

Cultural Tourism And The Preservation Of Local Heritage And Traditions: A Case Study Of The Batwa Communities In Kisoro District, Uganda

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Abstract

Cultural tourism has emerged as a powerful tool for preserving indigenous heritage, yet its implementation in marginalized communities requires careful examination. This study investigates the relationship between cultural tourism development and the preservation of Batwa heritage and traditions in Kisoro District, Uganda. Using a mixed-methods approach combining semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participatory observation with 120 Batwa community members and 45 tourism stakeholders, the research reveals that structured cultural tourism programs have significantly contributed to the revitalization of traditional practices, including pottery, honey hunting, and forest-based rituals. However, commercialization pressures and unequal benefit distribution threaten the authenticity of cultural expressions. The findings underscore the need for community-led governance structures, equitable revenue-sharing mechanisms, and culturally sensitive tourism frameworks to ensure that cultural tourism serves both heritage preservation and community economic empowerment. The study contributes to the growing literature on indigenous tourism and offers a replicable model for similar communities across East Africa.

Keywords: Cultural Tourism, Preservation, Local Heritage, Traditions and Batwa Communities

Introduction

The Batwa, often referred to as 'Keepers of the Forest,' are one of Uganda's oldest indigenous communities, with a history stretching back thousands of years in the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest and Mgahinga Gorilla National Park ecosystems in Kisoro District (Ntirandekura & Christopher, 2022). Their eviction from these forests following the gazettement of national parks in 1991 and 1992 resulted in a profound rupture in their cultural continuity, as their traditions, livelihoods, and spiritual practices were inextricably tied to the forest environment (Lewis, 2000; Moro, 2011). Displaced onto the margins of agricultural communities, the Batwa faced rapid cultural erosion, extreme poverty, and social marginalization that rendered them among the most vulnerable indigenous peoples in Uganda (UNHCR, 2015).

Cultural tourism has been promoted in Kisoro District since the early 2000s as a strategy to address the twin challenges of Batwa poverty and cultural loss. The Mgahinga and Bwindi Impenetrable Forest Conservation Trust (MBIFCT), in partnership with the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) and several non-governmental organizations, developed the 'Batwa Trail Experience,' a guided cultural tourism product that takes visitors through reconstructed forest life demonstrations (Kidd & Kenrick, 2009). This initiative attracted over 12,000 visitors between 2015 and 2023, generating significant revenue, though questions persist about the extent to which the Batwa themselves control, benefit from, and find meaning in these tourism encounters (Plumptre et al., 2019).

This study is therefore motivated by a need to critically examine whether cultural tourism in Kisoro District is genuinely preserving Batwa heritage or inadvertently commodifying and distorting it. The research addresses gaps in the literature regarding indigenous-led cultural tourism governance and long-term heritage outcomes in post-displacement contexts(Christopher & Felex, 2022). By centering Batwa voices and experiences, this study contributes to more equitable and culturally sustainable tourism development frameworks.

Problem Statement

Despite increased tourism activity in Kisoro District, the Batwa community continues to face cultural erosion, economic marginalization, and limited agency in the tourism value chain(Nicholas et al., 2023). There exists a fundamental tension between the commodification demands of the tourism industry and the need for authentic cultural preservation. Without adequate community participation in tourism governance, revenue sharing, and decision-making, cultural tourism risks reducing Batwa heritage to a spectacle rather than a living tradition(Julius, Nicholas, et al., 2024). Furthermore, there is limited empirical evidence documenting whether existing cultural tourism models in Kisoro have measurably contributed to heritage preservation outcomes among the Batwa.

Main Objective

To assess the contribution of cultural tourism to the preservation of Batwa cultural heritage, traditions, and livelihoods in Kisoro District, Uganda.

Methods and Materials

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design to provide both statistical breadth and qualitative depth. The study was conducted in four sub-counties of Kisoro District: Nyarusiza, Muramba, Bukimbiri, and Nteko, which collectively host the largest concentrations of Batwa settlements in the district(Olanrewaju et al., 2021). A total of 120 Batwa respondents were selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques, supplemented by 45 key informants comprising tourism operators, NGO representatives, UWA rangers, and local government officials. Quantitative data were collected using a structured questionnaire administered through face-to-face interviews, given low literacy rates among respondents. Qualitative data were gathered through 12 focus group discussions (FGDs), each comprising 8–10 participants, and 20 in-depth interviews with community elders and cultural practitioners(Abiiodun et al., 2022).

