CONTENTIONS ABOUT COMMODIFIED ETHNIC IDENTITY; THE CASE OF CULTURAL TOURISM IN *HMMAR* AND *MURSI* COMMUNTIES OF SOUTH OMO RIFT VALLEY, ETHIOPIA

Saleh Seid

Arba Minch University, Ethiopia

Author's Note

Saleh Seid, MA, Culture and Environment in Africa, Advanced master in cultural anthropology and development studies; Lecturer, Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology; Arba Minch university, Arba Minch, Ethiopia. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Saleh Seid Email: - salehseida@yahoo.com

Article Info	Abstract
	Most ethnic groups worldwide tend to engage in commercializing and commodifying their indigenous cultures and heritage. Cultural tourism is one of the areas where ethnicity is often highly commodified. In this aspect of the worldwide movement, the notion of cultural authenticity falls under a growing danger while some argue commodification will help to preserve identity through commercializing it. The other debate pertaining to the commodification of cultural identity is whether it fosters emancipation or exploitation. A much-disputed question here is who is exploited by commodification, the tourist or the community. Drawing upon these contentions around commodified ethnic identity, this study explores the specific case of cultural tourism in the Ethiopian South Omo rift valley. The findings show that the outcomes of commodification in cultural tourism for local identities can be both constructive and destructive or emancipating and exploitative.

INTRODUCTION

Most ethnic groups worldwide are considering commercializing and commodifying their indigenous cultures and heritage. As Commarof & Commarof (2009) point out, "[w]hile it is increasingly the stuff of existential passion, of the self-conscious fashioning of meaningful, morally anchored selfhood, ethnicity is also becoming more corporate, more commodified, more implicated than ever before in the economics of everyday life" (p.1.). In this aspect of the universal move, the idea of cultural or ethnic identity comes under a mounting risk. Cultural tourism, marketing products, and branding different companies and their merchandise with ethnic labels are some of the areas where ethnicity is often commodified. Consumption of goods rather than production has become the base for the postmodern and post-industrial economy. Hence, commodities become powerful tools in the construction of our identity, who we are, and whom we want to be.

Cultural tourism is one of the areas where ethnicity is often highly commodified. In this study commodification is seen as a result of the impact cultural tourism has on local culture. Mass tourism based on consumerism is treating cultural values as a commodity to be consumed. Tourism is part of the globalization process that wipes out economic, political and, cultural demarcations and offers a free flow of human, goods, capital, information, communication, and lifestyle (Cohen, 2012). There is contention among scholars whether this process leads to monoculturalism or multiculturalism.

Despite the vast research by anthropologists and sociologists about commodification and cultural identity, there is still contention about what commodification means to cultural identity. On the one hand, we have a group of scholars who argue that commodification reduces cultural authenticity and destroys local identity and cultural values (Bunten, 2008; MacCannell, 1973, 1993; Urry,1990,1999; Watson and Kopachevsky, 1994). On the other hand, we have the oppositions who insist that commodification through cultural tourism could result in renaissance and preservation of cultural values. A fairly recent literature argues that both could happen simultaneously (Mousavi. et al., 2016).

It is on the last proposition that this paper based its analysis of the relationship between commodification and cultural identity in cultural tourism. This paper also argues that our understanding

of the outcomes of this relationship should be grounded in the specific context that we are dealing with. This study explores the relationship between tourism and commodification of cultural practices and values in the specific context of cultural tourism in pastoralist communities of Hammer and Mursi in the Ethiopian South Omo rift valley.

Beside the authenticity-preservation debate, this paper attempts to address the issue of emancipation and exploitation. It shades some light on who gets exploited by staged authenticity, what is authenticity, and who defines it. Most of the empirical data used in this paper are collected from my own experience and exposure to the pastoral communities of the South Omo valley, in particular the Mursi and Hammer people, for more than five years. This has given me the opportunity to understand the daily process of cultural representation, commodification, and local tourist interaction. Such a prolonged stay is also useful from methodological stand point as Butten (2008) points out the setback most anthropologist studying tourism encounter is short visits to destinations like the tourists themselves. A critical engagement with the literature in the field was also used to complement the cases.

