

Tourism and Commoditization of Traditional Cultures among the Himba People of Namibia

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Abstract

The objective of the study was to investigate the Tourism and Commoditization of Traditional Cultures among the Himba People of Namibia. Globalization theory by Greg Richards and the use value theory by Marx was linked with this study. A mixture of methods comprising of descriptive cross-sectional survey, phenomenology and ethnographic research designs was employed to assess the effect of commoditization of traditional cultures among the Himba people through tourism. The study employed two principal data collection techniques: questionnaires and in-depth interviews. Stratified sampling and purposive sampling procedures were used. Purposive sampling was used as a non-probability sampling method in the sampling of key informants such as tour-guide, local leaders and museum employees. The study took place in two sampled villages in the Opuwo rural constituency, namely, Ohunguomure Village and Okatutura ka Vinjange, which form the major cultural tourist destinations. The sample size of this study was 98. Data was analysed using qualitative and quantitative approaches. Quantitative analysis was applied to close-ended questions, and the data were analysed in terms of frequencies and percentages using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21. Qualitative data obtained from open-ended questions and interviews were analysed thematically. The study concludes that commoditization of culture is diluting culture and destroys the originality of the culture. The study recommends the need for this Ministry to have a component or department that specifically works towards the issue of commoditization of the Himba culture in the Kunene Region.

Key Terms: Commoditization, Himba people, Traditional Cultures, Tourism

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Introduction

Tourism is considered to be among the fastest-growing sectors in the world, and one of the best methods for conservation of nature as well (Mbaiwa, & Amanda, 2010). According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) (2012), the travel and tourism industry remains one of the most dynamic and largest industries in today's global economy. Tourism has evolved into various forms and types, among them being cultural tourism. When we talk about cultural tourism, we refer to tourists travelling to the destination because of the local peoples' culture. In other words, cultural tourism is a type of tourism whereby tourists travel to the destination to meet other cultures, which attract them. Cultural tourism was recognised as a distinct product category in the late 1970s when tourism marketers and tourism researchers realised that some people travel specifically to gain a deeper understanding of the culture or heritage of a destination (Hilary, & Bob, 2015). However, a prevailing assumption is that cultural tourism destroys or changes the cultures and traditions of indigenous groups. It is believed that because culture becomes a commodity, sold either by tourist operators or by the communities themselves, it is no longer an authentic culture but a business enterprise.

Within the global context of cultural tourism development, tourism scholars argue that with the rapid economic growth and increasing affluence in most parts of the world, the number of international and intra-country tourists visiting local communities and other destinations in Africa will continue to increase in the near future (Mbaiwa, 2011). According to Christie et al. (2013), rich traditions of music, art, and dance in sub-Saharan Africa form unique cultural attractions believed in providing substantial opportunity for tourism growth. In Africa, the tourism industry is a major sector of the economy for many countries (Hayombe, et al., 2012). Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, and South Africa are the four countries seen to benefit most from tourism. Namibia,

Botswana, Mozambique, Tanzania, and Kenya are the second category (UNWTO, 2014). Although Novelli (2015) states that many African countries have used cultural tourism as their niche to diversify their tourism economies, the question of the integrity of showcased cultures and traditions remains unexplored. This resulted into commoditization of indigenous cultural aspects.

Commoditization of culture is not a new phenomenon but has existed in the world for centuries with its positive and negative impacts on the indigenous peoples' culture. Commoditization of culture is defined as culture being turned into a commodity, packaged and sold to tourists. Agata (2009) writes that commoditization of culture is the process whereby the owners of the culture transfer it as a supply to consumers. In a sense, their uniqueness such as ways of life, traditions and symbolisms, are transformed into saleable products to satisfy tourists' demands on cultural experiences. Through commoditization of cultural aspects, it led the move of cultural to creative cultural tourism to meet tourists' demands. In Namibia, commoditization of traditional cultures is increasing due to a large number of tourists visiting heritage sites. Lisette (2013) observes that before the independence of Namibia in 1990, the Ju'hoanse culture had declined tremendously. However, from 1994 when tourists started to come to Namibia seeking to experience the tradition of San people, a cultural revival was noted. Tourists sought to know how San people lived and experience their culture hence motivating the Ju'hoansi to revive their culture to meet the needs of the tourists. Consequently, the resulting relationship between the San people and tourists triggered a new source of income.

