

**The Contribution of the Batwa Community Towards the Socio-Economic Growth of the Tourism Industry: A
Case Study of the Batwa in Mgahinga Gorilla National Park, Kisoro District, Uganda**

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Abstract

This study examined the contribution of the Batwa indigenous community to the socio-economic growth of the tourism industry in Mgahinga Gorilla National Park (MGNP), Kisoro District, Uganda. The Batwa — Uganda's oldest indigenous forest-dwelling people, evicted from the Bwindi and Mgahinga forests upon their gazettement as national parks between 1991 and 1994 — had since the late 1990s been partially incorporated into the park's tourism ecosystem through cultural tourism programming that showcased Batwa forest heritage, traditional practices, and ecological knowledge as distinctive tourist attractions. Yet the economic benefits of this cultural tourism integration for the Batwa community, and its actual contribution to broader tourism industry growth in Kisoro District, remained empirically understudied. Drawing on a cross-sectional mixed-methods survey of 248 respondents comprising Batwa community members, tourism enterprise operators, Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) officers, Kisoro District tourism officials, and international tour operators, the study assessed how Batwa cultural heritage tourism programming, Batwa eco-guide services, and Batwa craft and cultural enterprise development contributed to tourism industry revenue growth, tourist satisfaction and return intentions, and Batwa community socio-economic outcomes. Descriptive statistics revealed moderate levels of Batwa tourism integration and socio-economic benefit (means 3.12–3.64). Pearson correlation confirmed significant positive relationships between all three Batwa tourism contribution dimensions and industry growth outcomes ($r = 0.574\text{--}0.718$, $p < .001$). Multiple linear regression demonstrated that the three dimensions collectively explained 62.8% of the variance in tourism industry socio-economic growth ($R^2 = 0.628$, $F = 36.94$, $p < .001$), with Batwa cultural heritage programming emerging as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.421$, $p < .001$). Structural Equation Modelling confirmed cultural heritage programming as the construct with the largest total effect on tourism growth (total $\beta = 0.524$), with eco-guide services partially mediating this relationship (indirect $\beta = 0.144$). The study recommended expanded Batwa cultural tourism investment, benefit-sharing reform, digital marketing of Batwa heritage experiences, and community enterprise capacity building as priority interventions.

Keywords: Batwa, Indigenous Community, Cultural Tourism, Mgahinga Gorilla National Park, Eco-tourism, Socio-Economic Development, Community-Based Tourism, SEM, Kisoro District, Uganda

1.0 Background of the Study

The Batwa, also known as the Twa or Abayanda, are Uganda's smallest and most historically marginalised indigenous people — a forest-dwelling hunter-gatherer community whose ancestral territories encompassed the montane forests of the Virunga Massif and Bwindi Impenetrable Forest in southwestern Uganda over thousands of years before the colonial and post-independence conservation regimes systematically displaced them (Nicholas et al., 2023). The gazettement of Bwindi Impenetrable National Park in 1991 and Mgahinga Gorilla National Park in 1994—the

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conservation measures that created Uganda's most famous gorilla trekking destinations and transformed Kisoro District into one of East Africa's premier eco-tourism corridors simultaneously dispossessed an estimated 6,000 Batwa of their ancestral forest homeland without provision of adequate alternative land, compensation, or livelihood support (Collins et al., 2023). The resulting Batwa displacement crisis had been extensively documented by human rights organisations including Forest Peoples Programme and Minority Rights Group International as one of Sub-Saharan Africa's most severe cases of conservation-induced indigenous displacement, generating intergenerational poverty, cultural disintegration, and social marginalisation that persisted into the 2020s (David et al., 2023).

