

10 Leveraging tourism in Kenya through indigenous knowledge

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Abstract

Indigenous knowledge is the local knowledge or knowledge that is unique to a given culture or society. It is an archive of the sum total of knowledge, skills and attitudes belonging to a community and passed down through many generations. The use of indigenous knowledge to attract tourists is known as indigenous tourism. This is a form of tourism in which the indigenous people are directly involved either through control and/or by having their culture serve as the essence of the attraction. Indigenous tourism gives indigenous communities an opportunity to tell their story to the world. It also gives tourists an authentic experience with the indigenous communities as well as their culture and environment which cannot be easily experienced through any other way. This chapter explores the use of indigenous knowledge to leverage tourism in Kenya through indigenous tourism. It demonstrates the value of indigenous knowledge in supporting sustainable national socioeconomic development. In the face of the prevailing cut-throat competition, indigenous communities in Africa can enhance their competitive edge by mainstreaming their unique indigenous knowledge in their tourism packages.

Introduction

Tourism is a crucial sector in the global economy. The World Travel and Tourism Council (2015) reported that tourism contributed 10 per cent of the global GDP in 2014. The report further states that the tourism sector grew faster than other economic sectors, including financial, transport and manufacturing, in the same period. It generated 277 million jobs, translating to one in every 11 jobs globally. Moutinho (2011) opines that tourism contributes significantly to the economy of developing countries, Kenya included. According to Njoya and Seetaram (2018), tourism is also one of the fastest growing sectors in Kenya's economy and contributes directly and indirectly to national development. Statistics from the World Travel and Tourism Council (2017) reveal that in 2016, tourism directly contributed 257.4 billion Kenya Shillings (about 2.547 billion USD), 3.7%, to the country's GDP and 399,000 (3.4%) jobs. Consequently, Njoya and Seetaram (2018) conclude that tourism directly and indirectly leads to socioeconomic growth amongst rural and urban poor by increasing income and demand for labour. This ultimately leads to a fall in the poverty headcount as well as the poverty gap and severity in these communities.

Development of the tourism sector in Kenya began soon after independence in 1963. Indeed, Smart (2018) reports that Kenya spent at least two million sterling pounds to market its tourism industry during the 1960s and 1970s. This promotion was conducted in conjunction with projects aimed at facilitating a good experience for tourists. Some of these included expansion and advancement of transportation infrastructure and hospitality facilities. The government of Kenya also prioritised strengthening of technical and institutional capacity of tourism service providers through professional courses in tourism and travel management, catering and accommodation management, events and convention management as well as foreign languages. The government also streamlined visa requirements, application and processing to make it easy for tourists to obtain visas expeditiously. The government also embarked on preserving the country's flora and fauna to increase their appeal to tourists. In addition, there were programmes to mainstream the tourism ethos such as courtesy and hospitality amongst the citizenry. Smart (2018) argues that these efforts were largely successful and tourism grew by 20 per cent per year in the 1960s and earned higher revenues than coffee which was then the top cash crop. Mayaka and Prasad (2012) opine that the growth in the tourism sector in Kenya during this period was boosted by the desire for adventure, sightseeing and big-game hunting by international tourists. Anyhow, this growth rate was maintained into the 1970s.

The pace of growth of the tourism sector slackened in the late 1970s and early 1980s. According to Sindiga (2000), the use of package tours model lowered tourism prices and diminished the return on investment on related infrastructure and accommodation facilities. Similarly, Smart (2018) observes that tourists to Kenya were mobilised by firms in their countries of origin. This approach ensured that a significant portion of the revenues was retained in the countries of departure resulting in a leakage, rendering the sector unprofitable. In spite of these challenges, the government of Kenya used diverse strategies to buttress tourism as a top socioeconomic activity in the country. Some of the strategies include increasing the volume of communication on tourism amongst the potential tourists in Europe and North America, for instance, through opening of more liaison offices in these regions; increasing budgetary allocation to and investment in tourism infrastructure and promotion; diversifying tourist attractions to include unique cultural heritage, activities and cuisine; projecting a positive image of the country through international media; as well as repackaging Kenya as the preferred destination for international tourists seeking an exquisite and unique African experience. These efforts were successful to a large extent. According to Akama (2002), in the 1980s, tourism accounted for more than 12 per cent of Kenya's GDP, employed about 140,000

people directly, and provided indirect income for another 350,000 people. In the same period, tourism surpassed tea and coffee and became Kenya's top foreign exchange earner.