The paper has four parts. Part one deals with the concept of cultural tourism and commodification. Part two discusses the study area and shades light on the history and current status of cultural tourism in the study area. The third section presents the contentions on the relationship between cultural tourism and local cultural values and identities in the area. The last part provides concluding remarks on the basic arguments of the study.

Cultural Tourism and Commodification

Tourism can be seen as travel for leisure supported by various service industries. It involves various phenomenon and stakeholders with multiple and conflicting interests. "Tourism is not just an aggregate of merely commercial activities; it is also an ideological framing of history, nature, and tradition: a framing that has the power to reshape culture and nature to its own needs" (MacCannell, 1975, p. 1). Tourism itself is a commodified travel. As a result of this commodification of travel, most tourist attractions are pseudo-events (Boorstin, 1961). The pseudo-events are even more common in cultural tourism than in any other types of tourism.

There is a strong connection between culture and tourism as "all tourism is a cultural experience" (MacCannell, 1993, p. 67) and tourism itself could be a culture. McKercher and Du Cros (2002) suggest that "the number of definitions for cultural tourism nearly matches the number of cultural tourists" (p. 34). Cultural tourism is the offspring of culture. In this paper, cultural tourism is understood to be traveling for the consumption of cultural elements and its manifestations. Culture is a package to be consumed by tourists in cultural tourism.

In this time of mass tourism, tourist destinations are competing more than ever to attract mass mobility and visitors which result in the commodification of local identity (Urry, 1999). This competition forced local community to surrender to the tourist affection (Urry, 1990). Cohen (1988) defines commodification as a process where cultural values and materials are priced according to their exchange values and treated as goods and services in the market. Similarly, commodification is an inevitable outcome of modern capitalism where products, experiences, and pleasures are standardized (Watson and Kopachevsky, 1994).

Like commodification, tourism is also the result of modern capitalist consumer culture. A postmodern and postindustrial culture shifts the base from the production of goods to consumption. Commodities hence become powerful tools in the construction of our everyday life. In cultural tourism, the tourist is a modern consumer and culture of the local people is a consumption good and service. This process produces new types of tourists that are more interested in consuming their emotion.

The commodification of cultural values and their material manifestations in cultural tourism starts with tourism marketing. In the marketing industry there exist uneven power relationship between the powerful tour operators and the weak local community. At the same time, excessive marketing and promotion about tourist attraction sites in the mass media and social media reduce the uniqueness of the destinations and the experience. Consequently, this raises the demand for exotic experience and space by tourists which result in a further intensification of the commodification of local cultural identity. Hospitality, which used to be a social exchange, has become a pure economic exchange. Urry (1999, p. 213) refers to this as '[m]oral nexus' converted into a 'cash nexus.' This is what Bunten (2008) phrases as the commodification of hospitality produced by the 'cultural tourism formula.'

Commodification as a result of the impact of cultural tourism could have both negative and positive implications for the local community and the tourists. This paper is far from concluding on either side; instead, it tries to show that both implications are the case. Beside the commodification of local identity, the guest host interaction also produces other social facts like acculturation, assimilation, and borrowing.

The impact of the cash induced by cultural tourism to the local community in shaping their internal social organization is another blind spot in the study of cultural tourism and local identity. In pastoralist communities like South Omo where social structure is egalitarian and properties are collectively owned, capitalist relation is developing through the cash induced by cultural tourism together with other factors. Below is given a model that shows the relationship between commodification and cultural tourism. Adopted from Kirlar, C. et al. (2017), the model exemplifies the juxtaposition among cultural tourism and commodification in the face of ever-growing globalization, consumerism, and technological development.