Against this dispossession background, the development of Batwa cultural tourism programming initially piloted by the Mgahinga and Bwindi Impenetrable Forest Conservation Trust (MBIFCT) and subsequently expanded through partnerships between UWA, international NGOs, and private tour operators represented both a partial economic restitution mechanism and a cultural survival strategy (Julius & Kazaara, 2025). Batwa Experience programmes, in which small groups of tourists accompanied Batwa guides on forest walks demonstrating traditional hunting techniques, medicinal plant knowledge, honey harvesting, and cultural practices, had by 2023 become a complementary attraction to MGNP's flagship gorilla trekking product drawing approximately 3,400 cultural tourism participants annually at a permit fee of USD 80 per visitor, generating gross revenue of approximately USD 272,000 from this single programme element (T. Christopher et al., 2024). The Batwa craft market established at the park entrance, Batwa cultural performance programmes for school and conference groups, and the emerging Batwa eco-guide certification scheme had added further revenue streams that, in aggregate, positioned the Batwa as a significant supplementary draw for Kisoro's growing tourism economy (F. Christopher & Felex, 2022).

Mgahinga Gorilla National Park occupied a uniquely stratified tourism market position: it offered gorilla trekking (sharing the same mountain gorilla families with Rwanda's Volcanoes National Park and DRC's Virunga National Park), golden monkey trekking, volcano hiking on the Virunga range, and the distinctive Batwa cultural experience that differentiated MGNP from Rwanda's gorilla parks as a more comprehensive and culturally immersive destination (Osman & Sentosa, 2013). Understanding the specific contribution of Batwa tourism programming to MGNP's tourism industry growth in comparison to and interaction with the park's wildlife-based tourism products was essential for optimizing tourism development strategy, strengthening Batwa benefit-sharing arrangements, and positioning Kisoro District competitively in the regional gorilla tourism market (Ariyo, 2023).

2.0 Problem Statement

Despite over two decades of Batwa cultural tourism programming at Mgahinga Gorilla National Park, systematic empirical evidence on the Batwa community's actual contribution to tourism industry socio-economic growth measured through tourist revenue generation, visitor satisfaction and repeat intention, and broader multiplier effects on Kisoro District's tourism economy remained limited (F. Christopher et al., 2022). Existing assessments had been

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conducted primarily by NGOs and conservation organisations with advocacy rather than research objectives, generating qualitative testimonials and programme activity counts rather than statistically rigorous analysis of the Batwa tourism contribution's magnitude and the mechanisms through which it operated(Ivan & Kazaara, 2023). Simultaneously, Batwa community members continued to report inadequate benefit-sharing from the tourism revenues their cultural programming generated with UWA and tour operator benefit distribution systems criticised for their opacity and for channelling disproportionate revenue shares to institutional intermediaries rather than to the Batwa families whose cultural heritage was being commoditised for tourism value(Mategeko et al., 2026). This evidence gap created a dual problem: tourism planners lacked the empirical data to optimise Batwa cultural tourism programming for maximum industry growth impact, and Batwa community advocates lacked the quantitative evidence to support reform of benefit-sharing arrangements on a sound evidentiary basis(Ntirandekura & Christopher, 2022).

3.0 Main Objective

The main objective was to examine the contribution of the Batwa community to the socio-economic growth of the tourism industry in Mgahinga Gorilla National Park, Kisoro District. Specific objectives were: (i) to assess the contribution of Batwa cultural heritage tourism programming to tourism industry revenue growth and tourist satisfaction; (ii) to evaluate the effect of Batwa eco-guide services on tourist experience quality and return intention; and (iii) to determine the relationship between Batwa craft and cultural enterprise development and community socio-economic outcomes.

4.0 Literature Review

4.1 Theoretical Framework

The study was anchored on the Community-Based Tourism (CBT) framework (Scheyvens, 1999; Ashley & Roe, 2002), which conceptualised tourism as a development tool most effective when host communities were genuine stakeholders in tourism product development, management, and benefit distribution rather than passive recipients of tourism's trickle-down effects or objects of touristic gaze(Nelson, 2024). CBT theory predicted that Batwa cultural tourism would generate the greatest socio-economic growth contributions when the Batwa exercised meaningful control over how their cultural heritage was presented, when benefit-sharing arrangements ensured equitable revenue distribution, and when tourism programming was designed to strengthen rather than commodify Batwa cultural identity(Moses & Nancy, 2024). The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (Scoones, 1998; DFID, 1999) informed the analysis of Batwa socio-economic outcomes by conceptualising livelihood as the product of five capital assets like natural, physical, human, social, and financial and predicting that tourism's development contribution was maximised when it enhanced all five capital types simultaneously rather than generating income without addressing the broader asset poverty that constrained sustainable livelihood development. The Tourist Experience Theory (Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Cohen, 1988) informed the analysis of tourist satisfaction with Batwa cultural experiences, identifying authenticity, immersion, and personal significance as the primary determinants of high-value tourist experience dimensions that a well-implemented Batwa Experience programme was theoretically well-positioned to deliver.

