

Roots/Heritage Tourism in Africa and the African Diaspora: Case Studies for a Comparative Approach

An International Conference organized by
the African & African Diaspora Studies Program

February 12-14, 2015

Florida International University

Graham Center Ballrooms, Modesto Maidique Campus
Miami, Florida

“Roots/heritage tourism” began developing in the 1980s and 1990s in West Africa following the emergence of a black middle-class in the Global North—mostly the United States and the United Kingdom—eager to spend newly acquired disposable income to “reconnect” with the land of their “ancestors.” The global success of Alex Hayley’s book and television miniseries *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* contributed to the beginning of this movement to Africa of black tourists, which intersects with the confluence of two different theoretical approaches to “the African diaspora”:

1) An approach that tends to be diachronic in orientation because based on personal, political/ideological, and analytical narratives that unfold exclusively in terms of both the conceptualization of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade as the exclusive or most important African diaspora foundational event there is, and the unidirectional traveling of African peoples and cultures from one point in continental Africa to one specific location in the Americas. Here, continental Africa symbolizes the arguably romanticized diaspora past, its source and origin.

2) A more recent analytic and political/ideological approach, synchronic in orientation, which conceptualizes the African diaspora in terms of multiple trans-local and transnational networks of blackness, premised on an understanding of the Middle Passage as one foundational event among others. That second line of theorizing better incorporates a growing number of movements in this contemporary moment of intensified global circulation of peoples, ideas, and goods in all directions.

It conceptualizes the Atlantic as a site, among others, of multidirectional traveling originating and going potentially anywhere and leading to multiple encounters, articulations, and “frictions” among black people in a variety of locations globally. Here, Africa and Africans are coeval to locations and peoples of the African diaspora, in a historically constituted global system characterized by white supremacy.

In the 1980s and 1990s, sites associated with Trans-Atlantic slavery in Ghana, Senegal, The Gambia, and Benin were transformed into roots/heritage tourist attractions. Roots/heritage tourism continued to grow in West Africa to the point of reaching high-level international notoriety (the last three U.S. presidents visited roots/heritage tourism sites in either Ghana or Senegal; President Obama visited such sites in both countries). Roots/heritage tourism locations associated with the Trans-Atlantic slave trade also emerged, more recently, in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Sites associated with a number of historical events of importance for those who participate in and contribute to the African and African diaspora networks also became the focus of roots/heritage tourism, and in turn attracted black and non-black visitors from across the globe. That is how the formation of roots/heritage tourism also emerged in association with specific communities of Africa and the African diaspora, their histories of resistance against anti-black racism, and the notoriety of their cultural productions. Famous cases here include, non-exhaustively, the many visits of U.S. residents to Salvador de Bahia in Brazil, and to Northeastern cities and towns that have had some association with Afro-Brazilian cultures and history; the visits of African Americans and non-U.S. blacks to plantation sites in the U.S. South; the tours of “Black Miami,” in Florida, and “Black Paris,” in France.

Roots/heritage tourism provides a privileged lens for scholarship to engage anew the theorizing of the African diaspora in this contemporary moment of global circulations; it provides spaces wherein black individuals who have quite different trajectories within the networks of the African diaspora meet and interact in sometimes complex articulations that often involve different interpretations of historical events about which tourists, tour guides and the local population have disparate emotional investments that often lead to ostensibly inevitable and profound cultural misunderstandings, and to divergent understanding of what is to be considered “authentic.” Processes of hierarchization among black subjects following, for example, inequality of financial means among the stakeholders, and between sites’ staff and tourists can also be observed. And interactions with visitors of different origins who do not identify with the African diaspora and who might have a different interpretation of the significance of the sites they visit can occur.

This is a multi-disciplinary conference. We are particularly interested in papers about diverse sites of African and African diaspora roots/heritage tourism in continental Africa, the Americas, Europe, and elsewhere, hence we seek in a non-exhaustive list, the following foci:

- Multilateral and international agencies, nation-state and other governmental agencies' involvement, or lack thereof, in the transformation of sites of memory into roots/heritage tourist attractions.
- Involvement of identified stakeholders in the construction of specific narratives to be served to roots/heritage tourists in specific sites; tourists' reception of the narrative; local populations' reception of the narrative; ...
- Roots/heritage tourism as a sustainable pro-poor or poverty reduction tourism initiative.
- The inclusion of roots/heritage tourism in U.S. study abroad programs.
- Ethnographic history of specific roots/heritage tourism sites.

The ultimate objective of the conference organizers is to publish an edited volume with a selection of the papers presented along with keynote presentations.

Please, submit your abstract (no more than 600 words) as an attachment in Word or pdf by **September 30, 2014** to 2015ht@fiu.edu. A committee will select the papers for inclusion in the conference program. Notices will be sent out by October 30, 2014.

We will accept abstracts in English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese and will explore the possibilities of simultaneous translation during the conference, once papers have been selected. After your abstract has been selected, you will need to register by November 15, 2014. Failing to register by that date will jeopardize your participation in the conference. We want to have a final conference program ready by December 2014. To register, please send your name (first, middle, last), phone number, mailing address, e-mail, institutional affiliation and paper title to 2015ht@fiu.edu.

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