

## **Critical Factors in Cultural Tourism in Botswana**

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### **Abstract**

This discussion is a critical assessment of the role of cultural factors in promoting tourism in Botswana. From the 1990s, the Botswana Government's policy on tourism focused on involving local community participation in tourism by making Botswana cultural heritage one of the cornerstones of tourism. This policy included goals of alleviating rural poverty and promoting sustainable resource management. Communities in urban and rural areas were challenged to market their cultural knowledge such as holding court, traditional Botswana hospitality, performance arts and handicrafts in attracting international tourists. This policy of engaging communities in cultural tourism caused tension in relations with policies launched earlier. Since independence in 1966, the Government of Botswana followed economic policies which promoted private sector participation and partnerships. From the 1970s, the private sector was particularly courted to participate in tourism in order to attract famous and rich tourists such as entertainment actors to Botswana. This promoted a strategy and vision called 'low volume – high price market tourism'. The Government hoped to use its reputation for good governance and economic management to attract rich tourists. It was anticipated that through cultural tourism, local communities in various parts of the country would become involved and benefit.

### **Introduction**

We survey and analyse some key factors affecting offers of the Botswana cultural attractions to local and foreign visitors in major tourist centres in the country. We discuss some issues which stand out in scholarly reviews of the policies of the Government of Botswana aimed at fostering community participation in environmental management and sustainable development from the 1970s. The Government of Botswana promoted private sector involvement in tourism in the 1970s and 1980s (Wily, 1982: 291-308; Perrings, 1988, 1989). From the 1990s to the present, the Government of Botswana expanded its programmes to include community participation in tourism. During the same period, tourism policy was revised to focus on "low volume – high price market". This approach was adopted because of a good international image Botswana had. The country attempted to use this international image to attract rich tourists who would spend large sums of money on viewing Botswana's human, botanical, landscape and cultural assets. Botswana acquired this reputation because of her stable economic performance and form of her democracy since independence. Contradictions are clear from the 1970s to the present in policy emphasis on private sector and community involvement in tourism in Botswana. These contradictions were expressed in continuity and changes have been persistent features in policies of the Government of Botswana on tourism since 1966. The Government of independent Botswana inherited from its predecessor a responsibility to set a policy on tourism. Cobhan observed that from the 1970s a continuing trend was that emphasis on the private sector disadvantaged community participation in tourism. A decision from about 1990 to promote community involvement in tourism represented a major shift in policy and also revealed tension in priorities of government over the role of the private sector and Botswana communities in tourism. This tension increased after 1990 because the Government of Botswana wanted to promote development through tourism and sustainable environmental management among rural communities (Cobham, 1994).

This discussion attempts a critical review of some relevant literature on tourism and a few field interviews

From this review of literature, we map out from several issues as benchmarks of a research project on cultural tourism in and community involvement in Botswana. Most of the studies we examined were based on primary research. Our intention is to prepare a longitudinal study on how local communities have

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responded to shifting policies on environmental management and sustainable community based tourism. In that research, it will also be useful to examine responses of local and international tourists to Botswana cultural experiences, that is, cultural history, performance arts and handcrafts. We briefly refer to customer response in this preliminary discussion.

#### **Rationale for Review and Further Research**

The Government of Botswana has branded the country's cultural heritage as the foundation of the domestic political economy and a pillar of its foreign relations. To that end, one of the key features of the tourism sector is to minimise "negative social, cultural and environmental impacts" while at the same time "maximising the involvement in, and economic benefits to, host communities".<sup>11</sup> This is a key rationale for a planned critical examination of the role cultural factors play in the tourism industry, which is one of the meeting points of Botswana's domestic and foreign relations policies. It is also seen as an important sector in Botswana's holistic development. Providers of cultural attractions in Botswana demonstrate diverse levels of capabilities in availing cultural activities, knowledge and material objects to local and foreign visitors in the context of regional competition in Southern Africa. Those who use cultural attractions to promote local tourism and to bring foreign tourists in Botswana demonstrate a refined awareness of regional diversity and competition.

