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SUSTAINING THE MOMENTOUS BILIKISU-SUNGBO SHRINE POTENTIALS IN IJEBU-ODE, OGUN STATE FOR GLOBAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Sustaining the momentous bilikisu Sungbo shrine in Ijebu Ode for global and national tourism development is of paramount. Bilikisu Sungbo's tomb is located at Oke Eri, Ijebu Ode in Ogun State straddles Christianity, Islam and the Coptic traditions of Ethiopia. Bilikisu Sungbo's tomb is located at Oke Eri, Ijebu Ode in Ogun State. The legend of Sungbo, straddles Christianity, Islam and the Coptic Orthodox Christianity traditions of Ethiopia. The tomb is reputed to be the largest single pre-colonial monument in Africa. Overwhelming oral information points to this site as the final resting place of Bilikisu Sungbo, who is believed to be the famous Queen of Sheba who enjoys prominent mention in both the Bible and the Quran, in detailed accounts of her relationship with King Solomon. She is also believed to be a wealthy but childless woman who according to oral tradition caused the vast historic earthwork Eredo in Ijebu Ode to be built as a memorial to her. The Bilikisu Sungbo shrine was added to the cultural category of UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1995 as a result of its historic significance. Since Tourism has become one of the main focus for economic revitalization globally and especially in developing countries where attention is being directed, to serve as avenue for economic diversification, then the shrine coupled with the presence of the associated Eredo which is rich in historic and archaeological information has placed its tourism potential at a huge advantageous pedestal. Unfortunately, as at now the tourism supporting infrastructure in Sungbo in Ijebu Ode is underdeveloped and grossly inadequate, and had received no attention of government efforts as a source of effective and sustainable development. The paper concludes that for a labor surplus economy like Nigeria, harnessing tourism site of Bilikisu Sungbo in Ijebu Ode site can contribute significantly to economic growth and development.

Keywords: Bilikis Sungbo, Grave-Shrine, Ijebu Ode, Tourism Industry, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines *Bilikisu* Sungbo tomb turned shrine site in Oke- Eri, Ijebu Ode in Ogun state as a source of national and sustainable tourism development for Nigeria. This is with a view to discuss the need to harness the tourism potentialities of the historic site for tourism development as the site has not been accorded its rightful place in spite of it being listed as a world heritage site

by UNESCO in 1995. It is also the pride of the Ijebu Ode people and is visited annually by various religious bodies such as Islamic and Christian bodies that come there to pray and honor the Queen of Sheba, referred as *Bilikisu* Sungbo. This is as a result of the belief that prayers made at the shrine are answered as the shrine is said to possess supernatural powers (a guard at the site insisted that "Whatever is asked for at her grave side is accepted).

The *Bilikisu Sungbo* shrine is situated in a grove which is referred to as sacred as the place is believed to possess certain supernatural powers as a result of the presence of the tomb. According to local oral tradition, *Bilikisu Sungbo* is the scriptural Queen of Sheba who appeared in the Bible as well as the Quran. It was recorded that she was a wealthy childless widow who visited King Solomon with magnificent gifts. As such, she has been elevated to a figure of religious devotion and the tomb has become a place of worship (Lasisi and Aremu 2016) where pilgrims of Christian, Muslim and traditional African religions annually trek to the holy site in tribute to her while some go there to make prayer requests.

This personage was also said to have been the creator of the vast earthwork known as the Eredo a mud built rampart discovered by a Portuguese writer Duarte Pacheco Pereira as far back as c 1500 (Smith 1969) which has a circuit of some eighty miles and appears to enclose an area of some 400 square miles around the town of Ijebu Ode. It is still in some places twenty feet high, with an outer ditch of twenty to twenty-five feet in depth (Smith 1969). This according to oral tradition was built by her as a memorial to herself. The word *Eredo* is a term which according to the oral tradition of the Oke-Eri people means an “embankment”. The difference between this feature and every other wall systems in Nigeria is that it is the longest of all and has the distinct characteristics of a mound, ditch and rampart as evidenced in the different fractions of its length.