Just like the Ju'hoansi, the Himba culture remains one of the unique cultures in Namibia. The uniqueness of Himba culture and norms continue to attract many tourists

seeking to observe and have experience of the unique Himba culture. For many years, the number of foreigners visiting Himba villages has increased. Murdock (2013) postulates that the Himba people have recognized how their lifestyle can attract tourists for revenue. However, scholars argue that cultures that are performed as tourist attractions lose their originality to accommodate the tourists' demands (Cahyadi, 2015). Moreover, they further emphasize that commoditization of culture destroys or changes the cultural practices and traditions of the indigenous groups. It deprives the culture of its meaning and role of providing individuals with identity and belonging.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural tourism was recognised as a distinct product category in the late 1970s when tourism marketers and tourism researchers realised that some people travelled specifically to gain a deeper understanding of the culture or heritage of a destination (Hilary, & Bob 2015). Cultural tourism is a type of tourism whereby tourists travel to the destination to meet other cultures, which attract them. According to Hilary and Bob (2015), cultural tourism is one of the forms of tourism, which attracts vast numbers of tourists in the world. Cultural tourism products contribute to the enrichment of the image of the destination, such as traditional dance and cultural heritage places. Presentably, cultural tourism is one of the tourism elements, which attract huge numbers of tourists now.

Cultural tourism is one of the elements, which attract huge numbers of tourists now. Culture becomes a product that is sold by the host community and consumed by cultural tourists. The increase of the cultural tourists' demands for cultural products has left the tourism industry without any choice but to put all cultural aspects on the market for satisfying their consumers' needs and wants, such as traditional dances, arts and

crafts, and the traditional sites or historical sites. Moreover, the uniqueness of culture has been classified into its material and non-material aspects. The material culture is the visible, tactile objects, which people able to manufacture. On the other hand, non-material culture refers to the intangible or invisible aspects of culture, such as norms and the philosophy of the people (Oster-Beal, 2013).

Globalization and commercialisation through tourism may be blamed on the question of the authenticity of many cultural aspects, which are consumed in the contemporary market. In today's world, social fabrics become tradable goods on the global tourism market. Those sellable elements of the local culture have passed through the process of modified cultural products tis is according to the market demands and needs. Traditional rites, dances, norms, songs, ceremonies, and events are put on the stage and promoted like a theatre play (Richards, 2007). Thabu Bosiu cultural village in Lesotho commodifies Sotho culture by showing Lesotho's traditional and cultural heritage such as the Basotho blanket and hat, which they display in front of the tourists. The Basotho blanket is made from a pure wool whilst hat from grass and is sold to the tourists. Moreover, their traditional huts made of mud also attracts tourists (Manwa, 2014).

Similarly, Sanchez (2017) writes that the Bamasaba tribe in eastern Uganda sell the festivities of circumcision to the tourists. The study further indicated that tourists can pay to attend a centuries-old public circumcision ritual conducted after every two years in parts of Western Kenya and Uganda. This ceremony of a teenage boy's passage to manhood is no more a secret in this tribe, but it looked like a public show because candidates are circumcised in public. In the three-day ceremony, locals and foreign tourists are allowed to camp in the circumcision area while drink home-brewed millet beer,

enjoying roasted bulls, and watch a traditional dance called kadodi.

Additionally, Bomas Village in Kenya is a historical site in Nairobi, where national folklore troupes are performed to tell stories that purposely promote Kenyan nationalism/equality among ethnic groups. Fortes (2013) stated that when the tourists visit the site, they pay to enjoy the different cultural dances. In this case, culture is again commoditized as a good. At the same time, the Maasai have commoditized their culture through postcards, Maasai wraps, and films worldwide. Thus, in the current epoch, any form of culture can be commoditised. The pressure of cultural tourists hard-pressed on cultural tourism left the tourism industry without any alternative opportunity but only to commodify the forms and cultural activities, as the consumers are demanding. The increase of the cultural tourist's demands for cultural products has left the tourism industry without any choice but to put all cultural aspect on the market for the purpose to satisfy their consumers' needs and wants (Jovchelovitch, 2007). The Himba people represents a case of indigenous communities in the world today that have sustained their cultural practices and values to become a cultural tourism hosting destination in Namibia. The forms and activities of cultural practices among the Himba community that attract tourists include traditional dances, creative arts, traditional crafts, holy fire, house structures, women bathing on the smoke and hairstyle. This study has hinged on the premise that the community practices of Himba people are based on authentic and original culture. However, in the areas which are more prone to the tourist's attraction they, sometimes they modify the souvenirs to meet the needs and purposes of the consumers. Most of the local sellers modify their cultural souvenirs with the purpose to pull the attention of the tourist and fulfil their expectations and demands.