Ikiara (2001) describes the status of the tourism sector in Kenya in the 1990s as being erratic and lacklustre. Akama (2002) explains that the growth momentum in the tourism sector witnessed in the 1960s to 1980s was lost in the 1990s due to increased competition from other destinations in the region, particularly in southern and northern Africa; loss of marketing networks in traditional tourist-generating countries in Europe and North America; as well as growing insecurity in the region exacerbated by political violence and terrorist attacks resulting in unfavourable travel advisories. Mayaka and Prasad (2012) attribute this sorry state to poor planning and preoccupation with mere tourist numbers and bed capacity rather than investing in wholesome sector development and sustainable growth. Ng'ang'a (2018) concurs and explains that the growth in the sector was intermittent, depending on the prevailing government policies and external shocks such as insecurity. Smart (2018) adds that the decline in the tourism revenues in Kenya continued throughout the 2000s, resulting in a reduction of employment in the sector by 25 per cent in 2015. This led the government to take myriad actions to redeem the sector. The actions included extensive rebranding as well as marketing and promotion of Kenya as "a land of contrasts", offering diverse experiences to tourists. These efforts, championed by none other than President Uhuru Kenyatta himself, resulted in an increase of earnings in the sector by 17.8 per cent in 2016. One key component of these strategies is mainstreaming of indigenous knowledge in the tourism packages.

Indigenous knowledge

Various definitions of indigenous knowledge exist. Warren (1991) defines it as the local knowledge or knowledge that is unique to a given culture or society. Johnson (1992) defines it as a body of knowledge developed by a group of people through generations of living in close contact with nature. Onyancha and Ocholla (2005) define indigenous knowledge as a dynamic archive of the sum total of knowledge, skills and attitudes belonging to a community over generations and expressed in the form of action, object and language. Ocholla (2007) states that indigenous knowledge is a complex set of knowledge and technologies existing and developed around specific conditions of populations and communities indigenous to a particular geographic area. According to Kwanya (2015), indigenous knowledge can also be perceived as the knowledge and practices invented by indigenous communities as a means of enhancing their capacity to survive in a given context. Such knowledge relates to cultivation

of crops, management of natural resources, art and crafts, and indigenous medicine. Kwanya and Kiplang'at (2016) explain that indigenous knowledge is passed down orally from generation to generation and reflects thousands of years of experimentation and innovation in all aspects of life in a particular indigenous context.

It can be deduced from the foregoing that indigenous knowledge is local since it is engrained in a specific indigenous community; is established within the boundaries of broader cultural traditions and developed by a specific community; is intangible and consequently not easily codified; is conveyed orally; is experimental rather than theoretical; is learnt through repetition; and it changes continuously with conditions around and within the concerned community. According to the World Bank (2004), indigenous knowledge is constantly created and recreated, discovered and lost, even though outsiders may perceive it to be static. This view concurs with Johnson (1992) who asserts that indigenous knowledge evolves in the local environment so that it is specifically adapted to the needs and conditions of the local people. So, it is not old-fashioned, backward or static. Langill (1999) explains that indigenous knowledge is creative and experimental, constantly incorporating outside influence and internal innovations to meet emerging needs. Semali and Kincheloe (1999) hold the view that indigenous knowledge reflects the dynamic ways in which the residents of an area have come to understand themselves in relation to their environment and how they organise that folk knowledge of flora and fauna, cultural beliefs, and history to enhance their lives. A similar view is expressed by Flavier, de Jesus, Navarro and Warren (1995) who state that indigenous knowledge systems are dynamic and are continually influenced by internal creativity and experimentation as well as by contact with external systems.