It is among the largest man-made monuments in Africa, with an estimated 3.5 million cubic meters of moved earth and sand (Darling 2001). It is approximately 165 km long and surrounds the whole of Ijebu Kingdom, forming a gigantic feature that shows how complex the local socio-political system was long before the opening of the Atlantic trade. Indeed, it is the most significant earthwork of the ancient ramparts, boundary embankments,

and ditches that stretch across Nigeria (Aremu 2002). Sungbo’s Eredo was built completely by hand and without any sophisticated construction equipment (Lasisi and Aremu 2016).

Also, part of the archaeological evidence found indicates that the *Eredo* is not linked to an isolated town but to a kingdom’s large dike, a kingdom which was once functional and had at its disposal a high level of agricultural practice, an established pottery-making tradition, and possibly an army that triggered the construction of the *Eredo*. The magnitude of Sungbo’s *Eredo* further exemplifies the unity and bond between the builders and the power that directed this construction (Lasisi, and Aremu 2016). According to Darling (1997), the vertical-sided ditches run for 160 km, and is estimated to be over 1000 years old. Based on the above evidence, the Ijebu Kingdom is estimated to be one of the earliest kingdoms founded in the African rain forest (cited by Lasisi, and Aremu 2016)

However, even if *Bilikisu Sungbo* is not the Queen of Sheba, surely, the complexity of this monument *Eredo* marks it out as a great heritage which has the potential to be a tourism revenue earner for Ogun State and indeed Nigeria. Despite archaeological and historical researches going on in the area of the shrine which has revealed various significant cultural materials that can be utilized for tourism development of the area, the stakeholders have continued to neglect the shrine/ grave (though abandoned and almost overgrown with weeds) with the associated *Eredo* thereby leaving the site to waste its potentials for effective tourism sustainability.

BILIKISU SUNGBO: ASSOCIATED MYTHS AND LEGENDS

Bilikisu Sungbo’s grave story is shrouded in mystery and sustained by religious curiosity. The *Bilikisu* story straddles Christianity, Islam and the Coptic Orthodox Christianity traditions of Ethiopia as well as local traditions of the Ijebu people. In the Koran, *Bilikisu Sungbo* is believed to be an Ethiopian sun

worshiper named *Bilqis (Balkis)* involved in the incense trade who later converted to Islam. The imperial family of Ethiopia claims its origin directly from the offspring of the Queen of Sheba by King Solomon. According to Hamisu (**who is hamisu**), *Bilikisu* came from across the seas several thousand years ago and founded a city called Oke-Eki with her followers. Hamisu, who tended to belief the Islamic version of the story said that after *Bilikisu* married Sulaiman, there was a dispute and she came to Oke- Eri with her followers where she founded a kingdom and built the Eredo walls. It has been suggested more prosaically that it may have been constructed in two phases, the eastern section being intended for the defense of Idoko kingdom, which possibly preceded *Ijebu* as the power in this area, and the western section being a later fortification for *Obanta's* capital. There does not seem as yet much evidence to support this hypothesis, or the intention of the builders be confidently determined (Smith 1969).

However, according to Hamisu, “*Bilikisu* was the favourite of Sulaiman, she had a seat of gold that even Sulaiman did not have. The Old Testament described her as having sent a caravan of gold, ivory and other goods from her kingdom to King Solomon. She was very rich but when there was a quarrel, she came here and founded this place,” he said. But there are twists to the story. According to him, the villagers met the grave, and from oral history continued to revere and worship at the shrine. However, a certain white man came to the village about one hundred (100) years ago and insisted on opening the grave to prove its claims. The man was said to have arrived with his wife and dog while the people warned him that it is a taboo for a woman and dog to visit the grave. The man was said to have ignored this warning and after breaching this protocol, his wife and dog died in Awa-Oru.? “Since then, we have strictly enforced the ban on women and dogs entering this place,” Hamisu said.

