Trend Analysis: Genocide Tourism in Cambodia

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Abstract

Society’s curiosity with tragedy and death has lead to the increasing trend in dark tourism. This trend has spiked tourism to the Khmer Rouge genocide sites of Cambodia where visitors gather to experience, mourn and learn about the genocide that killed thousands. The country’s unstable past has made it difficult to develop traditional tourism. Despite this, tourists have been traveling to attractions such as Toul Sleng and Cheoung Ek since they accepted visitation in the 1980s. Future predictions suggest that dark tourism will only continue growing and become even more commercialized.

Key words: Dark tourism, Genocide tourism, Cambodia

Introduction

Dark tourism, and more specifically genocide tourism, is defined as travel to areas associated with death and suffering where mass deliberate and systematic destruction of a racial, political, or cultural group has occurred (Merriam-Webster, 2011). Driving the dark tourism trend is Western society’s fascination with death. It has been labeled as tourism’s dirty little secret. There are many types of dark or macabre tourism ranging from graveyards, celebrity death sites, fictional deaths, prisons, slavery-heritage areas, and holocaust and genocide sites (Stone, 2006). Dark tourism is becoming increasingly pervasive thus this paper aims to discuss the trend, with a specific focus on how genocide tourism affects the country of Cambodia.

Description of the Dark Tourism Trend

Over the last century, dark or macabre tourism has become much more prevalent and widespread. It is even suggested that sites and destinations associated with war
constitute the largest single category of tourist attractions in the world (Stone, 2006). At least in part, this trend is increasing due to the wide spectrum of what is now considered to be ‘dark tourism’. There are many types of dark tourism ranging from celebrity death sites to war reenactments to fictional death. Each of these areas represents a different shade of dark tourism, with genocide tourism being the darkest. It is defined as a site of death and suffering with a high political influence and an educational orientation (Stone, 2006).

**Description of Genocide Tourism in Cambodia**

April 17, 1975 marked the end of the five-year civil war in Cambodia when the communist party of the Khmer Rouge emerged as the dominant party in the region. The Khmer Rouge troops quickly forced all citizens of Phnom Penh out of their homes and marched them to the countryside to live and work as a communist society. If the workers were not performing to the appropriate standard, they were executed. The Khmer Rouge slogan was, "keeping new people is no benefit, losing them is no loss" (Carvin, 1999). The regime was finally terminated at the beginning of 1979 when Vietnamese troops poured into the region capturing the capital and dissolving the Khmer Rouge.

There are two main genocide attractions that draw tourists to the area. The first is Choeung Ek, also known as the Killing Fields. This is the site where over 17 thousand people were executed between 1975 and 1979 during the Khmer Rouge regime. It is the infamous burial ground for those arrested and tortured at the Tuol Sleng prison. It is the largest gravesite in the country containing 129 mass graves housing an estimated 8,895
bodies. Today, the killing field is a memorial marked by a Buddhist stupa grimly
decorated with over eight thousand human skulls (Carvin, 1999).

The other main attraction is the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum or S-21, which was
a school, converted into Cambodia's most important prison in 1975. Over 15 thousand
people were tortured here before being killed at the killing fields near Phnom Penh.
Presently, the building exhibits paintings, many disturbing photographs and skulls of the
prisoners for the tourists to see. The site is conveniently accessible and promoted as a
must see attraction, heavily advertised to tourists (Carvin, 1999).