In recent history of Botswana, tourism has become significant in many diverse ways. The policy adopted in 2000 has clear themes on economic and cultural relevance of tourism in Botswana. These include, first, tourism contributes, from the 1990s to the present, about 4.5 per cent to the Gross National Product (GDP) of Botswana. Consequently, tourism replaced agriculture as the second source of foreign exchange for Botswana after minerals. Second, tourism offers the Government of Botswana an opportunity to promote local community based development and to build institutions of governance. Such an intervention is also a chance for the government to manifest its presence at local level. Third, the Government acts as a sponsor and referee of interaction between its domestic constituency and the international stakeholders in the tourist industry. The Government of Botswana adopted and views its National Eco-Tourism Strategy (NES) as aimed at facilitating renewal of pride in local culture for sustainable utilization of natural resources such as plant, land and animal environments. Fourth, tourism is an investment sector where the Government of Botswana promotes partnerships among local and between local and international stakeholders.

Local communities are central in policy changes on tourism in Botswana since 1990. The Government of Botswana recognises national culture as a key commodity which should sustain national tourism. This hardly needs emphasis because it is clear that the Government of Botswana considers indigenous knowledge about the physical environment (including fauna and flora), performance arts and handcrafts as core elements in cultural tourism. The definition of tourism culture of the Botswana Government was formulated and articulated by the Botswana Tourism Board. As an agent of the Government, the Board views the Botswana culture as a complex mixture of resources in a process of continuous refinement. Awareness of change and adaptation and recognition that these are unavoidable are the foundation of cultural tourism in Botswana. There are internal dynamics based on cultural change such as one group learning from another Botswana group. There are also external influences from foreign tourists. The people of Botswana also know what happens in other parts of Southern Africa which compete for international tourists with Botswana.

The Tourism Board recognises Botswana culture as comprising performance arts such as dancing, praise or poetry recitals, history of the different peoples of Botswana, and the dynamic attitudes of the nation towards use of their land and wildlife. For example, missionary records during the second half of the 19th Century showed that the people of Botswana were aware that they had to share wildlife and land resources among members of defined communities, their rulers and an ever increasing number of European

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.botswana-tourism.gov.bw/community/community.html> accessed 22 March 2008).

visitors (Livingstone, 1963). Botswana quickly knew that European penetration created new options about how to dispose of their trophies besides making honorific tributes to their rulers.<sup>12</sup> European use of guns and killing large numbers of wildlife made it clear to many Botswana that land-use patterns were changing. John Mackenzie (1988; 1997: 215–228) analysed predatory and disruptive nature of colonial encounters in the British empire. He noted that settler hunters catastrophically reduced wildlife in Southern Africa. In a series of studies on environmental change in Southern Africa, Beinart (1999) examined diverse aspects in the interaction between indigenous populations and European settlers in the region. The goal of the policies of the Government of Botswana since the 1990s has been to promote partnerships between rural communities and the private sector in sustainable development and resource management. Denbow and Thebe (2006) systematically studied some major changes in Tswana intellectual, material and performance culture. Such knowledge is most useful in packaging cultural commodities for a dynamic tourist market.

The Tswana accommodated change because of their ability to control and desire to march along with change. Yet there are times when the Botswana Government moved in directions opposite to what many local communities and intellectuals expected. Both the colonial and postcolonial administrations adopted policies of creating game reserves (as exclusive animal sanctuaries) and national parks which are areas where human settlement is prohibited. The reserves and parks make up 17 % of Botswana land surface. The colonial administration pushed a wedge between people and environmental management such as seen in the creation of the Central Kalahari Game Reserve (CKGR) in 1961 or the Chobe Wildlife Park in 1968 (Silberbauer, 1965; Hitchcock, 1996; Ramsay, Morton and Morton, 1996: 180–1). The Government of independent Botswana saw itself as a midwife who should ensure birth of a sustainable tourism and good resource management according to Botswana cultural dynamics (Wily, 1982: 291–308; Maribe, 2008). Thus, it emerged over time to the Government of Botswana that critical engagement of communities in the neighbourhoods of tourist centres such as Safari Camps should include promotion of various forms of the Botswana cultural tourist attractions.