Fleer (1999) explains the distinction between indigenous knowledge and scientific knowledge using the concept of worldviews. She points out that while indigenous knowledge is founded on traditional worldview and produced for specific purposes to maintain particular societies, scientific knowledge is founded on the "civilised" worldview and produced for the sake of it. She argues that while scientific knowledge seeks power over nature and people, indigenous knowledge seeks to coexist with the same. On the one hand she describes scientific knowledge as being materialistic, reductionist, rational, de-contextualised, individual and competitive while on the other hand she extols indigenous knowledge as being spiritual, holistic, intuitive, contextualised, communal and cooperative. Table 10.1 contrasts scientific and indigenous worldviews as applied in this chapter.

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Perceiving indigenous knowledge, as explained in Table 1, identifies it as the natural, accepted, accessible, affordable, and applicable body of knowledge possessed by indigenous communities. This body of knowledge determines perceptions, decisions and practice in these communities.

According to Agrawal (1995), indigenous knowledge was perceived by some parties as being inefficient, inferior and anti-development. However, he reports that it is gaining prominence and has become a new area of attraction in development. Semali and Kincheloe (2002) concur and assert that indigenous knowledge is gaining prominence in the search for solutions to challenges relating to socioeconomic development and prosperity of societies not just in the indigenous but also in the global community. This increased focus on indigenous knowledge represents a shift from the preoccupation with the scientific knowledge which has failed to alter the lives of the majority of the poor over the decades.

A study sponsored by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in Kenya, Tanzania, Swaziland and South Africa conducted between 2004 and 2006 concluded that the value of indigenous knowledge for socioeconomic development lies in its ability to deliver social and economic goods. The study also concluded that certain traditional practices, if popularised, and integrated with modern knowledge systems, can help to alleviate poverty (Steiner, 2008). It was also evident from the study that the rural poor depend on indigenous knowledge for specific skills essential for their survival. Kwanya (2015) argues that indigenous knowledge improves the livelihoods of indigenous communities and other stakeholders; provides the basis for solving their problems; and promotes a global knowledge on development issues. According to Chepchirchir, Kwanya and Kamau (2018), indigenous knowledge contributes to socioeconomic development by generating income through activities such as tourist attraction as well as sale of cultural artefacts and music. Similarly, indigenous knowledge creates a physical environment supportive of forests and herbal plants which support socioeconomic activities. The authors also argue that protection of cultural expressions enriches the national heritage and promotes tourism as a socioeconomic activity.

Indigenous tourism

Tourism is one of the socioeconomic activities in which indigenous knowledge can be gainfully applied. Through the concept of indigenous tourism, indigenous communities are able to generate economic value from their traditional practices. Also known as cultural tourism, indigenous tourism can be defined as a tourism activity in which the indigenous people are directly involved either through control and/or by having their culture serve as the essence of the attraction (Hinch & Butler, 1996; Zeppel, 2006). Smith (1996) states that habitat, heritage, history, and handicrafts are the four “Hs” which underpin indigenous tourism. Kwanya (2015) explains that indigenous tourism can be achieved, for instance, by restaurants which serve indigenous foods; hotels and accommodation facilities owned and managed by indigenous people or constructed using indigenous architecture; indigenous games and cultural events; lifestyles of indigenous communities; indigenous art exhibitions, music, dances and stories around campfires; cultural ceremonies, festivals and special events; visits to cultural sites and shrines; cultural, environmental and spiritual beliefs and practices of indigenous people; and museums holding indigenous artefacts. Besides creating jobs for local people, indigenous tourism also gives indigenous communities an opportunity to tell their story to the world. Indigenous tourism gives the tourists an authentic experience with the indigenous communities as well as their culture and environment which cannot be easily experienced through any other way.

Control, identity and authenticity distinguish indigenous tourism from the other forms of tourism. Cohen (1988) explains that one of the factors influencing the growth of indigenous tourism is the pursuit of authenticity. He explains that authenticity is a modern value that leads the tourist to seek the pristine, natural experience, untouched by modernity. Wang (1999) explains that authenticity is a saleable attribute which enhances the uniqueness of tourist attractions.