Figure 1: Model for Tourism-Commodification Relationship
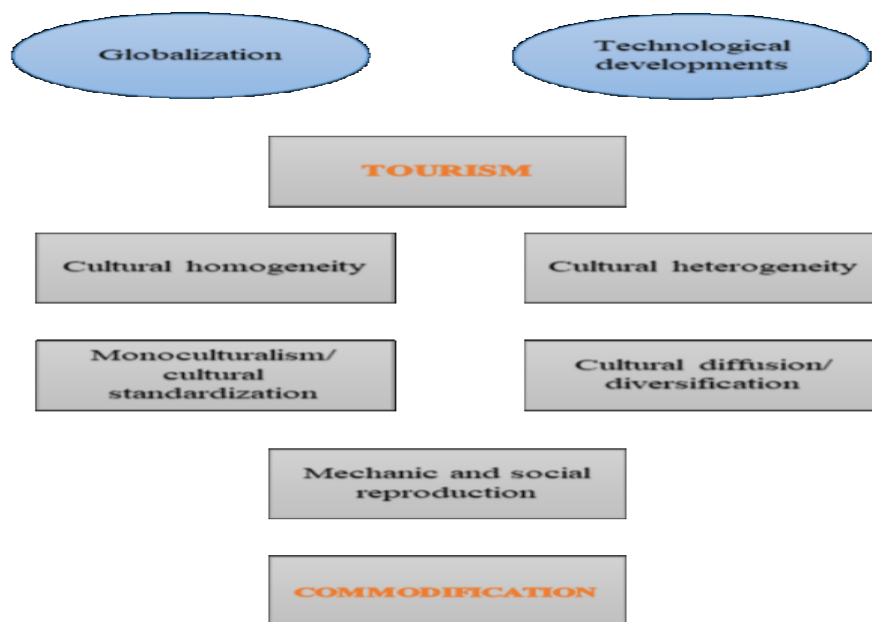
Source: Kirlar, C. et.al, 2017

Cultural Tourism in South Omo

Although Ethiopia is known for historical touristic sites, it also has tremendous potential for cultural tourism. Lower Omo Valley with more than 16 ethnic groups is one of the countries' hotspot destination for cultural tourism. They are known for their interesting way of life including rituals and traditional ceremonies, food, house design, dressing, body decoration, and other aspects which is the main element of attraction for cultural tourists.

The Hammar and the Mursi are the most known and frequently visited ethnic groups by tourists. Among other factors including infrastructural accessibility of other ethnic groups, this could be partly because of the selective tourism marketing and maybe the early contact with anthropologists. Early ethnographic works by anthropologists were the primary source of tourists' visit to the area at the beginning. Ethnographic collections from South Omo, both material and non-material, by anthropologists were exhibited in Europe which leads to an influx of cultural tourists to South Omo. In other words, anthropologists have played their own role in terms of promoting cultural tourism through their ethnographic publications about South Omo and the cultures and way of life of the various groups living in the region.

COMMODIFICATION AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN TOURISM

The central theme of this paper is to explore the relationship between the commodification of cultural values in tourism and local cultural identities. As mentioned above there are different arguments on the nature and outcomes of this relationship. Reduced authenticity or exploitation, as opposed to renaissance or preservation or emancipation, is the critical source of contention among scholars regarding the relationship between commodification and cultural identity in tourism. The opinion that favors the negative impact of commodification on cultural authenticity is relatively dominant among writers of the field (Bunten, 2008; MacCannell, 1993, 1973; Mousavi. et al., 2016; Urry,1990,1999; Watson and Kopachevsky, 1994). They argue that the capitalist mode of tourism destroys the values of local identity and culture. In the following sections, these arguments are discussed in more detail in the light of cultural tourism in Hammer and Mursi of South Omo Valley.

Reduced Authenticity or Exploitation

The commodification of local cultural identity through tourism can result in some destructive consequences on local cultural identity. Loss or reduction of authenticity is the most frequently mentioned cost of commodification in the literature (Bunten, 2008; MacCannell, 1993, 1973; Mousavi. et al., 2016; Urry,1990,1999; Watson and Kopachevsky, 1994). Despite its frequent mention there exist some difference in what authenticity means and who defines it. For this purpose, I would like to explain these two positions.