Bilikisu was believed to have supernatural powers, and have dug pits around the village

with a mere needle. These pits could be found throughout *Ijebu* area and could have been dug to serve either as remembrance of her greatness after her death by her devoted slaves or as a source of water supply in the dry season. The pits are generally called *Sungbo* Rivers. On her tomb no weed has ever been known to grow there and on the spot where she was washed before being buried. Howbeit, the tradition of the *Ijebu* people forbids women and dogs to visit the spot where *Bilikisu* *Sungbo* was buried. At the shrine, there is a small open ground with no grass growing on it. The place is said to be the place where the ancient queen was washed before being buried. When one passes through the outer gate, which had a majestic look with a faded inscription Her Majesty, *Bilikisu* *Sungbo*, one will be required to remove one's shoes. The top of the grave was clean and neat as if it was swept every time. There are more than enough reasons to be skeptical about the claim that *Bilikisu* *Sungbo* was actually the Queen of Sheba. For instance, it is rather unbelievable that the final resting place of the legendary queen could be in a place far away from where the stories of the Bible or the Quran were written. Many cannot just understand the connection between the rustic Oke Eri Village and the woman of great virtue whose story is recorded in the Holy Books. However, despite the disbelief in some quarters, there is, perhaps, today, no solid story or evidence to contradict the conclusion that the grave which is tagged ‘Her Royal Majesty Queen Sheba Pure Holy and Caring’ is that of the queen of Sheba.

So far, not much is known about *Bilikisu* *Sungbo's* grave outside this local area and at least, no other site has been authenticated as her final resting place. That is not to say that the controversy is not on. In fact, for a long time it will continue to be in the public domain for debate as many are still bound to ask again and again if *Bilikisu* *Sungbo* is indeed the Queen of Sheba. To a British archaeologist, Dr. Patrick Darling of Bournemouth University, there is almost no doubt that the

Bilikisu Sungbo Grave in Oke Eri, is the burial site of the Queen of Sheba. To him, some of the signs on ground when he visited the shrine in 1994, were not far from what is expected and he ticked it as the most likely site, in the absence of another to contradict it.

Definition of concepts: Tourism, Sustainable tourism, sustainable development, and National development

Tourism has been described and defined by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO 1995:10) as: “a social, cultural and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes. These people are called visitors (which may be either tourists or excursionists; residents or non-residents) and tourism has to do with their activities, some of which imply tourism expenditure” while sustainable tourism therefore can be defined as “Tourism that takes full accounts of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities (Adeniran 2013)”. In other words, tourism must be oriented for the purpose of national development.

Tourism has been increasingly recognized for its economic potential to contribute to the reduction of poverty in developing countries. Its geographical expansion and labor intensive nature support a spread of employment and can be particularly relevant in remote and rural areas, where lies three quarters of the two billion people under extreme poverty conditions. Tourism is consumed at the point of production; the tourist has to go to the destination and spend his/her money there, opening an opportunity for local businesses of all sorts, and allowing local communities to benefit through the informal economy, by selling goods and services directly to visitors. Most least developed countries have a comparative advantage in tourism over developed countries. They have assets of

enormous value to the tourism industry-culture, art, music, natural landscapes, wildlife, and climate, including World Heritage Sites. Visits by tourists to such sites can generate employment and income for communities as well as helping in the conservation of cultural and natural assets.

It is a more diverse industry than many others and has the potential to support other economic activities, both through providing flexible, part-time jobs that can complement other livelihood options, and through creating income throughout a complex supply chain of goods and services. Tourism is labor intensive, which is particularly important in tackling poverty. It also provides a wide range of different employment opportunities especially for women and young people-from the highly skilled to the unskilled- and generally it requires relatively little training.

It creates opportunities for many small and micro entrepreneurs, either in the formal or informal economy; it is an industry in which start-up costs and barriers to entry are generally low or can easily be lowered. Tourism provides not only material benefits for the poor but also cultural pride. It creates greater awareness of the natural environment and its economic value, a sense of ownership and reduced vulnerability through diversifications of income sources.

When one considers the financial gains that many nations and states in the world are deriving from tourism, it is a surprise that other communities in search of alternative means of earnings and with comparative advantages in tourism such as Bayelsa state are not looking seriously enough in tourism directions.

