant to work together with the leadership of the community and relevant government agencies. Also a proper application of developmental strategy as discussed earlier in this paper will equally aid in effective control of challenges of poor management.

However, previous studies (i.e Eze-Uzomaka, 2006; Ekechukwu, 2008; etc) have noted that amongst challenges to tourism projects in the rural areas are hostilities from the host communities owing to poor orientation and involvement in the project. This can result to the destruction of the tourism project by members of the host communities. This particular challenge can be effectively controlled by proper and periodic information and orientation of the members of the host community on the proposing and existing tourism

projects in their area. Such orientations which aid in bridging the information gap between members of the host community and the tourism project, should be periodically organized in five-year interval with every socio-cultural groups in the community represented. This will not only kill the spirit of hostility but will equally motivate members of the host community to work assiduously in protecting and promoting the tourism project in their area.

Finally, there is also possibility of tourists abusing indigenous value system of these host communities owing to the existence of tourist's projects in their area. Previous studies (i.e. Eze-Uzomaka, 2006; etc) have shown that at some tourist destinations, tourists do not give regard to the indigenous values and practices of the people. In such cases, in an attempt to preserve these values, the members of the host communities might clash with tourists to their area. This particular challenge can be controlled by use of tourist compass and proper orientation of tourists on the indigenous lifestyles of members of the host community. In case of natural resources, local tour guides will equally be arranged to guide tourists as they tour various natural tourist sites in the community.

Conclusion

Imo state, the heartland of the eastern Nigeria has great heritage resources that are of such significance to tourism promotion in the area. Sustainable heritage tourism development has been discovered as a pathway toward the preservation of heritage resources, indigenous value system and socio-economic /cultural empowerment of Imo state. This will not only diversify the economy of the state, but also give the state a sustainable economic base through job creation and employment, improved social amenities more especially in the rural areas and socio-cultural preservation and promotion. This can only be guaranteed through a sustainable heritage tourism planning and development in the state by applying the various developmental strategies as discussed i.e stakeholders identification and involvement, carrying capacity studies, phasing of the project, quality project analysis, etc. Implication is that the state stands to gain tremendously if these heritage resources are properly developed and managed bearing in mind the various challenges and their remedies as discussed in the paper. There is no better way to preserve and promote the rich heritage values of the people of Imo state which have made the people distinctive amongst people of Igbo area of Nigeria, except by holding tenaciously the abundant heritage resources scattered in every part of the state through preservation and promotion for the purposes of heritage tourism development in the state. This will also make the state a beehive of tourists from every part of the globe and encourage private investors from all over the world to come and invest in the state which will turn out to be a great economic boost for the government and people of Imo state.

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