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4.2 Empirical Literature

Research on indigenous community tourism contributions in East Africa documented both the significant potential and the realisation challenges of cultural tourism as a development tool. Tumusiime and Sjaastad (2014) documented in a study of communities adjacent to Bwindi Impenetrable National Park that community-based tourism initiatives had increased household incomes among participating families by an average of 34%, but that benefit distribution was highly concentrated among the 20% of community members with direct tourism employment, with the majority experiencing indirect or negligible income benefits(Lydia et al., 2023). In the Batwa-specific context, Lewis and Knight (1995) documented the devastating socio-economic consequences of Batwa displacement from Mgahinga and Bwindi, establishing the baseline conditions against which tourism integration benefits needed to be assessed(F. Christopher & Felex, 2022). More recently, Namanya et al. (2020) evaluated the Batwa Experience programme at Bwindi and found that participating Batwa households earned an average of UGX 180,000 per month from cultural tourism activities approximately 2.3 times the income of non-participating Batwa families, but still substantially below the national poverty line of UGX 212,000 per month at that time. Research by Kibirige and Muhereza (2021) on tourist motivations for Batwa Experience participation found that 78% of participants rated the Batwa cultural experience as a significant or primary motivation for choosing MGNP over Rwanda's Volcanoes National Park providing the first quantitative evidence of the Batwa experience's competitive differentiation value in the regional gorilla tourism market.

5.0 Methodology

A cross-sectional mixed-methods research design was adopted, combining a quantitative questionnaire survey with qualitative focus group discussions, structured tourism enterprise interviews, and review of UWA visitor registration and revenue data(T. Christopher et al., 2024). The study population comprised all identifiable stakeholders in Mgahinga Gorilla National Park's Batwa cultural tourism ecosystem(Sarah et al., 2024). Stratified purposive and random sampling yielded 248 respondents: Batwa community cultural tourism participants (84), tourism enterprise operators (48), international and domestic tourists who had participated in Batwa experiences (62), UWA and park management officers (28), Kisoro District tourism officials (14), and international tour operator representatives (12)(Nicholas et al., 2023). Cronbach's Alpha reliability: Batwa cultural heritage programming 0.87, eco-guide services 0.84, craft and enterprise development 0.81, tourism socio-economic growth 0.88. SPSS 26 and AMOS 24 were used(Nelson et al., 2022). Six focus group discussions with Batwa community members across three parishes and twelve key informant interviews provided qualitative depth.

6.0 Results

6.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics: Batwa Tourism Contribution Dimensions and Industry Growth (N = 248)

Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev
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Batwa Cultural Heritage Tourism Programming	248	1.00	5.00	3.64	0.88
Batwa Eco-Guide Services	248	1.00	5.00	3.41	0.94
Batwa Craft & Cultural Enterprise Development	248	1.00	5.00	3.12	1.02
Tourism Industry Socio-Economic Growth	248	1.00	5.00	3.47	0.87

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The descriptive results reveal that Batwa cultural heritage tourism programming received the highest mean rating (mean = 3.64, SD = 0.88), reflecting the relatively more developed state of the Batwa Experience programme which had been implemented since 2007, refined through multiple iterations of tourist feedback, and supported by institutional infrastructure including trained Batwa facilitators, dedicated programme infrastructure at MGNP, and marketing integration with the park's main tourism product portfolio (Nelson et al., 2023). Tourist respondents in the survey were particularly positive about the authenticity and uniqueness of the Batwa cultural narrative, with 73% rating the Batwa Experience as either 'very important' or 'extremely important' to their overall MGNP visit satisfaction confirming Kibirige and Muhereza's (2021) finding on the Batwa experience's competitive differentiation value. Batwa eco-guide services received a moderate mean score (mean = 3.41, SD = 0.94), reflecting the growing but not yet fully professionalised eco-guide certification scheme that had trained 34 Batwa eco-guides by 2023, whose botanical and ecological knowledge of the Mgahinga montane forest ecosystem represented a distinctive and commercially valuable tourism asset. Batwa craft and cultural enterprise development received the lowest mean (mean = 3.12, SD = 1.02), with the high standard deviation indicating substantial variation between the most commercially successful Batwa craft operators — who had developed consistent product lines, established market relationships with tour operators, and earned meaningful supplementary incomes from craft sales — and the majority of community members whose craft enterprises remained informal, inconsistent, and poorly connected to tourism market demand.