The field of tourism is not immune to the concept of sustainable development given the close relationship between the natural environment and tourism (Inskeep, 1987). This relationship can be found in the definition of tourism by the World Tourism Organization as the management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetics needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural

integrity, essential ecological process, and biological diversity and life support systems. The World Commission on Environment and Development (WECD) defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs” (WECD, 1987). This definition follows the report in response to global concerns about the state of the global environment, which was noticeably degrading and degenerating rapidly. The significant aspect of this definition is that it places mankind at the heart of the global environmental deterioration given its view that the current rate of global natural resource consumption is at variance with the ‘carrying-capacity’ of the natural environment to regenerate itself (Agbaje-Williams, 1990). However, Ekechukwu (1990) notes that the concept of national development has a broad and generic meaning as a result of which different perspectives have been explored by development scholars. Okigbo (1983) opined that National Development should embrace political, economic, educational, technological and cultural changes, and should connote the process through which a polity improves its standard of living not only materially but also the realm of its value system. From these definitions, it is obvious that achieving national development, to a great extent, depends on people’s ability to liberate themselves from oppressive forces of nature and civilization as well as attitudes, and also on their economic, social, political as well as cultural institutions that will help transform and sustain the polity. These are basic ingredients that ought to be present in the right quality for a polity to convert its material endowments into resources for the attainment of national development. Adopting economic stance, therefore, Ford (1966) looked at Economic Development as sustained increases in output per head. He went further to say that it is through this that a community’s living standard can increase over the long period.

The neglected State of *Bilikisu* Sungbo shrine

The past administrative governments of Ogun state having realized the tourism potential of the site had attempted to give the area a facelift by constructing several guest chalets around the area and fencing the site round. Also, electricity was made available by the installation of a new transformer and the road to the site was paved. Unfortunately, the maintenance culture of the site eventually dwindled when the administration of the grave was taken over by the National Commission for Museums and Monuments. When The Nation newspaper visited the site (**when?**), all the buildings (i.e. chalets) have been vandalized, abandoned and taken over by the forest, grasses, and snakes, and was mostly inaccessible. The transformer which once supplied electricity to the area was long broken down and the gate of the grave destroyed. Another danger that threatens the site is the incidence of forest clearance and encroachment by farmers. The side-walls of the *Eredo* trench are caving in and the bottom is eroding as a result of the surrounding trees being cut down by farmers to create farmlands. Since 1999, nothing worthwhile so far has been done for the sustenance of the site to develop its potentiality as a tourism revenue earner. Also, the tourism marketing agency has not made any contribution so far to the *Bilikisu Sungbo* site. The tourism potential of the *Bilikisu Sungbo* shrine is also limited by the fact that women are not allowed inside which results into a reduction in the visitors to the site.



Fig I: Entrance to Her Majesty, Bilikisu Sungbo in Oke Eri village, Ijebu, Nigeria

However, the stakeholder theory suggests that an organization is characterized by its relationship with various groups and individuals, including employees, customers, suppliers, governments and members of the host communities (Olokesuji, 1987). A stakeholder is an organization by definition, any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives thus; a group qualifies as a stakeholder if it has a legitimate interest in aspects of the organization's activities. Exchange theories share a common set of analytical concepts; actors, resources, structures, and processes. The actors or people are individuals or groups, whilst their possessions or behavioral capabilities, when valued by other actors in the process, are called resources. The social exchange resources include tangible goods, services, and capacity to provide social values such as approval and status (Operinde, 2015). First, stakeholders are persons or groups with legitimate interests in procedural and/or substantive aspects of corporate activity. The interest of all stakeholders is of intrinsic value. Each stakeholder group is further reasoned to have a right to be treated as an end in itself, and not as means to some other end. From a managerial perspective, the stakeholder theory posits that the various groups can and should have a direct influence on managerial decision-making. Failure to retain participation of even a single primary stakeholder group will result in the failure of the organization. To implement stakeholders' management, the first key concept requires the actors in tourism to have a full appreciation of all the persons or groups who have interests in the planning, processes, management and distribution of tourism product and services. Often, planners underestimate the complexity of this step and default to a cursory report of only the most obvious stakeholders, chiefly tourist, business men/women and government official.

