

Briefing of 10/24/2001
Cultural Dimensions of Global Tourism
by
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1. Antigua-A Small Place

Jamaica Kincaid's Antigua and Barbuda is a small place in the West Indies/Eastern Caribbean Sea. It is nine miles wide by twelve miles long. Christopher Columbus was the first European to discover the island in 1493. The British had not successfully colonized the island until 1632. Antigua became self-governing in 1967 but did not achieve its full independence from Britain until 1981. When tourists go to Antigua, they see the magnificent clear blue water, the white and pink sand beaches and a gorgeous view of the sky. But for the natives who live there it is anything but paradise. They are trapped in a system of corruption and degradation that has infected the island throughout its history. England had oppressed the people of Antigua for hundreds of years and when they finally received their independence, in turn the new elite of Antigua continued to exploit the Antiguan. In *A Small Place*, Jamaica Kincaid expresses her frustrations about growing up in this underprivileged, dishonest, and ignorant small place that many tourists visit, but never care to acknowledge. There are many reasons that are illustrated in her book to support this opinion.

2. Government Corruption

There are vast amounts of deceit and corruption tied in with the government. Here are a few of the many examples given. One is how easy it is to get a car loan instead of a mortgage in Antigua because the government wants it that way. The reason for this is that a few government ministers and government officials own or have shares in the two main Japanese car dealerships in Antigua (Kincaid, p.7). This is why all government automobiles are Japanese models and why officials receive a new car every year. Other, more illicit, businesses are practiced as well. Someone close to the Prime Minister owns the largest brothel. Another official is involved in drug trafficking. The U.S. based Mafia controls some casinos in Antiguan tourist hotels. They bribe someone in government to let them operate. Once, eleven million dollars donated by the French government to Antigua simply vanished in government channels. All these events, its perpetrators and their businesses are public knowledge (Kincaid, p.59) but not many dare to speak up in the public. One reason is that all radio stations in Antigua are owned by the government. And those in power attempt to silence any criticism by the opposition party, criticized are only the critics (Kincaid, p.66f).

3. Society and Underdevelopment

Jamaica Kincaid explains how substandard living conditions in Antigua really are. Some people may drive fancy Japanese model automobiles but at the same time they live in a house that pales in comparison to the cost of the car (Kincaid, p.7). The health care system is in shambles. Therefore, whenever government officials get sick they fly to New York to see a real doctor. Antiguan don't even refer to physicians as doctors, rather they call them "the three men" (Kincaid, p.8). A library was damaged in the

earthquake of 1974. Since then a sign in the front says *Repairs Are Pending* but nothing was ever done about it (Kincaid, p.9). And there is no proper sewage disposal system in Antigua. The waste is flushed out into the Atlantic Ocean or the Caribbean Sea next to tourist beaches (Kincaid, p.14). Education also falls in this category of decay. According to Kincaid “most young people seem almost illiterate, they speak English as if it were their sixth language,” (Kincaid, p. 43), a result of the bad post-colonial education.

4. Effects of British Colonialism and Oppression

Antigua's century-long domination by the British colonial empire strongly affected culture and identity of the island. Wherever the British went, they turned a place into something that reflected their values and attitudes. Kincaid tells how a street near her birthplace was named after an English maritime hero, who was in fact a criminal government pirate. The same applies to other streets on the island. Antiguan natives were also subjected to the same laws as in England--one Puritan law even opposed cursing. And Antiguan natives were forced to forget their own language and dialects. Instead they had to speak in the same tongue and to pray to the same imported Gods as the British occupiers (Kincaid, p.25). Kincaid also rages about how wealthy and successful colonial slaveholders and people in the West became by means of century-long exploitation and cruel treatment of the island's inhabitants. Kincaid writes, “Not only do we have to suffer the unspeakableness of slavery, but the satisfaction to be had from making you bastards rich”. She also explains the hostility and ignorance of people in Antigua against ways of doing successful business because, as Kincaid explains, during the slave trade the Blacks were treated like "capital" themselves. Antiguan natives were exchanged on markets like commodities or cattle and the memory of this handling is still with them (Kincaid, p.37).

5. The Ignorance of Western Tourists

The effects of Western tourism on the island's conditions is an important part in Jamaica Kincaid's message. One instance is the so called Mill Reef Club. This was a place built by North Americans to spend their holiday in Antigua. The owners made the club "private" and only invited natives if they agreed to be servants. Kincaid calls the Western owners and their customers “pigs” because they had such bad manners and racist attitudes. Not only did they treat the natives of Antigua as subhumans. They also did not respect the fact that they were the strangers in a land that did not belong to them (Kincaid, p.27). For this and other reasons, the natives of Antigua do not like tourists very much. They frown upon their table manners using silverware while the locals use their hands. Antiguan natives mock the accents of foreigners, their pinkish skin color, untrained fat bodies, and ungrateful manners. At the same time the natives envy tourists. For the tourists can afford to visit the beautiful island of Antigua and be ignorant to what really goes on. Meanwhile many residents themselves can't afford to travel abroad or marvel at the beauty of their own island. They labor hard every day and are stuck in their ordinary existence of poverty. They envy Western tourists in the same capacity they despise them (Kincaid, p.17-19).

6. Questions for Class Discussion:

- 1) What changes have been made, if any, to alter the way society runs in Antigua after Kincaid published her book in the mid-1980's? After it's release, did *A Small Place* bring about any changes on the island?
- 2) Why do Antiguan hate tourists when tourism is a major employer and contributor to their economy? Had tourism only negative effects on natives and their society?
- 3) Isn't it illusory to expect mass tourists arriving for a few days on a Caribbean island to respect and know the history, culture, language, and people of their destination?
- 4) What is the core of Antigua's cultural identity apart from the British colonial legacy? Can the pre-colonial island culture really become a source of pride?
- 5) Jamaica Kincaid faced criticism for the belligerent tone in her book. Is there sufficient justification for this?