Therefore, the Himba community, in many cases collect various cultural components in order to add artificial value to their products to attract tourists. For example, the container from cattle horn is decorated with copper wires to look more attractive to the tourists. The container is considered vital because it is used to keep the traditional lotion and cattle butter for smearing on women bodies. The significant part of it is used for women bathing on the smoke, topless body and for their hairstyle. This attracts most of the multitude of tourists to travel to Opuwo rural areas to experience the bathing of Himba women.

Another activity that attracts tourists is the Holy fire in an indigenous Himba house. The Holy fire represents the life and blessing among the community of Himba People. The Holy fire is a place where the elderly communicates with their ancestors. Traditionally, only the community members are supposed to come close to the holy fire. Moreover, traditional dance among the Himba people is regarded as one of the attractive activities to tourists. Both men and women participate in the traditional dance. The increasing numbers of cultural tourist among the Himba community have encouraged them to commodify their cultural aspect to the tourists since tourists want to see and know more about their culture. The study found out that some community members regard commoditization of traditional culture as the strategies to alleviate poverty, through a willing seller-willing-buyer arrangement. This has also contributed to the modifying of the cultural aspect or souvenirs in order to attract consumers. Of course, it which may lead to the diluting of the norms and values.

Commoditisation of culture leads the community to lose the authenticity and originality of their culture. The study, therefore, sought to establish whether the Himba community practice the authentic and original culture. Himba people are well known for their traditional attire,

which are made from goat or sheepskin and smeared with ochre giving them a reddish look. Himbas creative arts and traditional crafts such as wooden vessels, wooden bowl, Himba women doll and horn container are some of the cultural items which tourist like to buy their traditional commodities. This makes the tourists make their destination to the Himba communities. Holy fire is a place where elderly people in the community communicate with their ancestors' spirit in difficulty and easy time. This place is also attracting visitors, and they like to take pictures and only insiders allowed to sit around that place.

The scarcity of water in the area of the Himba community forced the Himba women to start bathing in smoke. This was using an alternative way to keep women health and hygiene. Himba women bathing in the smoke became attractive because it is a unique method of bathing when it comes to African culture. In many cases, when tourists make their destination on the Himba community, they ask them to demonstrate on how to bath on the smoke. This method of bathing on the smoke had been practised a long time ago, and it is still use by the present generation. Even though it is was used as an alternative way to keep hygiene, now it has become one of the cultural activities, which pull more tourists in the area. Women bath on the smoke is one of the most attractive to the tourists and like to watch how they are bathing on the smoke.

The impact of tourism on local culture, leading to the emergence of commoditization, has become prominent in international tourism research (Mbaiwa, 2011). There are in-depth discussions on the effects of commoditization of culture among scholars. The argument had divided the scholars into two groups because some view commoditization of culture on the negative perspective while others on a positive perspective.

In Brazil, findings of a study by Richard (2009) among the indigenous tribes in Brazilian Amazon pointed out that commoditization of culture has reduced the authenticity of cultures; destroyed local identity and cultural values; lead to standardization of culture; turned a local phenomenon into a global one, and resulted into cultural conflicts. Moreover, when the local culture is attached to economic value or is performed by outsiders, it loses value among the local communities, and its originality and meaning is lost.

Generally, the commoditization of culture has many advantages to the local community such as economic benefits, utilization of tourist facilities by local people, and the opportunity of making new friends. On the other hand, through the commoditization of culture, local people gain cultural self-consciousness and become proud of their own culture. Furthermore, the study highlight that the commoditization of culture is viewed as a strategy of eradicating poverty and empowering the locals.

In Africa, according to the study on Moroccan couscous by Elkhdar (2012), the Moroccan couscous no longer keeps its secrets within the confines of the nation because the product was re-packaged and sold globally. However, this resulted in the new generation not being acquainted with the original culture as it has undergone a lot of modification. Lisette (2013) also established the layout of the local baskets in Okavango Delta, Botswana, are no more in use as it should be. This prompted high competition among the producers and had caused certain aspects of the baskets to be modified in ways deemed suitable to the tourists' tastes. For instance, instead of using the traditional tree backs and roots, synthetic material is used such as plastics and dyes. The authenticity of the local basket has been diluted in the name of cultural commoditization. The locals are now collecting various cultural components to add something

artificial to the product to make it eye-catching for tourists the way they did with basket. The villagers abandoned this indigenous identity and responded to the tourists' demand for representations of the artificial basket. In agreement with such observations, Conradie (2012) postulates that "in South Africa, indigenous culture has undergone deep-seated change as the vast majority of the population have adopted Western norms, religions, customs, dress, and language". Such development is the outcome of commodifying culture, which has ultimately destroyed an indigenous culture.