What is Authenticity? And, who defines it?

MacCannell's (1973) work regarding the debate on authenticity and cultural commodification is a pioneer in the academic literature. Defining authenticity was one of the significant sources of debate among writers. The use of the concept could vary from context to context; precisely, it could be used for object, staged, and emergent authenticity (Claire, 2011). MacCannell (1973) suggests that the very idea of authenticity in tourism starts with the tourists' quest for authenticity because tourists want to overcome the shallowness and inauthenticity of their everyday life. In other words, cultural tourism is a quest for authentic cultural experience, i.e., "the unspoiled, pristine, genuine, untouched, and traditional" (Handler, 1986, p.2, as cited in McIntosh and Prentice, 1999). Cultural tourism as a quest for authenticity is implying that western societies are no longer authentic.

The genuineness of objects, events or experiences depends on the subjective criteria for authenticity set by tourists from a western perspective. However, these western criteria lead to staging authenticity by the local community in order to satisfy the consumer (western tourists) and create income. In other words, the tourist's quest for authenticity could result in a staged authenticity. Since authenticity is a subjective concept, its inauthenticity is not always recognized by tourists. Cohen (1988) presents that authenticity is also dynamic over time. What is fake or inauthentic today may, over time, become authentic. Correspondingly, Xie (2003:6) argues that authenticity "is not a fixed property of an object or a situation but it is negotiated attribute.''

Western tourists are not the only ones who set the criteria for authenticity and define it. The government, tour operators, and the local communities also define what is authentic and what is fake

or inauthentic. However, in mass tourism consumption, the consumer, in this case, the tourist, has the upper hand to demand a specific type of experience and define it as authentic or inauthentic. The power relationship between the tourist and the local people favors the definition of the tourist for authenticity.

Authenticity in the South Omo case

The pastoral communities of South Omo are commercializing their culture and heritage to be consumed by the tourists in order to get cash/money. All the stakeholders of the tourism industry ranging from the fancy lodges, tour operators, and guides to local authorities and the pastoral communities seek to maximize tourist satisfaction. However, maximizing the satisfaction of the tourist means doing whatever it takes even if it means to reshape or contradict their cultural beliefs and customs. Consequently, fake or staged identity are presented that are far from the authentic culture.

However, one should take note here that there is a limit as to what can be faked or staged for tourists. There are still some parts of their traditional practices to which tourists are not welcomed at all. Mousaviet al. (2016) suggest that extreme cases of commodification may result among the local community living a life expected from them by the tourists. This has not happened yet in Hammar and Mursi. This may be because of the relatively recent history of tourism and the conservative nature of the community. However, things are changing as cultural tourism is intensifying in the area and conservative values are fading subsequently. The limits and their future are discussed in the coming section of the paper with more details.

Staging Authenticity as a Resistance Tool: Exploitation vs. Emancipation

By staging authenticity or by 'self-commodification' (Bunten, 2008), the local people could prevent or limit the impacts of commodification and empower themselves in the guest-host relationship. Erven Goffman's (1959) theory of Dramatology is used by MacCannell (1973) in order to describe the local people's staged authenticity in their interaction with the tourists. The locals produce and perform a front-stage identity to the tourist which is different from their true back-stage identity. By doing so, they prevent the tourist interface in their back-stage identity. In some cases, the tourists may try to enter the backstage in order to attain their quest for authenticity. To have the back-stage experience, tourists must be fortunate enough to be in the community on that specific day of the

traditional ritual performance. It is also relatively expensive to have the real experience, and the number of tourists who can attend the back-stage performance is few as determined by the locals. In such cases, there is a little concern for the tourist expectations by the locals.