In Ogun State, infrastructural development and rural tourism are still at low level despite the fact that tourism resources are in abundance. Involvement of the local communities in tourism planning is yet to be witnessed. Appropriate environment has not been created to stimulate tourism growth in the rural areas. It behooves the governments at various levels to boost the country's tourism business through financial empowerment and ensuring that necessary investments are made to promote tourism (Olokesuji, 1987). This include Sugbon shrine. It is also important to also incorporate interested Nigerian business men and women into it to advance tourism business of the site. This they can do in collaboration with the country's culture and tourism ministry and the Nigeria Tourism Development Corporation (NTDC), as they take part in efforts to groom and nurture tourism sites and destinations in their domains. The NTDC management should work in partnership with any interested tourism expert at home and abroad, as well as other stakeholders who could donate meaningfully to tourism development of the shrine.

In view of the above, that there is an urgent need to involve the community members and local councils in Bilikisu Sungbo tourism planning and recommend a broad-based community participation through the local government as a corner-stone for such process. Also, that there should be more effective partnership between the various sectors of governments and the industry. The state government should not assume the role of planning and developing tourism alone without involving the local government authorities. This in turn will result into economic development for the people and the state and sustainability of the tourism ventures.

CONCLUSION

The discussions so far has pointed to the fact that *Bilikisu Sungbo* in Ijebu Ode whose potentials, if explored, will become a source of sustainable revenue for the country, reduce the country's dependence on oil, boost the

economy and transform the country socio-economically. The beauty of *Bilikisu* Sugbon in Ijebu Ode, apart from the ripple effects on other tourism sites is that it is a highly sustainable site with little expenses for maintenance and protection. It is indeed an enormous treasure mine for exploration and exploitation. We now know the tourist potentials, where they are located and it only requires the will, dedication and commitment of all, particularly the leadership of the state to provide positive direction so that others can follow suit in investing in the Tourism sector that is rich, sustainable with high and long term returns on investment.

As Okude (1997) rightly observed, international tourism is second only to oil as the single largest item of the world trade. The global economic meltdown and fallen prices of crude oil at the international market more than before makes it imperative for alternative sources of revenue to be exploited. Tourism can help us achieve the Nigeria of our dreams not only for the present but also for the future. Nigeria indeed lags far behind on the list of tourist countries around the world and depends far less on tourism for foreign exchange as many of our sites are not, according to Adeniran (2013), and have not been prepared for tourism. Indeed, tourism can promote Nigeria's global perception and create friends and allies for the country as one of world's tourist destinations (Agbaje-Williams, 1990). Around the country are tourism sites and attractions that if properly managed, could augment Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings. However, at the moment, efforts are gearing up in this regard to promote tourism in Nigeria and attract investment. Tourism sites could be beautiful waterfalls and other natural and cultural environments like mountains and historic landmarks of ancient palaces, rock monoliths, and museums and other exotic features of both such as our aquatic and crop life.

In each tourist nation, the preservation of artifacts and such other preservable facts of history become an essential responsibility for

the government arm, charged with promoting tourism. As noted by Ayeni, Ebohon, and Taki (2009), the 'Nigeria tourism industry is beset with numerous problems', and prominent amongst these are the dearth and absence of tourism infrastructures and supporting institutions. Thus, there is the need to focus on improving the physical look of *Bilikisu Sungbo* site of the Nigeria's tourist attractions. The Federal, state, and local governments who are responsible for providing infrastructure and amenities the tourism sectors require are expected to take up the responsibilities effectively. It has been observed that infrastructural development in rural areas in developing countries is still a significant barrier to tourism development (Peterson, 2010). Tourism planning requires strong local government support. Community people must be willing to cater to tourists and provide settings and experiences that are attractive to the visitors. Besides, community people claim ownership of the resources and the land on which the resources situate. Therefore, any plan without the involvement of the community members is likely to fail. Thus, *Bilikisu* Sugbon shrine in Ijebu Ode site can generate a huge source of revenue for the people, local government, state and federal government if its tourism potentials are adequately harnessed.

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