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Student Presentation

The Maasai Dilemma and the Problematic of Community Participation in Cultural Tourism

Abstract

The Maasai of Kenya have become the face of Africa in the global cultural tourism. The pastoral community occupies arid and semi-arid rangelands in southern Kenya and northern Tanzania. The community maintain a semi-nomadic pastoral lifestyle, which still seems to be close to their traditional' culture. Their traditional values encompass their ways of life in general that include initiation rites among others. In this context, scholars describe cultural tourism as the main 'pull factor' which influences visitors' initial decision to travel to destinations in different parts of the world. In particular, the image of the Maasai male warrior is popular in the sense that Maasai warriors are emblematic of an indigenous way of life and a traditional culture that many cultural tourists pay a lot of money to see. Secondly, cultural homes traditionally known as manyattas illustrate the changing force of tourism and its ability to transform societies. Yet only a small portion of the money generated by cultural tourism is allocated to support the Maasai development initiatives. In their efforts to preserve their heritage and tradition, the community increasingly faces challenges of representation. To date, their role remains minor due to minimal representation in the decisions that affect their livelihoods. This has doubled the community's vulnerability and resulted into economic marginalization, cultural exploitation, and constant violation of their cultural and human rights. Studies by Tosun and Timothy (2003), demonstrate the necessity of local community participation whether in policy development or implementation of cultural tourism projects because community participation can add to the democratization process that ensure benefits relate to the local community needs.

Introduction

The Maasai people reside along the border of both Kenya and Tanzania. The community is unique and popular due to their long-preserved culture. Despite education, civilization and western cultural influences, these independent-minded people have maintained their traditional way of life, making

them a symbol of Kenyan culture. The community is strategically located next to national parks and game reserves in Kenya and Tanzania which are to animals such as lions, rhinos, giraffes, zebras, warthogs and buffaloes. Their interaction with both wild and domestic animals has contributed to their unique identity and appeal and over decades they have become an admired community. In particular, their distinctive and well-known culture has made them one of East Africa's most internationally famous tourist attractions. The community has over time developed and evolved intricate traditional knowledge, skills, natural resource management practices and cultural rituals derived from interaction with the animals.¹ It is their broad and deep traditional knowledge and related skills that have enabled them to build a traditional livelihood

The World Heritage Convention adopted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) General Conference in 1972 gave mandate to countries and communities to promote cooperation among nations to protect and conserve heritage around the world. In line with this mandate various groups of people practice cherished cultures. The Maasai people of Kenya are one of the groups that continually preserve their traditional ways and although their main livelihood is cattle, they hold dear other traditional rites of passage, cultural values and knowledge that are passed from one generation to another by the elders. This way the community strives to maintain their pride that binds them so close to that of their ancestors despite modern influence. Currently, the image of a traditional Maasai is depicted and displayed in brochures, magazines, and on billboards around the world. It is against this cultural background that the community decided not only to preserve and maintain their valuable culture but turn cultural tourism into a source of income. Some of their unique cultural tourism activities include circumcision and warrior ceremonies, guided tours to game parks and homesteads.

Despite the Maasai being a tourist attraction, the community is losing its material culture and profound knowledge of livestock, environment and wildlife at a high rate. Their culture faces growing challenges from both outside and within as they deal with emerging dynamics of modernity such as education. One of the factors contributing to the loss of Maasai traditions and knowledge is the passing away of traditional elders before documenting the heritage. With their culture at a crossroads, there is an urgent need to support the community in their effort to preserve their heritage through an active community participation process.

¹ The Maasai have been able to abide by their traditionally inherited practices in relation to their approach to life. They are culturally conservative towards accepting modern trends unlike the surrounding societies who have incorporated much more modern practices (Saitoti, 1980).

Methodology

This paper deals with the problematic of Maasai participation in cultural tourism. The paper quotes various authors who have documented literature on Maasai cultural concepts, their livelihood, religious beliefs, ceremonies and myths describing the Maasai. The paper finally makes recommendations.

The problem

Richards, (1996) defines cultural tourism as a discrete product category that is differentiated from other tourist activities or attractions by consumption of a destination's tangible and intangible cultural heritage². Cultural tourism involves the display of a particular community's ancestral traditions, cultural ways, cultural practices; passages of rights and related ceremonies; further examples include participation in dance, music, festivals, cultural exhibitions, buying artifacts and souvenirs³.

The Maasai community has a rich culture that attracts thousands of tourists to Kenya every year. Like any other peoples, they can either protect heritage or destroy it depending on the way they use it. The community therefore has the sole responsibility of preserving and conserving their heritage for future generations. Given their proximity to the national parks, the Maasai realized the economic value of cultural tourism. The accompanying advantages of exploiting cultural tourism should ideally be the creation of community facilities and services, upgraded infrastructure, health and transport improvements, new sport and recreational facilities, hotels and public spaces, as well as an influx of better-quality commodities and food. As part of their income generating venture, the community sell their livestock, operate curio yards that buy and sell traditional artifacts, operate- manyattas run by elders, perform traditional songs and dances for tourists and run tours of homestead and traditional fire making,

One of the major cultural tourist activities is establishment of cultural manyattas along the national parks. Some of the manyattas are for hire for the tourists who want to spend in what is referred to as cultural accommodation. Initially, Maasai women used to come to the tourist accommodation to sell beadwork but the dynamics of selling their artifacts outside hotels led to the idea of building a special

² Cultural and natural heritage are "priceless irreplaceable possessions for all mankind," see World Heritage Council (1999).