In a study on the San people of Namibia, Lisette (2013) argued that the culture would be lost because the host population adopts new lifestyles, which they have learned from outsiders. The process of commoditization of culture is destroying the social fabrics and its authenticity, leading to cultural erosion. Nevertheless, it is not necessarily true that cultural commoditization destroys the authenticity of local cultural products and human relations. Still, it depends on how the community packages their cultural products and how the consumers are accepting it.

It is emphasised that commoditization does not only destroy the meaning of cultural fabrics, but it affects the original meaning of it and the value of it to the host community. As time goes, it will also lose the value even to the tourists and no one will be attracted to it (Conradie, 2012). Therefore, it is for the tourism industry to put in place mechanisms that promote cultural authenticity and prevent the destruction of culture through commoditization. Cultural tourism has grown in recent years. Many tourists are visiting different countries around the globe. Cultural tourism is the source of attraction to many people as they seek to experience the culture of the indigenous people in their natural environment. Through the interaction between the local people and tourists in many areas, including the Himba

community, there had been both positive and negative results.

One of its adverse effects is that it gradually destroys the originality of the cultural practices as indigenous people begin to adopt the lifestyle and practices of the visiting cultures. One of the scholars Richard (2009) in his study on the indigenous tribes in Brazilian Amazon he found out that commoditization of culture has reduced the authenticity of cultures; destroyed local identity and cultural values; lead to standardization of culture; turned a local phenomenon into a global one, and resulted into cultural conflicts. This applied to the Himba community too; for example, they are decorating their traditional products to suit the consumers' demand. Besides, the product that symbolizes life in the family were not supposed to be sold, such as baby carry, which symbolizes life in the family. In that way, the meaning of the baby carry is no more meaning the same because the children who are going to be carried are not from that same family lineage.

Moreover, when the local culture is attached to economic value or is performed by outsiders, it loses value among the local communities, and its originality and its meaning may lose in the process. Through interaction between Himba people and visitors, it had strenuously affected the lifestyle of the Himba men because they are no more wearing their traditional attire from the skin. Still, they buy fabrics and even wearing European t-shirt, which is not part of their culture. Both men and women in Himba culture were supposed to be topless, but at present men have changed their traditional attire to the European one and this influenced by the interaction between them and outsiders because some of the visitors give them those European cloth.

On a positive note, it is dearly regarded as a source of income for the community; the commoditization of

culture has many advantages to the local community such as economic benefits, utilisation of tourist facilities by local people, and the opportunity of making new friends. On the other hand, through the commoditization of culture, local people gain cultural self-consciousness and become proud of their own culture. Furthermore, the study highlights that the commoditization of culture is viewed as a strategy of eradicating poverty and empowering the locals.

FINDINGS

The study investigated on the effects of commoditization of the traditional culture among the Himba people of Namibia. The study found out that the Himba community modified their cultural souvenirs to meet tourists' expectations, tastes and demands. These findings contradict with the findings of Tumwesigye and Kasiye (2012), who earlier asserted that the Himba community preserve their cultural norms and heritage and do not spice them to make them suit the tourist's expectations. The findings further contradict the findings of the Namibian Statistical Agency (2012), which claimed that the Himba community are conservative and submit to their original cultural expectations rather than changing them to suit tourists expectations.

The study further to explore whether the Himba community still practices authentic and original or indigenous culture. When we talk about authentic culture among the Himba community is the way of life of the Himba people, i.e., their dress code, their beautification styles, the type of food they eat and the various cultural practices which are exhibited by the Himba people. The study found out that they still live their indigenous culture based on their traditional attire, hairstyles and traditional food. The majority of the respondents, 87 per cent agree to the statement that they still practice authentic and original culture. These findings corroborate with the findings of Jovchelovitch (2007) who stated that if a

community practice its authentic and original culture, it is a sign of submission to the original culture and such a community submits to the values of and norms of its cultural heritage which it passes on from generation to generation.

