

Tourism Geography in Sub-Saharan African Cultures Analysis

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This essay analyzes tourism in Sub-Saharan Africa from a geographical and cultural perspective. The maps used in the original assignment identify a vast region extending from the southern edge of the Sahara to the Cape of Good Hope and from the Atlantic coast to the Indian Ocean. Treating this entire space as one culture would be misleading. Sub-Saharan Africa contains hundreds of languages, varied religions, major cities, rural communities, forests, savannas, deserts, mountains, coasts, rivers, islands, and long histories of trade and state formation. The original essay's strongest idea is that tourism should not be limited to wildlife safaris. Visitors can also learn from cultural landscapes, historic trade routes, architecture, performance, food, crafts, religious sites, urban life, and the knowledge of local communities. (UN Tourism, 2018)

Geography shapes tourism by influencing accessibility, climate, ecosystems, settlement, and the historical movement of people. Coastal regions connected East Africa with Arabia, Persia, India, and later Europe. Trans-Saharan routes connected West African kingdoms with North Africa and the Mediterranean. Rivers such as the Niger, Senegal, Congo, and Zambezi supported settlement and exchange, while highlands and lakes created different agricultural and cultural zones. Tourism itineraries should reflect these regional differences instead of presenting "African culture" as one unchanged village tradition.

Defining Sub-Saharan Africa

Sub-Saharan Africa is a geographic term for countries and regions located fully or partly south of the Sahara. It is useful for broad comparison but can hide important distinctions. The Sahel, West African coast, Congo Basin, East African highlands, Horn of Africa, Great Lakes region, southern African plateau, and Indian Ocean islands have different histories and tourism resources. Political borders also divide cultural and ecological regions that existed long before modern states.

A map should therefore be read as a representation rather than a complete reality. Boundaries, language groups, trade routes, and cities change over time, and a map's categories reflect its creator's purpose. The original assignment uses several maps to connect civilization, migration, trade, and cultural distribution. These maps become more meaningful when supplemented with historical and local information.

Precolonial Civilizations and Trade

The original essay states that civilizations began around the Red Sea because of Arab trade and European exploration. This requires correction. Complex societies and states developed across Sub-Saharan Africa through local agriculture, pastoralism, metallurgy, trade, political organization, and intellectual traditions long before European explorers arrived. External trade influenced development, but it did not create African civilization.

West Africa contained states and empires such as Ghana, Mali, and Songhai, connected with trans-Saharan commerce in gold, salt, textiles, and other goods. The city of Timbuktu became associated with scholarship and trade. Great Zimbabwe developed through regional production and Indian Ocean connections. Ethiopia maintained ancient state and religious traditions, while kingdoms in the Great Lakes, Congo, Sahel, and southern Africa followed their own histories. Tourism should present these societies as producers of history rather than passive recipients of outside influence.

The Red Sea and Indian Ocean World

The eastern coast of Africa participated in long-distance trade across the Indian Ocean. Coastal settlements exchanged gold, ivory, timber, iron, cloth, ceramics, spices, and other goods with Arabia, Persia, India, and later regions farther east. Over time, Swahili city-states developed distinctive urban cultures combining African foundations with extensive maritime connections. The Swahili language itself reflects Bantu structure and centuries of contact.

Historic towns such as Kilwa, Lamu, Mombasa, Zanzibar Stone Town, and Mozambique Island offer tourism opportunities involving architecture, archaeology, religion, food, and maritime history. They should not be described only as evidence of Arab presence. Local African merchants, craftspeople, sailors, farmers, and rulers shaped these urban societies. Interpretation should also address slavery and unequal trade rather than romanticizing every exchange.

Trans-Saharan and West African Routes

Across West Africa, caravan routes connected Sahelian states with North Africa. Camels made large-scale desert travel more practical, while river systems linked inland production and markets. Towns emerged at strategic locations where traders, scholars, rulers, and travelers met. Islam spread through trade and scholarship, interacting with existing beliefs and political systems.

A cultural-tourism itinerary could connect archaeological sites, manuscript traditions, mosques, markets, music, and oral history. However, routes that cross modern borders may face infrastructure, visa, and security limitations. Tourism planning must be based on current local conditions and should not encourage travel into unsafe areas merely for historical completeness.