Policies to engage local communities in tourism were slow to emerge and to develop. Influenced by debates on rural development based on participation of local communities in the 1970s, the Government of Botswana fostered similar and diverse programmes. The government programme of action in the Ghanzi farms and Makgadikadi in the 1970s was generally a strategy for self-determination of local communities outside capitalist enclaves in these areas (Wily, 1982: 291–308). In the late 1980s, Perrings (1988 & 1989) found that limited progress had been made in engaging local communities in tourist activities, especially those in their neighbourhoods. This was largely because the government focused on involvement of the private sector and left it to the goodwill of the private sector to mobilize the diverse Botswana traditional activities. The private sector was mainly foreign and largely South African because incipient domestic entrepreneurs were yet to develop (*Mmegi*, 7 March 2008). Abucar and Molutsi (1993: 61–73) attempted to explain factors behind such slow progress in the context of environmental programmes in Botswana. First, they argued that people were more likely to change and embrace government policies if the livelihoods of local communities improved. Second, strategies adopted in Botswana development had not empowered many rural communities to see themselves as part of solutions instead of being part of the problem in sustainable environmental programmes. Improved financial resources and commitment to refine traditional institutions such as Kgotla developing liberal democracy in Botswana cultural conditions paid off. Denbow and Thebe (2006: 8, 20–23) for example, discuss Botswana's first World Heritage Site at Tsodilo Hills, and many Safari Camps in the country where the Botswana cultural performances and handcrafts are successfully commoditised as part of tourist expansion.

### **Marketing of Cultural Experiences to Tourists**

Some aspects of government policies such as discussed above raise vital issues for the Botswana tourism industry. One of these is that it focuses attention on the importance of providing the Botswana cultural

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.gov.bw/index.php?option=com\\_context&task=view&id](http://www.gov.bw/index.php?option=com_context&task=view&id)

services or experiences such as hospitality, dance, crafts, and popular history which may be reflected in museums such as the National Museum and Art Gallery in Gaborone or ethnic ones for the Bakgatla, Phuthadikobo, at Mochudi, for the Bangwato, Khama III Memorial at Serowe, and for Bakwena, Sechele I at Molepolole, respectively. Research on service provision in the tourism sector has emphasized satisfaction of clients as a strategy to ensure that the tourists return in future. This points to potential of inventing culture and traditions or underlines the dynamic nature of culture. Given the significance of oral communications in African societies (Hamilton, 2002), and in the tourism sector generally despite high levels of literacy among tourists, 'word of mouth' (Anderson, 1998) advertising, quality of what tourists see increase marketability.

The internet now means that foreign visitors do advertise the Botswana cultural richness through email sent on a daily basis to family and friends all over the world. For example, Mug and Bean, a South African service enterprise, runs two popular entertainment facilities in Gaborone where locals and foreign tourists patronize. The oldest of these, Bull and Bush, is located on the western edge of Gaborone where vegetation is a marvel in this desert country. Bull and Bush provides diverse forms of music which make any visit memorable. Lina Longa, the most recent entertainment outfit of Mug and Bean in Botswana, is one of the most patronized places on the eastern side of Gaborone at Riverwalk Mall. In interviews, the management of the two places emphasised their awareness that they cater for local and foreign visitors (Oral Interview at Bull and Bush, 25 September 2007). The management took pride in the fact that many foreign visitors, especially from neighbouring countries, return frequently. The management explained that one of their most effective advertisements has been the quality of their services. Clearly, the quality of management and their exposure to world tourism helps them in providing a product suitable for local and foreign clientele. Internet websites and email correspondence boost the cosmopolitan or global aspects of the Mug and Bean entertainment resorts in Botswana.

The interviews conducted at Bull and Bush in September 2007 were rewarding. We wanted to get views of foreign tourists in some well known restaurants and popular places of entertainment in Gaborone. An initial interview had been arranged with management as a preliminary survey in preparing a research project on South African involvement in the tourism sector of Botswana. The management stated that some of their oral advertisements had paid off handsomely. We were then introduced to a group of five South Africans and three Australians. The oldest couple in the group was the first in the group to visit Bull and Bush upon advice from friends some seven years earlier. Because of their ages, 81 and 83, it was easy for them to travel to tourist destinations in South Africa and neighbouring countries such as Botswana and Swaziland. The couple lives in Johannesburg. The couple introduced their "fantastic holiday destination in Botswana" to their friends in Johannesburg who brought a relative with them. The second group recommended Botswana to their friends in Australia after their second visit. They all found "Botswana cultural dances to be distinctive, unique and different from Zulu dances which dominate traditional music in South Africa" (Oral Interview, Bull and Bush, 25 September 2007). Clearly, there are many different factors which make certain tourist attractions succeed in entertaining foreign tourists and locals.