In addition, the study discovers out that commoditization of culture is a way of earning a living being practiced by the Himba community. The respondents, 78 per cent agree to the statement, that commoditization of culture is a way for earning a living. The findings uphold the findings of Agata (2009) that commoditization of culture is the ability to change a cultural product or souvenir or service in order to meet consumer's demand and supply in gainful exchange.

Namibia to be a semi-desert country, it also experiences the lack of water in most areas in the country. As a result, it had affected the living style of the Himba people, particularly women. The lack of water in the region had forced women to look of another alternative of bathing without using water, which at the same time become attractive to the tourists. Murdock (2013), stated that one of the most remarkable Himba traits is that the women are not allowed to use water for washing. The great scarcity of water forced this situation were only men allowed to bath with water because they can able to access at the water point such as rivers or streams. Even though the water is scarcity in the area, this did not resulted into lack of personal hygiene among the Himba women, but they use smoke to bath. On the statement whether women bathing on the smoke is more attractive than other cultural activities in the village, the study found out that the bathing on the smoke is not more attractive to compare with other cultural activities such as holy fire and traditional attire. This finding contradicts the findings of Murdock (2013) who stated that women bathing on the smoke is more attractive than other cultural activities in the village as act of where

commoditization they try to make themselves more marketable to the tourists.

The study also revealed that the tourists are interested in taking pictures of the Holy fire. The holy fire is a symbol of life in the community and a place for communicating with the ancestral spirits during initiation ceremonies. It is also the place to plead for ancestral protection during the sad moments like death, famine, flood and drought. The place is very unique in the community because only men are allowed to sit around it, and no strangers can come closer to it or walk between it and the main hut in the homestead holy fire is no more regarded as a sacred place, which bind the community together. About 81 per cent of the respondents collaborate that tourist are interested in taking pictures of the Holy Fire. These findings concur with the findings of Michael and Heinemann (2002) who indicated that the holy fire in the Himba traditional culture plays a significant role in attracting more tourists in the Himba community due to the fact that it displays a unique role that is not common in most cultures of the Namibian tribes and beyond.

The study also found out that modernization has ruined some of the social fabrics of the Himba traditional culture and those compromising cultural norms, rituals, and values have disrupted the chain of the social fabric of the Himba culture. The respondents, 82 per cent had shown that the modernization had ruined some of the social fabrics of the community, such as respect of Holy fire and women bathing on the smoke. These findings agree with the findings of Nattapon et al. (2018) who indicated that most cultural norms and practices are succumbing to modernity as most people resort to changes in line with the globalized world where each individual try to fit in the modern society or modern world.

It was revealed that 83 per cent of the respondents agreed that, commoditization of culture is diluting culture

and destroys the originality of the culture. Furthermore, participants indicated that through commoditization, culture loses meaning as many people are adopting some cultural attributes that are not necessarily for the Himbas but practices which are geared to meet the needs and demands of the tourists who come to visit them. Moreover, the study also revealed that there is no policy implemented on the commoditization of culture and that the tourism industry has insufficient policies on the commoditization of culture that protect both the host community and tourists. Further, the study also unveiled that there are inadequate policies on what to commoditize and what not to be commoditized by the Himba people.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion: This study purposes to investigate the effects of tourism and commoditization of traditional culture among the Himba people, in Kunene Region, Namibia. The study concludes that commoditization of culture is diluting culture and destroys the originality of the culture. According to the participants, they unveiled that through commoditization, culture loses meaning as many people are adopting some cultural attributes that are not necessarily for the Himbas but practices which are geared to meet the concerned needs and demands for the tourists who come to visit them. A mixed-method approach was used to answer the research questions. Finally, this study contributes new knowledge to a limited body of literature on tourism and commoditization of traditional cultures in Namibia.

Recommendation: Tourism and Environmental Ministry is responsible for all the tourists' issues in the country. Therefore, the study recommends the need for this Ministry to have a component or department that specifically works towards the issue of commoditization of the Himba culture in the Kunene Region so that the culture of the Himba people is not diluted through commoditization and tourism. The Himba need to be

sufficiently educated on the need to preserve and conserve their culture rather than succumbing to commoditization. There is a need to penalize those people who indulge in the commoditization of the Himba culture in Namibia. Design policies that address the issue

of cultural commoditization among the Himba people is necessary so that they understand the need to conserve their cultural heritage and norm.

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