Indigenous tourism can also be perceived as any form of direct or indirect involvement of indigenous people in tourism. This can be through entrepreneurship or passive displays (Hinch & Butler, 1996). It describes the collection of activities and enterprises owned or exploited by individual people. According to Erikson (2003), indigenous tourism revolves around exotic cultures which travellers seek to experience, gain insights into and collect in some form. Lindner (2014) explains that indigenous tourism encompasses performing arts, visual arts and crafts, festivals, museums and cultural centres, and historic sites. Maher (2009) argues that

indigenous tourism is growing because tourists are steadily becoming more interested in indigenous culture.

Indigenous tourism in Kenya

According to Owuor, Knerr, Ochieng, Wambua and Magero (2017), indigenous communities in Kenya practise nature tourism, rural tourism, agricultural tourism, and cultural tourism. They explain that the most predominant type of tourism amongst indigenous communities is cultural tourism which is characterised by visits to local communities that preserve and practise their ancestral traditions and culture. They add that the main activities in community tourism in Kenya include participation in dance and music, festivals, buying souvenirs, artefacts, and photography.

Kenya has several attractions which are being exploited for indigenous tourism. Some of these attractions include the six UNESCO World Heritage sites in the country. These are Mount Kenya National Park and natural forest, Fort Jesus, Old Town Lamu, Kenya lake system in the Great Rift Valley, the sacred Mijikenda Kaya Forest and the Turkana National Park. Kenya is also home to several prehistoric sites which are a great indigenous tourism attraction. One of these is Koobi Fora where one of the earliest evidences of human habitation on earth was found. Other prehistoric and archaeological sites in Kenya include Olorgesailie, Enkapune Ya Muto, Hyrax Hill, *Jumba la Mtwana*, Ruins of Gedi, Manda Island, Namoratunga and Pate Island.

Kenya also has a number of sacred forests which serve as indigenous tourism attractions. According to Adam (2012), they include Karima Forest which is considered as an *ihoero* (sacred natural site in the local Kikuyu culture). It is located in Othaya Division of Nyeri County in central Kenya. It is a tapering dome-shaped volcanic hill with its highest point being at an altitude of 6000ft above sea level. It is located between the sacred Kirinyaga mountain (Mt. Kenya) and the Nyandarua (Aberdare) ranges, about 150 kilometres north-east of the capital, Nairobi. There are two shrines, Kamwangi and Gakina, in Karima Forest, comprising 85 acres which are gazetted under the National Museums of Kenya. The other sacred site is the Mijikenda Kaya forests which are the most well-known of Kenya's cultural heritage sites. The area consists of several forest sites spread over 200 kilometres in the contiguous Kenyan coastal counties of Kwale, Mombasa, Kilifi and Malindi. The Mijikenda people respect the Kaya forests as the abodes of their ancestors and are revered as sacred natural sites. The sacred natural sites owe their continued existence largely to the cultural knowledge and practices of the nine coastal Mijikenda ethnic groups - the Giriama, Digo, Duruma, Rabai, Kauma, Ribe,

Jibana, Kambe and Chonyi. Another sacred forest is Giitune which is considered as an *irii* (sacred natural site in local culture) on the eastern side of Mt. Kenya and is one of the numerous sacred natural sites surrounding this UNESCO World Heritage site. Giitune lies in a high rainfall area with fertile and well-drained volcanic soils. It is a community forest under the governance of the community which is recognised and protected under the National Museums of Kenya. Still there are Mathembo sacred natural sites in Ukambani in eastern Kenya where the Kamba community offers sacrifices during droughts and epidemics or to give thanks for a good harvest. The trees and bushes growing in these places are highly protected and cutting them is prohibited. Kivaa sacred natural site in Masinga is an example of an *ithembo* (sacred natural site in local Kamba language) which has been rehabilitated by the local community through a revival of their cultural practices and governance systems related to ecosystems.