European Exploration, Missionary Activity, and Colonization

The original essay identifies European explorers and missionaries as important before colonization. Their journeys produced maps and written records used by European audiences, but Africans already possessed detailed geographical knowledge and trade networks. Exploration was often connected with commercial interest, missionary activity, and later imperial expansion.

Colonial rule imposed borders, extracted resources, reorganized labor, and built transport routes primarily according to imperial needs. It also produced museums, mission stations, administrative centers, railways, and other sites now included in tourism. These places should be interpreted critically. A colonial building is not only picturesque architecture; it may represent dispossession, forced labor, segregation, or resistance.

Wildlife Tourism

The original essay observes that many international tourists are more interested in wildlife than in the cultures of local inhabitants. Wildlife tourism is a major sector in countries including Kenya, Tanzania, Botswana, South Africa, Namibia, Rwanda, Uganda, and others. Savanna safaris, gorilla trekking, birdwatching, marine tourism, and protected areas can generate revenue, employment, and conservation support.

Wildlife tourism also creates challenges. Protected areas have sometimes been established through the displacement or exclusion of Indigenous and local communities. Revenue may be concentrated in foreign-owned companies or national institutions while nearby residents bear crop damage, livestock loss, restricted land access, or dangerous animal encounters. Sustainable conservation requires community rights, benefit sharing, local employment, and participation in decisions.

Adding Human Interest to Tourism Itineraries

The original essay proposes adding “human interest” through cultural arts, traditional activities, and dance. This can enrich an itinerary when communities control how they are represented. A performance arranged for visitors may provide income and cultural pride, but it can become exploitative if tourists expect people to perform a fixed “traditional” identity on demand. Culture is lived and changing, not an exhibit frozen before colonization.

A respectful itinerary could include community-guided historical walks, artist studios, music events, markets, museums, food experiences, language learning, storytelling, religious architecture, contemporary design, and meetings with local conservation or social enterprises. Visitors should be

given context so that activities are understood as part of present life rather than as evidence that communities are “primitive.”

Culture as a Dynamic Resource

The original essay states that culture contributes to global diversity. Culture includes language, memory, food, belief, performance, family organization, architecture, work, and ways of interpreting place. It changes through migration, technology, education, trade, urbanization, and political struggle. Cultural tourism is strongest when it presents continuity and change together. (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, n.d.)

For example, a musician may use inherited rhythms with electronic production, or a textile designer may adapt established patterns for new markets. These developments do not necessarily represent the loss of authenticity. Authenticity is negotiated by communities, and outsiders should not demand that local people avoid modern life in order to satisfy a tourist expectation.

Villages and Cultural Practice

The original essay argues that villages preserve cultural practice more effectively than large cities. Rural communities may indeed maintain land-based knowledge, ceremonies, languages, crafts, and kinship structures with strong local continuity. Lower levels of migration and commercial development can preserve certain practices. Villages may therefore offer meaningful opportunities for community-based tourism.

However, it is inaccurate to assume that cities lack identifiable culture or that villages remain unchanged. African cities are major centers of music, literature, fashion, film, religion, food, political activism, and innovation. Lagos, Nairobi, Johannesburg, Accra, Dakar, Addis Ababa, Kinshasa, and many other cities produce distinctive cultures. Rural communities also use smartphones, migrate, participate in markets, and adapt traditions. Tourism should avoid a simple opposition between “Westernized city” and “authentic village.”

Urban Tourism

Urban tourism can include historic districts, galleries, memorials, universities, restaurants, nightlife, markets, architecture, and creative industries. Cities reveal how colonial planning, post-independence development, migration, inequality, and globalization interact. Informal settlements and infrastructure challenges should not be treated as spectacle. Tours should protect resident privacy and support local guides and businesses.

Contemporary urban culture helps visitors understand that Sub-Saharan Africa is not defined only by

wildlife and heritage. Film industries, technology hubs, design communities, and popular music are part of the region's geography. Including them produces a more accurate and balanced itinerary.

Migration and Linguistic Geography

The original map analysis mentions the movement of linguistic groups into different parts of the continent. The Bantu expansions, for example, involved long-term movements and interactions through which Bantu languages spread across much of central, eastern, and southern Africa. These processes occurred over centuries and included exchange, adaptation, and varied relations with existing populations.