³ The term 'cultural tourism' is subject to many definitions (Sofield & Birtles, 1996) and much confusion (Hughes, 1996) and is symptomatic of Tribe's (1997) 'indiscipline' of tourism

Maasai homestead where tourists could visit, hear about and experience Maasai culture. The community took advantage of this idea and allowed women to generate income through sell of traditional artifacts.

The idea of developing cultural manyattas around the national park was later encouraged by the new policy of Kenya Wildlife Service in 1996 (KWS, 1996), which sought to promote partnership and community participation in cultural preservation⁴. While participation of the Maasai community is identified as minimal, the income accrued from enterprises such as cultural manyattas does not give the community enough incentive to participate in conservation of the cultures. However, the community engages in other income-generating activities that preserve culture. For example, the Maasai elders' document stories of a cultural requirement of a young warrior who had to kill a lion before being allowed to either undergo circumcision or being allowed to marry. This is because hunting a lion was viewed as an act of bravery and achievement. Secondly, while such a culture was and still remains a source of pride, the community earns income when tourists gather in a hotel or manyatta to listen.

The other cultural tourism aspect is Maasai clothing. To display the Maasai dress code culture, both men and women wear wooden bracelets especially in particular ceremonies and ritual events. Equally, the Maasai women regularly weave and bead jewellery. This bead work plays an essential part in the ornamentation of their body. During special events such as music and dance, groups of Maasai sing to tourists to raise income. While an outsider may admire the strength, energy and effort of the community to preserve their culture, an insider will inform you that the community has suffered economic exploitation by outsiders. There is rarely an acknowledgment much less support of indigenous people's struggle for cultural survival, self-determination, freedom of cultural expression, rights to ancestral lands, and control over land use and resource management. Moreover, most of the Maasai people who work in the tourism industry occupy low unskilled and semi-skilled positions (Sindiga 1994). The companies that organize such events take a larger percentage of the revenue collected, while indigenous Maasai simply plays the roles of tour guides, security guards, gardeners, housekeepers, porters, and waiters.

All states that are parties to the 1972 convention have a responsibility to identify, protect, conserve, and present World Heritage properties. It is on the basis of this that all states must ensure that cultural

⁴ Service is the key to the hospitality atmosphere (Murphy, 1985: 120) and community participation can result in an increased social carrying capacity (D'Amore, 1983).

tourism is guided by law and policy. The review of Kenya's National Tourism Policy, for example, stipulates the government role in planning, development, promotion, facilitation and service provision, (National Tourism Policy, 2009). Nonetheless, there is consensus among scholars that community participation in the tourism planning process should be advocated as a way of implementing sustainable tourism and empowering local communities. Haywood (1988) defines community participation as a process of involving all stakeholders in such a way that decision-making is shared. Murphy, (1985) stressed the importance of local involvement in tourism development⁵. As cited by Okazaki, (2008), a community participation approach has long been advocated as an integral part of sustainable tourism development, which is aimed at channeling the benefits to the local community. Community involvement in cultural tourism today is regarded as one of the most essential tools, if tourism is to make a substantial contribution to the national development of a country. It ensures in particular better opportunities for the community to gain benefits from tourism taking place in their locality and positive community attitudes and the conservation of local resources. Despite this agreement the Maasai heritage in its all forms is facing serious problems and challenges.

The Maasai cultural heritage is a resource, yet it is used by un-authorized non Maasai for their own benefits. Some forms and examples of the misuse of the Maasai culture include commercialization of cultural expressions without the owner's permission. At times violation of rules of visitation to spiritual sites and shrines, used for tourist's attractions without consultation, qualifies as an insult and exploitation of the community. In the recent past, there have been cases of demarcation and annexation of the indigenous Maasai forest land by the government. These forests were traditionally used by the Maasai as a source of medicinal plants. Non-consultation on such important decisions not only encourages encroachment of the Maasai land by private developers of Kenya but also leaves the community without any tangible economic benefits.

Recently, the Maasai name has been used in Multimedia commercial product advertisements without due consultation, another intellectual and cultural rights exploitation of the Maasai. In such adverts a Maasai is presented posing with wildlife as if they are part of the wildlife. In other scenarios, the Maasai artifacts have been taken to Museums for other uses without the knowledge of the community yet research institutions have taken knowledge from the community and commercialized it without any benefits to the Maasai. Finally, with the flourishing tourist market, non-Maasai business people are

⁵ The reasons for community participation in tourism development are well rehearsed in the tourism literature and it is widely accepted as criterion of sustainable tourism.

pirating and eroding traditional crafts at the expense of Maasai artisans and communities. This level of exploitation requires urgent action if stakeholders were to encourage the Maasai community participation in preservation of the cherished heritage.

Prospects and conclusions

The survival of Maasai community heritage relies on their practical ownership. The community has an opportunity to benefit not only in terms of cultural preservation but also utilization of cultural tourism as their income earnings if they are allowed to conserve their heritage and environment. The government can facilitate them in order for them to fight for their rights through structured and legal mechanisms. Some of the interventions I propose that provide a workable frame for the community include

1. Community to embrace structured lobbying and advocacy initiatives so that they can protect and conserve what is left in terms of forests, land and even historical sites
2. Maasai through patenting can preserve and protect culture and music, intellectual rights, and spiritual sites for future use
3. Develop a legal framework at the national and international level to protect the Maasai knowledge and performances against misuse. In particular to form a community organization that can document, preserve and protect the community cultural heritage
4. Bring the cultural villages together and ensure fair distribution of resource especially fees earned from gate collections and performances in hotels

Finally, there is a need for the Kenya to ensure that cultural tourism is directed and owned by the host community (Maasai) in terms of conserving their culture.

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