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International Tourism and Culture Change in the Western Caribbean: Temporary Non-Acculturative Systems

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ABSTRACT

The few studies on international tourism and culture change have emphasized the direct effects of tourism on the host society. Recent research on Western Caribbean islands indicates that under the stimulation of economic developments arising from tourism, in-migration from adjacent mainlands has effectively stifled, at least temporarily, the onslaught of acculturation by North Americans. On Cozumel Island, Mexico, Mayan-speakers from the Yucatán Peninsula have fortified Cozumelito culture; in the Bay Islands, Honduras, Spanish-speaking mainlanders are the primary change agents.

INTRODUCTION

This paper directs attention to a new and rapidly emerging agent of culture change: international tourism. International tourism is a relatively recent global phenomenon that is playing an increasingly important role in the affairs of man. It has innumerable anthropological aspects that might be studied, and, in particular, many social and economic ramifications that are yet little understood.

To date, research on international tourism has been dominated by economists. They primarily have been concerned with tourism as an agent of economic development, and international organizations such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the United Nations have supported the research (for examples see Artus, 1972; Ball, 1971; Davis, 1968; and Krapf, 1968). The prominence of an economic approach is understandable because (1) the major source of research funds has been the United States, whose reputation for an economic orientation is universal, and (2) the role of international tourism as an income-producer is grandiose indeed. It is the single largest item in international trade, amounting to more than $15 billion for 1970 (Fiabane, 1971). Tourism has been so successful in its expansion that it makes a major contribution to one-fourth of the world's state economies. At least 10 countries can expect to gross more than $1 billion annually from international tourism by 1975 (Aldine Univ. Atlas, 1969).

Unfortunately, tourism's contribution to national economies is proportionately greatest in the so-called developing world, a fact that is of particular significance to anthropologists. It has been a well-established theme that wherever economic developments have occurred, changes in culture have not been long in following. Therefore, it should be among the cultures of the developing world that the most massive effects of tourism will be felt.

Anthropologists have indicated only slight interest in tourism as an agent of culture change. Professor James Silverberg of Milwaukee organized a symposium entitled, "Tourism: A Neglected Area of Culture Change Research and Applied Anthropology," for the 1964 meeting of the Central States Anthropological Society, but the seven papers presented have not been published. Sociologists have a slightly better record, including the seminal works of Forster (1964), Sutton (1967), and Cohen (1972). However, most of these writers have limited their thrust to categorizing tourist types and to discussing the effects of tourism on members of the host country. The usual model presupposes some degree of direct acculturation of the recipient society by the dominant group of international tourists.

The writer's paper is the first to his knowledge to suggest alternatives to the standard acculturation model by introducing a geographic variable. Specifically, the discussion covers cases in which economic developments on offshore tourist islands have attracted traditional native laborers from adjacent mainlands. Such in-migration should impede the normally rapid acculturation of the previously isolated islanders. For illustration of this point, two locations were selected in the western Caribbean where the effects of recent tourism still can be easily discerned.

COZUMEL ISLAND, MEXICO

Cozumel is a flat, heavily forested, coraline island about 12 mi off the northeastern coast of the Yucatan Peninsula. Its dimensions are 9 by 25 mi and total land area is just over 150 sq mi. Before tourism, the island was home for 3,500 Spanish- and Mayan-speaking Mexicans. They earned their livelihoods primarily from fishing, although there were bits of milpa agriculture and some lucrative contraband activities. The only multi-family settlement, San Miguel, was a perfect model of a "sleepy Mexican port," at least during the daylight hours when no smuggling was taking place.

Then tourism came to Cozumel. The island fell quickly before an aphorism of scholars of tourism, "tourism abhors a vacuum" (Anonymous, 1935; p. 509). Let people learn of a spot that tourists have never visited, and watch it develop into a resort overnight. First, popular accounts appeared in Holiday, Saturday Evening Post, and The New York Times—"Come to one of the last remaining unspoiled Caribbean paradises" (Jackson, 1970). Next, skimp-divers discovered that the clearest waters in the world surrounded the island. A former President of Mexico, Lopez Mateos, built a retreat, and Jackie Kennedy vacationed there. Meanwhile, international tourists, almost exclusively North Americans, increased from 24,000 in 1967 to about 100,000 in 1972.

Since 1965, the writer has visited the island at least once each year to keep informed on the consequences of the onslaught of tourism. First went the lobsters, prey to the spear-fishermen; then most of the other reef-life died. So far, this disruption of the natural life systems has not been reversed. The first studies indicated as well that some acculturation was occurring because of tourism. The writer separated islanders into categories according to occupation and to where they spent their time to determine the opportunity for and degree of...
contact with tourists. There was evidence that changes in language, dress, economic status, and life goals were due to tourism in varying degrees throughout the sample population. However, during the last five years the disruption has not continued in island life as it has in the natural systems. The explanation for the retardation of change apparently is related to the massive in-migration of laborers from the nearby mainland. When tourism developed to the stage that public infrastructure and services beyond those provided for normal domestic needs were essential, a construction boom stimulated the local economy. Farmers from Yucatan then immigrated to Cozumel to take advantage of the better economic opportunities. The total Mexican population of the island today is about 10,000, half of which has recently come from the mainland. These people are the reason for a revitalization of the "old island ways." Native Mayan dresses (huipiles) can be seen more frequently in the square, and the use of the Mayan language is on the increase.