Language maps can help tourists recognize regional connections, but they should not be interpreted as exact ethnic boundaries. Multilingualism is common, and people may use local, national, regional, and international languages in different settings. Language itself can be part of tourism through guided interpretation, place names, oral literature, and respectful learning of greetings.

Decolonization and National Tourism

The original essay refers to the period after colonization as decolonization. Political independence allowed new governments to shape national identity and tourism policy, but colonial economic and spatial structures often remained. Some countries promoted parks, monuments, cultural festivals, and national museums to attract visitors and communicate unity.

Tourism narratives can reproduce colonial perspectives when landscapes are described as empty wilderness or local people as timeless subjects. Decolonizing tourism involves community voice, accurate history, local ownership, return of cultural objects where appropriate, and recognition of whose knowledge defines a destination.

Community-Based Tourism

Community-based tourism gives residents a meaningful role in ownership, management, employment, and benefit distribution. It can support homestays, guiding, crafts, conservation, and cultural education. Success depends on market access, governance, training, infrastructure, and realistic visitor demand. Labeling a project "community based" does not guarantee fair distribution.

Communities should decide which sites and practices may be shared. Some ceremonies, sacred spaces, or knowledge may not be appropriate for tourism. Consent must be continuous, and visitors should follow rules concerning photography, dress, behavior, and environmental impact.

Economic Benefits and Leakage

Tourism earns foreign exchange, supports jobs, and stimulates transport, accommodation, food, and services. The original essay correctly identifies it as an important source of income for many countries, though dependence varies. Economic benefit is reduced by leakage when profits, imported goods, booking fees, or ownership transfer income outside the destination.

Local procurement, training, fair wages, small-business support, and direct booking can increase retained value. Governments should also balance tourism investment with public needs. A luxury development should not receive water, land, or infrastructure at the expense of residents.

Environmental Pressure

Tourism can damage the wildlife and landscapes it sells. Vehicle congestion, waste, water use, construction, disturbance, and carbon emissions require management. Carrying-capacity rules, visitor limits, zoning, wastewater systems, and conservation fees can reduce pressure. Climate change adds risks through drought, heat, coral loss, wildfire, and shifting wildlife patterns.

Cultural tourism also has environmental effects because travel, accommodation, and events consume resources. Sustainability should be part of itinerary design rather than limited to wildlife parks.

Ethical Representation

Tourism marketing often uses selective images of poverty, tribal identity, smiling children, or untouched nature. These images may attract visitors while reducing people to stereotypes. Ethical representation uses names, histories, and contemporary voices. It avoids treating residents as scenery and does not promise unrestricted access to private life.

Tourists also have responsibility. They should research local norms, purchase respectfully, ask permission before photography, and avoid activities that exploit children, wildlife, or vulnerable communities. Learning should be reciprocal rather than extractive.

A Balanced Itinerary

A balanced itinerary would combine natural and cultural geography. In East Africa, it might connect wildlife landscapes with Swahili coastal history, local food, museums, contemporary art, and community conservation. In West Africa, it might include historic trade centers, music, memorial sites, craft traditions, and urban culture. Southern African itineraries could connect parks with mining history, anti-apartheid memory, architecture, and living cultural institutions.

No itinerary can represent the whole region. Its value depends on depth, responsible pacing, local partnership, and explanation. Adding one staged dance to a safari is not enough. Culture should shape the interpretation of place throughout the journey.

Conclusion

Tourism geography in Sub-Saharan Africa includes much more than the location of wildlife parks. Historic trade across the Sahara, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean helped connect African societies with wider regions, but African civilizations developed through local knowledge, production, and political organization rather than being created by outsiders. Colonization and decolonization reshaped borders, cities, infrastructure, and tourism narratives.

The original essay's proposal to include cultural arts and human experience in itineraries remains valuable when approached respectfully. Villages can preserve important practices, but cities also produce distinctive and dynamic cultures. Responsible tourism combines wildlife, heritage, contemporary life, community authority, and accurate historical interpretation. Its success should be measured not only by visitor numbers but by whether residents retain control, receive fair benefits, and can represent their own cultures as living realities.

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