**Historic Perspective (past ten years)**

Cambodia is still considered to be a developing nation, and is plagued by wide
spread poverty. For the past two decades, the country has mainly been dependent on
millions of dollars of foreign aid granted to them by the Paris Accords of 1991 (Chandler,
2010). Cambodia has had a very rough and unstable past with political instability and the
Khmer Rouge crisis. Despite this, Cambodia has managed to regain its foothold in the
new millennium. In 1999, Cambodia became a member of The Association of Southeast
Asian Nations (ASEAN), which has helped them to form alliances with other Asian
countries. In that same year, the remaining Khmer Rouge leaders had surrendered and the
rebel troops were integrated into the Cambodian army. In 2003 the United Nations set up
a tribunal with Cambodia to try those responsible for the genocide. Since 1999,
Cambodia has become safer and a more peaceful place for tourists to visit (Chandler,
2010).
Cambodia is part of the Indochina region along with the countries of Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam. Over the past ten years this region has transformed from centrally controlled economies towards market economies. The market economy has allowed more foreign investors to establish more hotels and tour operations in the country (Travel And Tourism Industry-Asia, 1998). Despite the increased development and investment, Cambodia is still very prone to leakage from international companies. Cambodia has few restrictions on foreign investments and allows for 100% foreign ownership of almost anything. Foreign investors cannot own land but can purchase 99-year leases, which can be renewed (Cambodia.com, 2009). It is estimated that the country experienced $370 million worth of leakage in 2003 and there has been little improvement since (Chandler, 2010). For example, in 2006, the Cambodian government hired a foreign firm to build a hotel and a visitor’s center near Phnom Penh across from the Choeung Ek killing field. Income generated by the center is leaked out of the country, and Cambodia loses some of the economic benefit from the dark tourism site (chicagotribune.com, 2007).

The country uses its tourism destinations as a method of generating income. An example of this is the Toul Sleng genocide museum. It was originally only open to foreign visitors as its purpose was to help generate funding for the new government and to build awareness about the horrible acts the Khmer Rouge committed. In 1980, when the museum finally opened its doors to the public, many Cambodians came in order to seek information and truth behind the suffrage of their loved ones and relatives. Within the first week, the museum had 32,000 guests and only 1,930 of them were foreigners,
the rest were Cambodian (Ledgerwood, 1987). As of 2009, there were as many as 500 visitors per day at the genocide museum (Moore, 2009).

**Breadth of impacts to date**

Tourism to the genocide sites in Cambodia has had a large impact on both the visitors and the locals. However, opinions on tourism to these sites and motivations to partake in dark tourism activities in these areas are varied. When managing genocide destinations, it is difficult to please all stakeholders. The term heritage dissonance, coined by Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996), describes situations where heritage provoked amongst various stakeholders is in discord or lacks agreement and consistency. Some see genocide tourism as an opportunity for education, while others find it offensive and voyeuristic. Some want to know, others want to forget.

For many Cambodians, the museums and genocide monuments are a means of preserving the country’s history, heritage and society’s collective identity. Without the money from tourists, the government would be less likely to fund the upkeep of the areas, and the memories that lie in the buildings would vanish. The sites are also used as income generation centers, which provide jobs for the locals. Along with generating income, the areas serve as a place where locals go to remember the tragedy of the genocide. Many of the victim’s families go to the sites to pay tribute to the ones they have lost and the victims of the tragic events. They also go to learn about their heritage and the affairs that shaped their nation (Flemming, 2011).
Another benefit of the sites is the educational value to the tourist. Much of what is portrayed in the media has become distorted to skew the public’s view in certain ways. Many tourists travel to dark tourism sites to investigate the reality behind the media. Education allows tourists to better understand the events and to form their own opinions regarding the tragedy. By raising this type of educational awareness of the horrific past, future genocide will hopefully be prevented from occurring (Yuill, 2003).

On the other hand, tourism to the genocide areas of Cambodia can be viewed in a negative light. Some of the locals, survivors and victim’s relatives that have a deeper connection to the site, feel that the killing fields and Toul Sleng should not be tourist attractions. Some feel as though developers and tourists are commodifying their sacred areas (Yuill, 2003). Increasing amounts of tourism ancillary services, such as hotels and restaurants, are appearing around the genocide sites. There is even a small souvenir shop located inside the Toul Sleng genocide museum. Many tuk-tuk drivers try to attract business by advertising the killing fields as a popular attraction. They seem to be desensitized to their country’s misfortune in their pursuit of making a few dollars. People’s discomfort lies in the fear that the genocide areas are being exploited and their meaning lost (Flemming, 2011).

Other tourists visit for the thrill seeing aspect of dark tourism. They seem to have a genuine fascination with the tragedy and are curious to witness it first hand. They seem to have an interest in inhumanity, and genocide tourism provides them with the opportunity to witness other people’s extreme misfortunes (Yuill, 2003). In some cases
tourists feel that their visit to the genocide site is an invasion of sacred privacy. “You feel you are a voyeur, looking at something you shouldn’t be seeing, so for someone else to come into the room when you are there, it’s as if you’ve gotten caught,” said a visitor at the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum (Fleming, 2011). Some tourists may feel guilty for viewing the tragedy of others, demoralized by the tourism industry. As for these voyeuristic tourists, it is assumed that once they see the areas in person, they become, to some degree, more aware and affected by the tragedy and realize that it is an important aspect of the region’s heritage.