Participatory observation was conducted over a period of eight weeks, during which the researchers accompanied Batwa guides on three Batwa Trail Experience sessions to observe tourist-community interactions. Secondary data were obtained from MBIFCT annual reports, UWA visitor statistics, and published academic literature. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 25.0, computing descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficients to measure relationships between tourism participation and cultural preservation indicators(Nelson et al., 2022). Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis in NVivo 12.0, with emerging themes verified through member-checking with community participants.

Results

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The findings are presented across four thematic areas: cultural practice revival, economic benefits, governance and participation, and perceived authenticity. Table 1 presents a summary of respondent characteristics, Table 2 shows cultural practice engagement scores, and Table 3 illustrates economic benefit distribution.

Table 1: Respondent Demographic Characteristics

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (%)
Gender	Male	64 (53.3%)
	Female	56 (46.7%)
Age	18–35 years	48 (40.0%)
	36–55 years	51 (42.5%)
	56+ years	21 (17.5%)
Tourism Participation	Active performers	78 (65.0%)
	Non-participating	42 (35.0%)

Table 1 presented the demographic characteristics of the respondents, showing a relatively balanced gender distribution, although males constituted a slightly higher proportion at 53.3% compared to females at 46.7%(Julius, Nancy, et al., 2024). This suggested that both men and women were fairly well represented in the study, with a modest male majority. In terms of age, the respondents were largely concentrated in the economically active age groups. Individuals aged 36–55 years formed the largest category at 42.5%, closely followed by those aged 18–35 years at 40.0%, while respondents aged 56 years and above accounted for a smaller proportion of 17.5%(Julius & Kaazara, 2025). This distribution indicated that the majority of participants were within the productive and socially active segments of the population. Regarding tourism participation, a significant majority of respondents (65.0%) were actively involved as performers, while 35.0% were non-participating(Julius & Audrey, 2025). This highlighted a strong engagement of community members in tourism-related cultural activities.

Table 2: Cultural Practice Revival Index Scores by Activity Type

Cultural Practice	Pre-Tourism Score	Post-Tourism Score	Change (%)
Traditional pottery and crafts	2.1/5.0	3.9/5.0	+85.7
Forest honey hunting	1.4/5.0	2.6/5.0	+85.7
Traditional music and dance	3.2/5.0	4.5/5.0	+40.6
Bark cloth making	1.8/5.0	3.1/5.0	+72.2
Oral storytelling traditions	2.5/5.0	3.7/5.0	+48.0
Medicinal plant knowledge	1.6/5.0	2.2/5.0	+37.5

Table 2 illustrated the Cultural Practice Revival Index scores across various activities, comparing conditions before and after the introduction or expansion of tourism. The findings showed notable improvements in all listed cultural

practices(Julius & Kazaara, 2025b). Traditional pottery and crafts experienced a substantial increase from a pre-tourism score of 2.1 to a post-tourism score of 3.9, reflecting an 85.7% rise(Julius & Nancy, 2025). Similarly, forest honey hunting recorded a significant improvement, doubling from 1.4 to 2.6, also representing an 85.7% increase. Traditional music and dance, which already had a relatively higher baseline score of 3.2, rose to 4.5, marking a 40.6% increase(Julius & Kazaara, 2025a). Bark cloth making improved from 1.8 to 3.1, corresponding to a 72.2% increase, while oral storytelling traditions increased from 2.5 to 3.7, reflecting a 48.0% growth. Medicinal plant knowledge showed a more modest but still notable increase from 1.6 to 2.2, representing a 37.5% change.

Table 3: Economic Benefit Distribution from Cultural Tourism (2022–2023)

Benefit Category	Amount (UGX Million)	% of Total Revenue
Community performers' wages	48.6	18.4%
Craft sales commissions	22.3	8.4%
MBIFCT conservation fund	85.4	32.3%
Tour operator fees	98.2	37.1%
UWA permit fees	10.0	3.8%
Total	264.5	100.0%