Participation of those who create the product being marketed is critical in the tourist industry and this poses serious challenges with or in some rural communities. In a recent research on community participation in tourism and resource management at Kruger National Park (KNP), Tapela et al (2007: 60-87) found that evidence based interventions still aroused resistance from local communities. The communities questioned relevance of some research and origin of certain policy interventions from KNP management and Governments of Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe. The local communities felt that there was no feedback from researchers and yet KNP management was quick to formulate and implement new policies. Clearly here was a struggle for ownership and control of instruments for transformation. The local communities felt that they were not sufficiently engaged in processing data which they have given as a basis for formulation of new policies. Some members of the local community felt that researchers and policy-makers had not understood data from the communities at KNP. In further

consideration of the same research at KNP, Mavhunga and Dressler (2007:44–59) found that local communities did not feel empowered from new knowledge research had generated. This was despite the fact that the researchers had gone there with much conviction that rural participatory research approaches of the 1970s and 1980s (Chambers,1983) would help them generate information useful in enhancing benefits to local communities in a transfrontier resource management park on the borders of Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

This offers invaluable lessons to Botswana in packaging her diverse cultural environments for a sustainable tourist industry. The Botswana Government operates its tourist industry on a principle of providing high quality service to a low flow of tourists who are willing to pay high prices. In the Maun, Okavango and Chobe areas, some tourists charter small aeroplanes to see wild life, breathtaking landscapes and beautiful vegetation. This has raised concerns about patronage of the rich and celebrities and the capability, as we noted in the introduction, of local or Botswana communities to provide cultural entertainment suitable to local and foreign tourists (Parsons, 2006:667–682). Many doubts are raised about the ability of many communities in Botswana being able to prepare cultural entertainment, local films and popular educational (cultural and historical) activities that would meet the taste of many international visitors. Researchers on tourism and environmental management in Botswana raised such issues in the 1980s and 1990s and further reviews are necessary (Opschoor, 1981; Wily, 1982: 291–308; Abucar and Molutsi, 1993; Parsons, 2006: 667–682).

However, there are a few places where combinations of stakeholders market Botswana culture to local and foreign tourists. Mokolodi Game reserve in Gaborone is one of those areas where these conflicts are continually played out (Parsons, 2006, 667-682). With Norwegian funding, certain important personalities in Botswana (Gaborone) established one of the best tourist destinations near an urban area. Rich tourists or many on brief or exploratory visits to Botswana from South Africa patronize Mokolodi regularly. As South Africans, they enrich their experiences at Mokolodi by visiting Bull and Bush and Linga Longa which we discussed earlier. Local cultural Botswana dances are organised and this went a long way in attracting Norwegian financial support because some benefits would trickle down to low income or unemployed Botswana (people of Botswana). This is a serious attempt at business partnership between local communities and private sector, and with influential political elites.

The Mokolodi experience is also found in the north-eastern side of the country. According to media sources, *Mmegi* 7 March 2008, The Chobe Holdings Limited has Botswana and South African investors. The Botswana are individual investors while South Africans are companies with a long history of tourism business in South Africa and Botswana. For example, Ker and Downey Botswana (Ltd) began operations in Botswana in the mid 1950s (Bolaane, 2004) and recently expanded investment in Okavango Delta, “one of Africa’s premier destinations”. The Botswana Government is in no doubt that it has and it is empowering its citizens for a stake in eco-tourism. The *Sunday Standard* of 16 March and 30 March 2008 presented contrasting perspectives on what the Government has done to involve and empower rural communities in tourism business and sustainable environmental management. Writing from the perspective of the legal representative of the Ghanzi based NGO, First People of the Kalahari (FPK), Gordon Bennett observed impoverishment and marginalisation of a small population of Botswana ( in particular Basarwa) found in the CKGR. Clifford Maribe, a senior researcher and civil servant at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, presented the position of the Government of Botswana in the *Sunday Standard* of 30 March. Maribe stated, in part, that

The Sankoyo community, for example, runs a lodge and a camp site. In 2005 these projects generated for the Sankoyo community enough revenue to provide for, a P300.00 monthly stipend for the elderly in the community (60 years and above); P500.00 at the end of the year for all households in the community; 7 houses/shelters for the underprivileged; food baskets for all orphans in the community; sponsorship for tertiary education for JC and Form 5 leavers in the community; financial support for bereaved families; loan scheme of up to P30,000 for community members at a very low interest rate;

standpipes for all 53 households in the community; water borne toilets, to mention but a few. The community further made a donation of P50,000.00 to Masiela Trust Fund. Sankoyo Trust has in its employ 20 members of that community.