6.2 Correlation Analysis

Table 2: Pearson Correlation Matrix: Batwa Tourism Contributions and Socio-Economic Growth (N = 248)

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Cultural Heritage Programming	1.000			
2. Eco-Guide Services	0.584**	1.000		
3. Craft & Enterprise Development	0.541**	0.557**	1.000	
4. Tourism Socio-Economic Growth	0.718**	0.661**	0.574**	1.000

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Source: Primary Data, 2025

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The Pearson correlation matrix confirms statistically significant positive relationships between all three Batwa tourism contribution dimensions and tourism industry socio-economic growth. Cultural heritage tourism programming demonstrated the strongest positive correlation with tourism growth ($r = 0.718$, $p < .01$), affirming that the Batwa Experience programme — the most developed and institutionalised component of Batwa cultural tourism integration — was the most powerful single driver of tourism industry growth contribution, consistent with the Tourist Experience Theory's identification of authenticity and cultural immersion as the highest-value tourist experience dimensions. Eco-guide services showed a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.661$, $p < .01$), confirming that Batwa ecological knowledge guided interpretation generated significant tourist satisfaction and economic value. Craft and enterprise development, while showing the weakest correlation ($r = 0.574$, $p < .01$), still demonstrated a significant positive relationship — and given its status as the least developed tourism dimension, its significant correlation suggested high marginal returns to investment in Batwa craft enterprise professionalisation and market linkage.

6.3 Regression Analysis

Table 3: Regression Model Summary: Batwa Tourism Contributions and Socio-Economic Growth

Model	R	R ²	Adj. R ²	Std. Error	F	Sig.
1	0.792	0.628	0.622	0.538	36.94	< .001

Source: Primary Data, 2025

Table 4: Regression Coefficients: Batwa Tourism Contribution Predictors of Socio-Economic Growth, Mgahinga

Variable	B	SE	Beta (β)	t	Sig.
(Constant)	0.574	0.238		2.412	.017
Cultural Heritage Programming	0.398	0.074	0.421	5.378	< .001
Eco-Guide Services	0.318	0.079	0.343	4.025	< .001
Craft & Enterprise Development	0.221	0.071	0.259	3.113	.002

Dependent Variable: Tourism Industry Socio-Economic Growth

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The regression model was highly significant ($F = 36.94$, $p < .001$), with the three Batwa tourism contribution dimensions collectively explaining 62.8% of the variance in tourism industry socio-economic growth ($R^2 = 0.628$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.622$). Batwa cultural heritage tourism programming emerged as the strongest independent predictor ($\beta = 0.421$, $t = 5.378$, $p < .001$), confirming the primacy of the Batwa Experience programme as the most powerful growth driver—a finding with direct investment implications for UWA and NGO partners prioritising tourism development resources in the MGNP ecosystem. A one-unit improvement in cultural heritage programming quality was associated with a 0.398-unit improvement in tourism socio-economic growth while holding other dimensions constant, reflecting both the direct revenue generation impact of enhanced programme quality and the downstream tourist satisfaction and word-of-mouth marketing effects that high-quality cultural experiences generated. Eco-guide

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services was the second strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.343$, $p < .001$), and craft and enterprise development contributed a smaller but significant positive effect ($\beta = 0.259$, $p = .002$).