Bunten (2008) also indicates the same cases of the performance and the commodified persona. Role-playing or 'performance' in her word is "an intrinsic aspect of the commodified persona" (Bunten, 2008, p.382). She insists that these performances or role plays are central in cultural tourism and it is a critical activity as a result of the hosts' binary realization about their ethnic identity and its representation (Bunten, 2008). In some cases of South Omo, the locals have a different 'identity' to be presented for tourists only. Some of these staged identities are not any longer part of their current way of life.

For instance, the Mursi men, one of the 16 ethnic groups in South Omo, used to be famous for their naked but decorated body using red clay mud. In April 2, 2017 I was in one of the small villages of Mursi together with local officials discussing the research project on 'harmful' traditional practices with the villagers. They were dressed almost like me covered with a garment. In the middle of our discussion, a tourist vehicle approaches the village. At that point, the Mursi men suddenly disappeared from the discussion site and returned in no time with their naked and decorated body. From this, it was clear that now they are on front stage performing for the audiences, of course, the tourists, not for me and the local authority.

Beside the front stage backstage methods used by the locals and the performances, not everything is commodified or staged for an outsider even in backstage performances. In the pastoral communities of South Omo, there are some limits as to what can be commodified, staged or performed for tourists and what cannot be commodified, staged or performed. Despite the fact that commodification exists, some cultural identities are not for sale. The local community sets these limits. However, these limits are constantly changing, being pushed, and becoming flexible as cultural tourism gets intensified in the valley and economic pressures are exert ed upon the local community. Some examples are discussed below to demonstrate the impact of commodification on the restrictions.

For instance, the pastoralist communities are very serious when it comes to the woman body and her interaction with outsiders. For an outsider like tourists, it was a social taboo to interact and engage in any way freely with their women. Nevertheless, they have become passive when it is a tourist who is willing to pay whatever they ask. Although the women from Hammer, one of the famous ethnic groups in the Lower Omo Valley, are no longer naked above their waist, many are willing to pose naked for photographs with tourists for money. Some even allow tourists to touch their breast for more money. I have observed this during my visit to Hammer with my students of anthropology of tourism from Arba Minch University for educational trip. The Hammar girls were allowing the students to take pictures while they are touching their breasts. This would have been unthinkable without the commodifying impacts of cultural tourism in the area.

Another example that proves the limits are pushed by cultural tourism through commodification is in the traditional ceremonies of wedding and bull jumping as rites of passage. When such traditional sacred events are approaching, members of the communities inform tour operators in the town to bring tourists. In some case, they even arrange the date of such ceremonies to fit the tourist arrival dates.

Who gets exploited?

Exploitation through commodification is not just the concern of the locals but also the tourists. The victims of the commodification of cultural identity through tourism could be the tourists. Tourists think that they are experiencing real-time events as they unfold, but the truth is they are actually taken for a ride by the local community. In most cases, when they find out it was fake, they get disappointed. In this respect, I had an interesting discussion with a surgeon tourist from London during my field visit on the 23rd of June 2017 at Buska lodge, one of the luxurious lodges in Hammar. He explained his feeling as 'being subjugated.'

Due to commodification, cultural tourism in South Omo is getting more expensive year after year. The local community's pricing which is done through the tour operators and local guides is going higher as commodification intensifies. The local communities insist that they are exploiting the tourists by showing them fake performances and forcing them to consume it and pay for it.

Extreme cases of staged authenticity as a result of commodification could in the long run result in affecting cultural tourism itself by making destinations less attractive, unique, genuine, and exotic. This is evident in most villages of the Hammar pastoralist community where tour operators receive complaints from their clients that what they see is superficial and fake. Recently non-tourist visitors or researchers including anthropologists in the likes of me have also witnessed the effect of the growing tendency of commodification. Researchers or anthropologists are persuaded by commodification induced behavior when they, like tourists, are expected to pay for the information they get from the local people. Moreover, this payment is getting expensive even for researchers.

COMMODIFICATION FOR PRESERVATION AND RENAISSANCE OF LOCAL IDENTITY

The other side of the argument regarding the impact of commodification through cultural tourism on local identity is that it provides an opportunity for the preservation and rebirth of local identity. By giving them an economic value, commodification may result in renaissance and preservation of host cultures and traditions. In some cases, it may even lead to a revival of forgotten traditions and rituals (Su, 2011).