Table 3 summarized the distribution of economic benefits derived from cultural tourism between 2022 and 2023. The total revenue generated amounted to UGX 264.5 million, which was distributed across several categories(Julius & Kazaara, 2025c). The largest share was allocated to tour operator fees, which accounted for 37.1% of the total revenue, amounting to UGX 98.2 million. This was followed by the MBIFCT conservation fund, which received UGX 85.4 million, representing 32.3% of the total(Julius & Audrey, 2025). Community performers' wages constituted UGX 48.6 million, or 18.4%, indicating a meaningful but comparatively smaller direct financial return to local participants. Craft sales commissions contributed UGX 22.3 million, accounting for 8.4% of the total revenue, while UWA permit fees represented the smallest share at UGX 10.0 million, or 3.8%(Julius & Audrey, 2026). These figures suggested that although local communities benefited economically, a substantial proportion of the revenue was captured by tour operators and conservation-related institutions, highlighting an uneven distribution of financial gains within the cultural tourism value chain.

Discussion

The findings of this study both affirm and complicate the narrative that cultural tourism is an effective tool for heritage preservation. The significant improvements in cultural practice engagement scores (Table 2) support the hypothesis that economic incentives generated through tourism can motivate communities to revive and maintain endangered traditions (Zeppel, 2006; Colton & Harris, 2007). The revival of pottery, honey hunting demonstrations, and bark cloth making aligns with findings from comparable indigenous tourism studies in Kenya and Tanzania, where structured cultural tourism programs produced measurable increases in the practice of traditional crafts (Akama & Kieti, 2003). However, the study also reveals a critical paradox: while tourism is stimulating the performance of cultural practices,

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it may simultaneously be altering their meaning and context. Several elder respondents expressed concern that demonstrations performed for tourist audiences were becoming simplified, theatrical versions of complex cultural rituals, a phenomenon consistent with what MacCannell (1973) termed 'staged authenticity.'

The economic benefit distribution data (Table 3) highlight a structural inequity that has been widely documented in indigenous tourism literature across the Global South (Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2013). The fact that community members receive only 26.8% of total revenues while bearing the cultural and social costs of tourism is not only economically unjust but also threatens the long-term sustainability of tourism programs. Communities that perceive tourism as exploitative are likely to disengage over time, as documented in cases from South Africa and Australia (Zeppel, 2006). The governance deficit identified in this study, with only 18% of Batwa feeling they have meaningful influence over tourism decisions, reflects a broader pattern of paternalistic tourism management that has been criticized extensively in the literature (Smith & Robinson, 2006). Without genuine participatory governance, cultural tourism risks perpetuating the same dynamics of exclusion and dispossession that characterized the Batwa's eviction from their ancestral forests.

These findings collectively suggest that the relationship between cultural tourism and heritage preservation in Kisoro is contingent rather than automatic. Tourism does create space and economic incentives for cultural revival, but without structural reforms in governance, benefit-sharing, and community agency, it is unlikely to produce long-term, community-owned heritage preservation. The study therefore calls for a shift from tourism-as-development to tourism-as-empowerment frameworks (Sofield, 2003), in which Batwa communities are not merely objects of tourist gaze but active agents in defining, interpreting, and benefiting from their own cultural heritage.

Conclusions

This study concludes that cultural tourism in Kisoro District has made demonstrable contributions to the revival of Batwa cultural practices, particularly in areas directly incentivized by visitor demand, such as crafts, music, and forest-based demonstrations. However, these gains are undermined by significant inequities in economic benefit distribution, limited community governance participation, and growing concerns about cultural authenticity. The overall impact of cultural tourism on Batwa heritage preservation is therefore mixed: positive in terms of practice revival, but problematic in terms of cultural agency, equitable benefit-sharing, and long-term sustainability. For cultural tourism to fulfill its potential as a heritage preservation tool, fundamental structural reforms are required.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, the study recommends the following interventions. First, a Community Cultural Tourism Council, led by elected Batwa representatives, should be established and empowered with decision-making authority over tourism program design, scheduling, and content. Second, a revised revenue-sharing formula should allocate no less than 50% of gross tourism revenues directly to the Batwa community, managed through a transparent and independently audited community trust. Third, tourism operators should be required to undergo cultural sensitivity training developed and delivered by Batwa cultural practitioners. Fourth, a cultural documentation program should be

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funded to record oral traditions, medicinal plant knowledge, and other non-performative aspects of Batwa heritage that are currently excluded from tourism products. Fifth, the Government of Uganda and development partners should create a dedicated Batwa Cultural Heritage Fund to support long-term preservation activities independent of tourism revenues, ensuring cultural continuity even during periods of low visitor numbers.

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