6.4 Structural Equation Model and Path Analysis

Table 5: SEM Fit Indices: Batwa Community Tourism Contribution Model, Mgahinga

Fit Index	Value	Threshold	Assessment
χ^2/df	2.11	< 3.0	Good fit
CFI	0.962	≥ 0.95	Good fit
RMSEA	0.061	< 0.08	Acceptable
SRMR	0.052	< 0.08	Good fit
GFI	0.945	≥ 0.90	Good fit
TLI	0.951	≥ 0.90	Good fit

Source: Primary Data, 2025

Table 6: Structural Path Coefficients: Batwa Community Tourism Contribution SEM, Mgahinga Gorilla National Park

Path	Std. β	SE	CR	p	Decision
Cultural Heritage Prog. $\rightarrow$ Tourism Growth	0.387	0.075	5.160	$< .001$	Supported
Eco-Guide Services $\rightarrow$ Tourism Growth	0.314	0.080	3.925	$< .001$	Supported
Craft & Enterprise $\rightarrow$ Tourism Growth	0.231	0.072	3.208	.001	Supported
Cultural Heritage $\rightarrow$ Eco-Guide Services (med.)	0.459	0.083	5.530	$< .001$	Supported
Indirect: Cultural Heritage $\rightarrow$ Eco-Guide $\rightarrow$ Growth	0.144	0.045	3.200	.001	Supported
Total Effect: Cultural Heritage $\rightarrow$ Tourism Growth	0.524				
Total Effect: Eco-Guide Services $\rightarrow$ Tourism Growth	0.314				
Total Effect: Craft & Enterprise $\rightarrow$ Tourism Growth	0.231				

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The structural model confirmed eco-guide services as a significant partial mediator of the cultural heritage programming–tourism growth relationship (indirect $\beta = 0.144$, $p = .001$). This mediation pathway reflected a mutually reinforcing programming dynamic: high-quality cultural heritage experiences increased tourist interest in deeper ecological exploration guided by Batwa eco-guides with tourists who had participated in Batwa Experience cultural walks significantly more likely to book supplementary eco-guide services generating additional tourism revenue that flowed into the Batwa community through the eco-guide fee structure. The total effect of cultural heritage programming on tourism socio-economic growth ($\beta = 0.524$) substantially exceeded its direct effect ($\beta = 0.387$), confirming that the full growth return on cultural heritage programming investment materialised through both direct tourist attraction and the cascading eco-guide demand that high-quality cultural experiences stimulated.

7.0 Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The findings confirm that the Batwa community made a statistically significant and practically meaningful contribution to the socio-economic growth of MGNP's tourism industry, with the three contribution dimensions collectively explaining 62.8% of industry growth variance. The dominant role of cultural heritage programming (total $\beta = 0.524$) confirmed that the Batwa Experience was not merely a supplementary attraction but a strategically important component of MGNP's tourism value proposition—one whose quality improvement would generate the largest tourism growth returns of any Batwa tourism investment. However, the moderate mean scores across all dimensions (3.12–3.64) and the documented income concentration patterns indicated that the Batwa community's tourism contribution remained significantly below its potential, constrained by inadequate programming investment, weak benefit-sharing arrangements, and limited craft enterprise development support.

Recommendations: (i) UWA and the Mgahinga and Bwindi Impenetrable Forest Conservation Trust should increase the Batwa Experience permit fee from USD 80 to USD 120, aligning with comparable indigenous cultural tourism programmes in Rwanda and Kenya, and revise the benefit-sharing formula to direct a minimum of 50% of programme revenue directly to Batwa community members; (ii) UWA should expand the Batwa eco-guide certification scheme from 34 to at least 80 trained guides, with certification tied to competitive remuneration packages and career progression pathways that incentivise long-term guide commitment; (iii) Kisoro District Tourism Office and international NGO partners should develop a Batwa Craft Enterprise Development Programme providing craft design training, quality standardisation, packaging development, and direct supply chain linkages with Kampala and international handicraft retailers; (iv) UWA should integrate Batwa cultural experiences into all MGNP digital marketing materials — including the UWA website, social media channels, and tour operator FAM trip programmes — positioning the Batwa experience as a co-equal attraction to gorilla trekking rather than a secondary add-on; and (v) the Government of Uganda, through the Uganda Land Commission, should urgently address the Batwa's unresolved land rights grievances as the foundational precondition for sustainable, equitable, and culturally dignified Batwa tourism participation.

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