Furthermore, commodification could go beyond helping the survival of local identity and provide new image and identity for the community and its members. This is what Mousaviet et al. (2016) refer to 'projectual identity' where the local community create a new identity and change their social structure by relocating their status in the society using cultural values. Cultural tourism helps the community to sponsor this new image and identity. This is true among the young population of the Hammar and the Mursi community, especially young girls are trying to use cultural tourism to redefine the gender relation and change their social status and role.

A somewhat indirect but powerful contribution of cultural tourism in shaping identity and self-pride is the infrastructures constructed to support the tourism industry by the government and private companies. These infrastructures include roads, water facilities, and electricity that were not meant for the locals but the tourists. Such infrastructures are rare in other parts of rural Ethiopia where there is

no tourism activity. The government finances such infrastructure to attract tourism investors to the area but indirectly benefits the pastoralists of South Omo.

It also generates pride for locals in who they are and their way of life. Cole (2007) contends that locals in marginalized primitive societies that have been labeled as isolated and backward by their government could generate a sense of self-pride and identity through the authenticating agent of cultural tourism. This has been the case for the pastoralist communities of South Omo rift valley. They were labeled by the Ethiopian federal government's different documents and the speeches of government officials as 'backward', 'uncivilized', 'wild', and 'savage'. As a manifestation of these labeling, the federal government is working on altering or even destroying their traditional way of life, their tourist attraction source or their source of income.

However, there could be a counter argument that the locals are not feeling proud and confident of their identity for its intrinsic value, which should have been the case, but for its economic value brought up externally by the tourism industry. So, still identity is being jeopardized by commodification. In the pastoralist villages of the Hammar and Mursi, they justify their pride by associating economic benefits. Can the economic or exchange value of their culture justify its intrinsic value? Or Should the intrinsic value of their culture justify the economic and exchange value? In capitalist relations of production, our sense of who we are and our self-consciousness is dependent on our material possessions or commodities.

If it is bad, why would people pay for it?

The government labels some of the tourist attraction traditional practices as harmful practices that should be eliminated. During my research project on 'harmful' traditional practices among the pastoralist communities of South Omo, one of the main challenges for 'combating' these practices faced by the local authority is cultural tourism. According to the local officials, the communities do not want to leave the traditional practices that are labeled as harmful not only for their cultural values but also for their economic values generated through cultural tourism. The local people insist that the benefits from tourism are better than the benefits from the government. Mega development projects and villagization programs are facing the same challenge as cultural tourism expands in the area.

Beside the 'economic value' logic of argument by the local people, there is also the argument that it is good because tourists' interest to visit justifies it is not bad. Consequently, when the authorities label these practices as 'bad', the local people confront them with the argument saying 'If it is bad, why would people come from far places to visit such practices and pay for it.' The local authority sometimes goes further in the argument with the community insisting that they are being exploited, considered as an object in a museum, or dehumanized by cultural tourism.

However, the last line of the argument is not common because if these notions, i.e., they are like an object in a museum or dehumanized by cultural tourism, get accepted by the pastoralists, it will have an adverse effect on the tourism industry which is also the source of foreign currency to the government. When it comes to 'harmful' traditional practices, cultural tourism, and development intervention in South Omo, the government is always in confusion and dilemma. They are not mutually exclusive or cannot just coexist in the South Omo context. Even at the federal level, there is a conflict of mission between the ministry of culture and tourism and the ministry of pastoralist development affairs.

Divided positions: accepting and rejecting commodification

The position of the Hammar and Mursi community is as divided and confused as that of the government regarding cultural tourism development and its impact in South Omo. The pastoralist community do not have an explicit agreement on accepting or rejecting the commodification of their identity through cultural tourism. Some are afraid of losing their identity while others value the economic benefits of tourism. In most of the villages, accepting or rejecting commodification of identity or tourism development varies across sociodemographic lines.