All the 42 ethnic groups living in Kenya have diverse cultural heritage which offer tourists a unique experience, from traditional dances, bull fighting, festivals and celebrations. The myths surrounding *kaya* in the coast, *Kit Mikayi* and *Simbi Nyaima* in the west are among cultural attractions in the country. Several museums preserving national cultural heritage are spread across the country in Nairobi, Kisumu, Kitale, Kapenguria, Lamu and Meru. Others are Fort Jesus in Mombasa, Gedi Ruins in Malindi, Thimlich Ohinga in South Nyanza, and Jumba la Mtwana ruins in Kilifi. Every corner of Kenya has unique cultural features of tourist interest.

Indigenous tourism is being implemented in diverse forms in Kenya by the national government, county governments, communities and individuals to exploit the attractions highlighted above. Consequently, several examples of indigenous tourism projects exist in Kenya. Dunga tourism development project is located on the shores of the world's second largest fresh water mass, Lake Victoria in western Kenya. According to Jernsand (2017), the site attracts several domestic and international tourists who come to participate in traditional games like canoe rides or tug of war; join in cultural music and dances; or enjoy local foods like smoked fish and fermented milk. Also in western Kenya is an indigenous tourism circuit hinged around the production and sale of traditional artefacts and crafts. This circuit is predominant in Kisii where the locals produce soapstone carvings. Ondimu (2002) explains that besides the carvings, other tourist attractions in the region include pottery, traditional adornments and ornaments, initiation rites and songs, as well as traditional marriage ceremonies and homesteads.

Another form of indigenous tourism is what Okech (2014) calls culinary tourism. This type of tourism involves traditional food as the key attraction. Kenya boasts diverse indigenous cuisines which are reputed not only for being tasteful but also for their nutritional value. Culinary tourists swarm indigenous food centres dotting the entire country. For instance, in the coastal region there are *Swahili* dishes such as *pilau* (rice), *madafu* (coconut drink), traditional seafood, *kaimati* (donuts), and *bhajia* (coated potatoes). Other uniquely Kenyan cuisines include *nyama choma* (roasted meat), game meat, *mursik* (curdled milk), *aliya* (sun-dried meat), traditional vegetables and herbs, fermented porridge, and *mukimo* (potatoes mashed with pumpkin leaves and beans). It is common to find these foods being integrated in the tourist allure of specific regions of Kenya.

Conclusion

It is evident from the foregoing that communities in Kenya as well as the government have embraced indigenous tourism as a means of sustaining growth in the sector. Whereas good progress has been made, several challenges hamper effective execution of indigenous tourism in the country. The challenges include lack of adequate capital to develop products, market the attractions, build facilities and hire competent staff. The other challenge is lack of relevant business skills amongst local communities to develop appropriate business models around indigenous knowledge and manage indigenous tourism ventures. Remoteness of indigenous tourist attraction sites is also another challenge which pushes up costs associated with visiting the attraction sites. The remoteness of some of the indigenous tourism territories also makes them vulnerable to insecurity and lack of basic services essential for hospitality. Given that some of the attractions are based on natural resources, the effects of climate change and the resulting environmental degradation also negatively affect the viability of indigenous tourism in those areas.

The indigenous tourism stakeholders need to address the challenges that indigenous tourism faces in order to safeguard its gains. One of the immediate ways of addressing the challenges is the formulation of national policies and strategies on indigenous tourism. The strategy should identify the high potential niches and outline the means of harnessing them both in the short-time and long-term. The Government of Kenya should also create structures and institutional frameworks facilitative of indigenous tourism. One such structure could be a directorate dealing with indigenous tourism. These structures should percolate down to the devolved levels of government where most attractions are located. The stakeholders should also develop unique indigenous tourism products which can compete globally. They should not just imitate what

their competitors are doing but must make effort to develop and repackage products which are unique to Kenya. Importantly, the Government of Kenya should develop the infrastructure essential for indigenous tourism. The basic infrastructure includes telecommunication, transportation, accommodation and general services. Recognising the fact that indigenous tourism relies greatly on cultures and natural habitats, the concerned communities should work to conserve and preserve these to continue being attractive to tourists.

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