Understanding visitor motivations helps the tourism developers provide the guests with what they want. Although the tourists play a large role in the growth of the areas, developers must take into consideration the opinions of the locals, the survivors and the families of the victims (Yuill, 2003). Some improvements, such as infrastructure enhancement, especially when it comes to transportation, can benefit all parties. In 2008, the road between Anlong Veng, where the genocide sites are located, and Angkor Wat, another popular tourist site featuring renowned temples, was paved. It was also made wider which allows easy access for tour buses and travelers who want to visit the most famous sites. Most of the tours presently available in the country advertise the wondrous temples and Buddhists sites coupled with visiting the tragic areas where genocide took place (Burmon, 2010). These infrastructure improvements have greatly influenced the mobility of tourists and locals alike.
**Anticipated future evolution and impacts (next five years)**

As dark tourism increases in popularity, tourists are demanding more authentic attractions. Tour companies have started to package tours to Baghdad, Sarajevo, and Chernobyl. Consequently, the rapid development of these areas has attracted large amounts of foreign investment and leakage. In Cambodia for example, a Korean resort has recently been built in the area surrounding the historic site where Pol Pot died. There is also a brand new casino catering to the large Thai market, which is located nearby. These establishments take in large amounts of tourist dollars that contribute minimally to the Cambodian economy (USA Today, 2006).

The tourism growth in Cambodia will pose many challenges to its developing society. The country is still healing from the Khmer Rouge regime that terrorized the nation between 1975 and 1979. The rapidly developing economy threatens the country’s heritage, where the past could be more exploited than preserved. The country relies heavily on foreign aid and independent non-government organizations, which help to maintain the historical representation of Cambodia’s tourism attractions (Lennon, 2009). Despite this dependence, the Cambodian government is investing what they can in the sites to make them more accessible to tourists (Burmon, 2010).

The Cambodian government plans to develop a theme park devoted to the Khmer Rouge, to tap into the growing market of macabre tourism. Hundreds of thousands of tourists already visit S-21 torture center and museum and the killing fields at Choeung Ek. The Ministry of Tourism plans to refurbish 14 Khmer Rouge buildings in Anlong...
Veng, which was the Communists' last resistance after Vietnamese troops overthrew the Khmer Rouge in 1979. One of the most famous buildings to be restored is the dictator of the regime, Pol Pot's house, as well as the bungalow where he was imprisoned during the Vietnamese invasion. The deputy, Ta Mok’s, compound is also being renovated as part of the construction in the area. Other sites such as a propaganda radio station and a munitions warehouse will be restored as well (Burmon, 2010).

The creation of the theme park is very contentious. On one hand many people believe that this would increase the number of tourists to the region and generate more income for the economy. Tourism already accounts for one fifth of Cambodia’s GDP and many of the locals want to continue to exploit this area for the purpose of tourist dollars. The minister of tourism Thong Khon, was quoted saying, "It is right that the government should profit from remaking this historic place" (Burmon, 2010). However, news reports suggest that the Cambodian government has done little to endow its macabre sites and they operate them with the sole mission of collecting government revenues. Many locals have been affected and have had to leave their properties to accommodate the project. "It is wrong, because the profits will not go to any individuals in Anlong Veng, but to the government's budget," says Ta Mok’s niece whose property was seized. Reports say that the head of the Cambodian Documentation Center, Youk Chhang, is also concerned that these sites may lose their authenticity, "We don't want them turned into Disneylands and seen merely as a source of money" (USA Today, 2006).
The issue of genocide tourism itself is very controversial. It can be expressed as an educational experience where visitors learn about the past, feel remorse or come to grieve. The existence of genocide memorials, such as those in Cambodia, helps to raise awareness of the hardship and helps to prevent reoccurrence. On the other hand, one could look at the sites as the exploitation of tragedy and partial disrespect for those affected. Either way, genocide tourism is an increasing trend and the people of Cambodia are acquiring some of the benefits associated with travel to experience its horrific past.

References


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