In many ways, Maribe acknowledged a debate on policy formulation and implementation in which social scientists have participated for a long time in Botswana (Cobham,1994; Bolaane, 2000). Maribe also described a vision realized and deserving both support and scholarly discourse. With these or such benefits, Botswana should be able to use their cultural and environmental heritage in a sustainable manner. Sustainability science helps in reconstructing “towards an understanding of the human-environment condition with the dual objectives of meeting the needs of society while sustaining the support systems of the planet” (Turner *et al*, 2003: 8074 -8079). As Tapela *et al* and Mavhunga and Dressler demonstrated earlier for Kruger National Park, cultural heritage is beyond performance arts, folklore and crafts. It includes knowledge about managing the plant and land environments in a manner that they retain perpetual utility value. Indigenous knowledge in various societies in Botswana should be canalized. The Government of Botswana and research should play facilitating and advocacy roles.

Mbaiwa (2005: 1-16) demonstrated some of these roles. In his research and discussion of the impact of enclave tourism in the Okavango Delta, he found out that huge amounts of revenue generated from tourism went out of Botswana. In his view, tourism failed to alleviate poverty because it was dominated by foreign owners or managers who expatriated their earnings to their home countries. We have shown earlier that Chobe Holdings Ltd demonstrates this pattern which stretched back to the 1950s. The local people were paid low salaries. The Botswana Tourism Board echoed the findings of Mbaiwa. The Board pointed out that in 1997, out of an income of 1.1 billion Pula, about 830 million Pula was “lost to the country through payment to external agents and import leakages”.<sup>13</sup> These statistics are suggestive that longitudinal studies may reveal a more serious case where the Botswana Government is show-casing the country’s cultural diversity yet in sponsorship of foreign business. Statistics of tourists coming to Botswana make clear that the country’s policy of eco –tourism focusing on community participation and resource sustainability has considerable potential impact. The number of tourists who visited Botswana in 1995 was 106,800 and this rose to 184,475 in 1997. While more systematic research is needed ( and is already planned) there is no doubt that Botswana’s cultural heritage, as defined in this discussion could alleviate poverty and create institutions for self-determined tourist driven development as advocated since the 1980s.

The research must show how tourism identifies, adapts and develops skills based on Tswana cultural heritage and indigenous knowledge. A dynamic and rapidly changing development sector such as tourism should also nurture entrepreneurial skills. Tourism is a multifaceted investment sector involving transportation, accommodation, restaurant services and entertainment. Souvenir trade is also important. Despite this diverse potential, tourists arrange their package tours outside Botswana. We have no inventory in Botswana about how profitable various aspects are. Our comprehensive definition of cultural heritage underline the significance of Botswana indigenous knowledge about managing domestic and wild game and how Botswana opened to other communities in the world.

### **Conclusion**

In this discussion, two major themes have emerged. First, there were significant shifts in tourism policies in Botswana since the 1970s. The Government of Botswana attempted diverse versions of fostering sustainable use of human and physical resources in Botswana and in promoting participation of Botswana citizens. The role of the private sector and the population of Botswana were identified and reviewed periodically. Despite changes, periodic scholarly assessments pointed to limited participation of the Botswana common population as a major constraint in what Government aspired to do. There is also some evidence pointing to foreign capital as dominant investment in Botswana tourism. From the end of the

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.botswana-tourism.gov.bw/tourism\\_s.html](http://www.botswana-tourism.gov.bw/tourism_s.html) accessed 22 March 2008.

1990s, according to the website of the Botswana Tourism Board, the Government of Botswana rebranded tourism policy as based on cultural activities. Botswana historical awareness or Tswana popular interpretation of history is a new strategy the government is using to promote participation of local communities in tourism.

Second, a systematic study of cultural tourism as participation of local populations throughout Botswana awaits further research. Since the Botswana National Archives now allows access to its original (primary) sources up to mid 1980s, there is justification for a historical research on the origin and making of cultural tourism in Botswana. Rural communities should be studied in terms of how they plan investment in tourism, use their cultural knowledge and how they apply internet technology in their economic activities. The research should also capture responses of local and foreign tourists. The dynamic nature of tourism implies, as a logical necessity, continuous intellectual discourse.

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