Looking closer to these sociodemographic lines, one can see that there is a patterned characteristic shared between those who support the process of commodification. The younger members of the community are in favor of cultural tourism. Within this group, during a casual conservation in the villages, it seems that the young girls support tourism development or commodification more enthusiastically than the young boys. On the other hand, the elderly members of the community are against commodification in cultural tourism. Thus, one can understand from these

conflicting positions regarding commodification that cultural tourism through commodification is affecting the social structure and organization of the local community. Capitalist relationship is making its way through the pastoralist social life. Traditional gender relationships and sexuality are also changing. This could be attributed to the cash flow from cultural tourism that is accessible for anyone including women which was not the case in their social system before. Competition among members of the community to get the tourist attention and, of course, payment is against the communal life of the locals based on cooperation. Such competition is now replicating itself to even other aspects of their daily life.

This alteration of their social structure by cultural tourism is shaping the ethnic identity. Ethnic identity is not always a cultural variable, but it is also a social status appropriated by the social organization (Barth, 1969). Barth further asserts that "by concentrating on what is socially effective, ethnic groups are seen as a form of social organization. The critical feature then becomes (…) the characteristics of self-ascription and ascription by others" (Barth, 1969, p.14). Counting on this version of ethnic identity as a result of social organization, cultural tourism through commodification might be shifting local identity.

Another aspect of accepting or rejecting cultural tourism development in South Omo is related to the level of tourism flow. Although high season tourist flow means higher income for the locals, they are against too much presence of tourists or outsiders in their daily life. They argue that sometimes they feel as if they are fading due to the over presence of 'white men' in their small villages. The relationship between number and identity could be considered for further analysis. During the high seasons in some small rural villages, the tourists could outnumber the locals, which might be the source of rejection. Even though it is difficult to define how much tourism is too much, the local community appears to be hostile to 'too much tourism.'

CONCLUSION

This paper set out to explore the basic contentions revolving around the relationship between cultural tourism, commodification, and local identity in the context of the Ethiopian South Omo valley. These basic contentions explored here can be branded into two. First, authenticity versus preservation- the notion of cultural authenticity falls under a growing danger due to commodification while some argue commodification will help to preserve identity by commercializing it. Second, whether commodification fosters emancipation or exploitation and who is being exploited? The tourists or the locals? The authors' years of exposure to South Omo pastoralist community and a critical engagement with literature was used to provide an insight into these debates and arguments.

The most apparent finding to emerge from this study is that the outcomes of commodification in cultural tourism for local identities can be both constructive and destructive. These have been the case among pastoral communities of South Omo. Commodification has been jeopardizing local identity by dictating them to do what it takes to maximize tourist satisfaction. However, there are still areas of their identity that are not open for auction. Staging authenticity could also be a strategy to resist commodification. Vending fake authenticity for tourist might abuse the tourists not just the locals. Extreme commodification would remove the distinctive aspect of the destination whereby the tourist will not be interested in visiting. The social organization of the locals is also under threat by commodification.

Conversely, this very same process of commodification in cultural tourism could result in renaissance and revival of ethnic identity by providing economic values to it. Literature in the field and cases from South Omo have demonstrated that the demand from cultural tourism could save cultural values from extinction and produce cultural self-consciousness and confidence among the locals. The paper also highlights that commodification can also help to develop a new image and identity for the community. Infrastructures built for stimulating the tourism industry by the government could partly contribute to the formation of new identity and image for the locals.

Taken together, these findings suggest a role for future anthropologists and sociologists in promoting a context-specific yet holistic analysis of the complex relationship between cultural tourism,

commodification, and local identity. These findings contribute in several ways to our understanding of this relationship and provide a basis for future research. An issue that needs to be addressed in future similar studies could be on reasons for the difference in community attitude towards commodification. Notwithstanding some limitations, the paper discusses the relationship between cultural tourism, commodification, and local identity, though several questions remain to be asked and answered.

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