



Critical Analysis of *Maasai Manyattas* as Ecotourism Enterprises

Teresa Stanonik

The Maasai constitute an internationally famous cultural group native to the region of present-day Kenya and Tanzania. The Maasai are renowned for their rich heritage, transhumance-pastoral livelihoods, unique traditions and ceremonies, strong proud will, and co-existence with animals. This region is also famous for its rich diversity of large mammalian wildlife. Today, there are many national parks and wildlife sanctuaries established within this area. Tourists from all around the world travel to these parks to view these magnificent wild creatures within their native habitats.

These protected wildlife establishments generate a significant income through international ecotourism. In Kenya, tourism is the second largest revenue-generating industry, and most of these tourists' destinations include at least one wildlife park (Sindiga, 1995). Parks also promote conservation of both the wildlife they protect and the ecosystems they encompass. However, these protected areas occupy lands once utilized by the pastoral Maasai. The Maasai have traditionally practiced an indigenous form of wildlife conservation through their very lifestyles, but this modern version of conservation threatens their livelihoods by restricting their movements.

Herein lays the issue under discussion. Today, with wildlife parks established that generate a substantial income, it is the Maasai that are receiving the least amount of benefits from this situation. They live side-by-side with the wildlife that attracts so many tourists, yet they receive no compensation for the damage inflicted by the wildlife or restrictions imposed by the parks (Mwale, 2000).

As a possible solution to this problem, *cultural manyattas* were conceived of by the Kenyan government as a means of channeling tourist-generated income into the Maasai community. A *cultural manyatta* is a mock *boma*, a traditional Maasai homestead. *Manyattas* are established within or around national

parks and reserves, catering to international tourists. In a *manyatta*, the Maasai dress in traditional clothing and perform ritual song and dance for the tourist spectators. They lead a guided tour around the *boma*, showing homes and explaining various traditions and sustenance techniques. Throughout this display they are in character—portraying the traditional Maasai individual. Each tour costs around ten US dollars per person, and there are also many handmade souvenirs available for sale (Bruner & Kirshenblatt, 1994).

The *manyatta* is an example of the marketing and commoditizing of a culture. In them, the Maasai culture is “reworked, re-packaged, and reproduced” (Bruner, p.889) with the purpose of entertaining and performing for a curious tourist audience. While originally idealized as a preservation of Kenya’s national cultural heritage, *manyattas* in actuality are a marketing enterprise. The Maasai are acting as primitive peoples to satiate an ‘imperialist nostalgia’. When questioned about their motivation for participating in this performance, most Maasai claim they do it for the financial benefits (Bruner, 2001).

I view the creation of *cultural manyattas* as an extremely complicated issue due to the many factors involved. Some people are of the opinion that the *manyatta* enterprise is wrong due to its exploitation of the Maasai culture. They argue that the *manyattas* are unauthentic and superficial, and I agree with this to a certain point. Certainly the *manyattas* are a constructed performance of an indigenous realism, but they do generate money to a people who are badly in need of finances. Furthermore, they are an avenue in which the Maasai can benefit from tourism through a unique ‘economic niche’.

I have been fortunate enough to have visited a true Maasai *boma* as well as a *cultural manyatta*. They were similar in many ways and different in others. The structure of the *bomas* was similar in terms of resources used for construction and layout of the houses and fences. However, in the traditional *boma* there were many livestock, whereas in the *manyatta* there were none (and therefore no dung or flies, which are prevalent in the true *bomas*). The Maasai in both *bomas* were dressed the same – red clothes, beaded necklaces and earrings, and rubber sandals. Male warriors, called *morrans*, carried clubs and were adorned with red ochre. In the traditional *boma* there were no staged performances of singing and dancing, although there were both of these activities. In truth, the major difference was authenticity. Essentially, I

traditional *boma* as a friend and guest. In the *cultural manyatta* I was there as a client and spectator.

I feel blessed to have had the authentic experience of a traditional *boma*, knowing that most tourists are never able to have this genuine interaction. If I were a 'regular' tourist, I would be very curious about the Maasai culture and would perhaps visit a *manyatta* to gain a deeper understanding. The irony here is that the understanding I would gain would not necessarily be about the primitive Maasai culture, although the songs and dances performed would cater somewhat to this. I would probably gain an insight as to how the Maasai culture is assimilating to Western ways, particularly the desire and need for money. This would bring me sadness, and indeed does, to see the ramifications of globalization and the spread of cultural homogeneity.

However, this does not mean that I do not support *cultural manyattas*. I argue that they are a 'necessary evil' for the Maasai in the face of declining land, destructive wildlife, and financial need. From their point of view, they must act to support themselves and their lifestyles in a world that is quickly changing all around them. I see that *manyattas* are staged performances for tourist spectators, which lack authenticity and genuine interaction. On that note, I also realize that the Maasai need to benefit from tourism coming into their area and *manyattas* are a relatively easy way for them to do it. They do not have to work there if they do not want to, and we do not have to go there if we disagree with the commoditizing of their culture.

In terms of wildlife conservation, I see *manyattas* essentially supporting it. Wildlife parks and reserves are conservational institutions, and these establishments inhibit former Maasai territory. These institutions also enforce the punishment of all those who harm wildlife, therefore making it impossible for the Maasai to protect themselves or their livelihoods against destructive animals. The result of this situation is that the Maasai stand to lose from wildlife conservation and tourism unless they can financially benefit from it. *Cultural manyattas* represent an avenue for them to do so, and in the process join the conservation movement.

In conclusion, I think it's important to understand the full impact of *cultural manyattas* on the Maasai culture within modern day context and perspective. The 'primitive Maasai' people represented at the *cultural manyattas* are increasingly becoming a thing of the past. Even in the traditional *boma* that I visited, there was evidence of modernization. While you won't see this in the mock *boma*, your very presence and financial contribution to this culture that was subsistence-

based for so long, is adding to the assimilation process, and perhaps even expediting it. While the world traveler searches for the genuine and real, I think Edward Bruner said it best when he stated: "In tourism, authenticity is made, not discovered" (p. 905).

This paper was written for a combined Swahili language & Maasai culture course I took through the School for Field Studies. This school is accredited thru Boston University and supports environmental conservation college-level studies at various locations around the world. I studied in Kenya at the Center for Wildlife Management Studies.

This assignment was a critical analysis of the costs and benefits associated with Maasai cultural manyattas based on my experience after visiting a manyatta and a traditional boma. Information used in this paper, outside of what I referenced, was based on my studies at the Center for Wildlife Management and my personal observations while staying in Kenya.

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