**BAY ISLANDS, HONDURAS**

The second study area is a chain of eight islands and 65 cays with a total land area of just less than 100 sq mi. The Bay Islands are one political department of the Spanish-speaking Republic of Honduras. Roatan, the largest and most centrally located island, is approximately 40 mi offshore and accounts for more than half of the area. These are the only islands in the western Caribbean that are of continental structure. They, too, with their clear waters, fringing reefs, and mild tropical climate, undoubtedly will be called an "island paradise" in the travel guidebooks. In their cultural composition the Bay Islands are more diverse than Cozumel. English-speaking Anglo- and Afro-Antilleans account for 85% of the present 10,000 population, and there are remnant groups of Black Caribs, North Americans, Miskito Indians, and Spanish Hondurans. For the last 50 years economic activities have been oriented around the sea. Trading and boathulling have provided most of the cash income, but recently merchant sailoring has become the most widespread source of revenue.

Tourism, still clearly in the incipient stages of development, was introduced on a significant scale only within the last five years. As an indication of the economic changes accompanying the new North American visitors, the average cost of a one-acre waterfront plot grew from $75 to $300 between 1967 and 1970. During the same period the rates for native manual labor increased from $1.50 to $3.50 for an eight-hour day. Such changes are easily understood in view of the additional income available in the islands. An estimated $1.5 million entered the islands' economy from tourist-related construction costs alone. In addition, approximately $20,000 is paid annually in the form of wages to local hotel workers.

As in the case of Cozumel, the developing economy offshore has attracted mainland folk in phenomenal numbers. Most newcomers from the mainland enter to sell Honduran-made goods, to work in the new industries and hotels, and to take governmental positions. Some come as sojourners, others plan to settle permanently.

This immigration from the mainland is all the more significant because of the bitter feelings that have existed for centuries between islanders and the coastal peoples. The historic Spanish-Indian and Spanish-English feuds, the cultural differences, and the lack of communication have engendered mutual prejudicial attitudes. By their continued ties with Belize, the Cayman Islands, and the United States, and their retention of the English language and Protestantism, most islanders have successfully isolated themselves from Spanish Honduran influences.

However, the isolation is no longer complete. There is no doubt in the writer's mind that the Hispanicization of the English-speaking Bay Islanders is now underway. Particularly in the island landscapes one can see the first indications of the imposition of a new culture: a new Catholic church building, soccer fields, slaughter houses on cattle-less islands, and above all, the Spanish-language signs that hang throughout the islands. These features show well the new and growing presence of Spaniards from the coast of Honduras.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

This paper suggests geographic situation to be a primary consideration in acculturation studies. In the two study areas, Cozumel and the Bay Islands, tourist-induced culture change has not followed the standard model of direct acculturation of the host society by tourists. Instead, in both locations because of the proximity to mainland, the North American tourism that stimulated local island economies has resulted in the emigration of native workers from adjacent mainland. This has blunted the normal impact of foreign tourism. On Cozumel, in-migrations have caused the direct reinforcement of traditional island life. In the Bay Islands, Spanish in-migration has stifled North American acculturation, and is bringing instead the indirect acculturation of the English-speaking island population.

Under such conditions, a lag of a few years should be expected before direct acculturation by North Americans again occurs on a widespread basis. Apparently, a certain length of time must pass before the economy stabilizes and large-scale immigration terminates. It is ironic that by the end of such a lag, mass tourism will perhaps have destroyed the pleasant physical environment and removed one of the primary motives for touring, causing North Americans to cease their visits. Otherwise, international tourism may eventually be a most effective agent of change even in these locations.

**NOTES**

1. International tourism concerns the movement of foreigners to and within countries other than their own. In an attempt to standardize a definition for international tourist the United Nations has suggested "a non-resident in a foreign country for more than 24 hours" (OECD, 1968; p. 7). International tourism is isolated here for study because it holds greater consequences for culture change than does tourism by nationals within their own borders.

2. Perhaps the best source of the latest statistical information on international tourism is the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Paris.

3. Perhaps the best source of studies is the journal, Economic Development and Culture Change, now in its twentieth year from the University of Chicago.

4. Information on Cozumel was collected primarily for the writer's study on the settlement patterns there (see Davidson, 1967).

5. Data on the Bay Islands were collected primarily for the writer's study on the historical geography of the islands (see Davidson, 1973).
LITERATURE CITED


