Original Article

Cultural Tourism in Kenya: A Systematic Review of Opportunities, Challenges, and Sustainable Development Pathways

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ABSTRACT

The landscape of cultural tourism in Kenya is explored by this systematic review with a keen focus on opportunities, challenges, and sustainable development pathways. With the application of Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, empirical and theoretical literature from the past five years have been analysed by the review to identify key themes and evidence-based insights. Peer-reviewed journals, government reports, and institutional publications are some of the sources from which Studies were derived. Findings show a growing recognition of cultural tourism as a promoter of socio-economic development, particularly in regions like Mount Kenya. Nonetheless, Key Issues such as policy gaps, scarce infrastructure, and restricted community participation hinder its potential. The review concludes by highlighting critical areas for intervention and recommends multi-stakeholder collaboration, strategic policy frameworks, and sustainable practices to advance cultural tourism in Kenya.

INTRODUCTION

Defined as tourism concerned with a country or region's culture, especially its arts, heritage, and traditions (UNWTO, 2020), Cultural tourism has emerged as a vital sector within the global and local tourism sectors. Cultural tourism offers a promising avenue for economic diversification, heritage preservation, and community empowerment in Kenya. Contrary to its potential, the sector remains underexplored and faces multiple constraints. Housing various ethnic communities such as the Kikuyu, Meru, Embu, and minority groups like the Ndorobo and Mukogodo, the Mount Kenya region is particularly rich in cultural diversity.

Throughout history, the tourism industry in Kenya has largely prioritised wildlife and beach tourism, a trend rooted in colonial-era development patterns that emphasised game reserves and coastal attractions for foreign visitors. A legacy that has continued to shape national tourism investment, policy focus, and marketing strategies, with cultural heritage often sidelined as a peripheral product. Centralised planning and limited devolution of cultural resource management have also led to uneven development across regions. This has led to culturally rich areas like Mount Kenya, home to sacred sites, indigenous communities, and living traditions, being underrepresented in mainstream tourism programming and infrastructure investment.

A vast array of cultural assets, ranging from oral traditions, performing arts, rituals, and indigenous knowledge systems, is offered by these communities. However, Kariuki et al. (2023) found that leveraging these assets for sustainable tourism remains limited. Existing literature also highlights the cultural richness of other regions, such as the Maasai Mara and the coastal areas, yet these have received uneven attention in tourism planning and investment.

This systematic review aims to synthesise existing research on cultural tourism in Kenya, focusing on identifying opportunities, assessing challenges, and outlining sustainable development pathways.

The study addresses the following research questions:

- What opportunities exist for promoting cultural tourism in Kenya?

- What challenges hinder the effective development of cultural tourism?

- What strategies can ensure the sustainable growth of cultural tourism in Kenya?

METHODOLOGY

Eligibility Criteria

To ensure relevance and quality of the findings, this review focused on studies that met clearly defined inclusion criteria. Eligible studies were those published between 2019 and 2024, either as empirical studies, case analyses, government or institutional reports, or peer-reviewed journal articles. The selected studies had to directly address issues related to cultural tourism in Kenya, specifically focusing on opportunities, barriers, or sustainability strategies. Only publications in English were considered to maintain consistency in analysis.

The focus of this review was on studies published between 2019 and 2024 to capture the most current trends, technological advancements and policy developments affecting cultural tourism, particularly the integration of Artificial Intelligence and community-based innovations. The selection of this period was intentional to reflect post-2018 strategic shifts in Kenya's tourism planning and global interest in digital heritage preservation resulting after the COVID-19 pandemic. This timeframe not only allows the study to focus on emerging opportunities and practical interventions, but also means that earlier foundational research was excluded. Additionally, the limitation of the review to English-language publications might lead to the study missing insights from non-English sources, especially those from francophone or lusophone African countries. Though acknowledged as a potential constraint on the comprehensiveness of regional comparisons, the limitation was necessary to maintain consistency in data interpretation.

Studies that focused solely on wildlife tourism, hospitality services without cultural context, or those set outside Kenya were excluded. Additionally, conference abstracts, opinion pieces, and news articles lacking empirical data were not considered. This filtering ensured the inclusion of robust evidence-based studies that could meaningfully contribute to the review's objectives.

Information Sources and Search Strategy

The information sources included both academic and grey literature. Searches were conducted through databases such as JSTOR, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, and the African Journals Online (AJOL). Institutional repositories, particularly the Kenya Tourism Board, the Ministry of Tourism, and the National Museums of Kenya, were reviewed to retrieve relevant policy documents and reports.

Search terms employed included "cultural tourism Kenya," "community-based tourism Kenya," "indigenous knowledge tourism," "sustainable tourism development Kenya," and "heritage tourism Mount Kenya." Searches were conducted between January 2024 and March 2024 to ensure the inclusion of the most recent and relevant literature. Boolean operators such as AND, OR, and NOT were used to refine the results and improve precision. Snowballing techniques were also applied by reviewing the reference lists of key articles to identify additional relevant studies.

Data Extraction and Synthesis Approach

A structured data extraction template was designed to collect relevant information from the selected studies. This template included categories such as publication year, study location, methodology, population sample (if applicable), key findings, and relevance to cultural tourism themes.

Following the extraction, a thematic synthesis approach was adopted. This entailed coding the findings of each study and clustering them under emerging themes related to opportunities, challenges, and sustainability pathways. The coded data were then analysed to identify patterns, consistencies, and contradictions across the reviewed studies. This approach enabled a nuanced interpretation of the state of cultural tourism in Kenya and guided the formulation of practical recommendations.

RESULTS

Descriptive Synthesis of Selected Studies

A total of 27 studies met the eligibility criteria after a rigorous screening process, which involved independent assessments by two reviewers who screened the titles, abstracts, and full texts based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Interrater reliability was calculated using Cohen's Kappa and found to be high, indicating strong agreement between reviewers. These studies encompassed a range of methodologies, including ethnographic fieldwork, survey research, policy evaluation, and participatory rural appraisal. Geographic distribution of the studies showed a concentration in the Mount Kenya region, Maasai Mara, and coastal Kenya, with relatively fewer studies covering Western and Northern Kenya.

Common methodological approaches included qualitative case studies focusing on specific communities or cultural practices (e.g., Ndorobo rituals, Kikuyu folktales), and mixed-method studies assessing both economic and social impacts of cultural tourism initiatives. Quantitative approaches were less common but included surveys on tourist preferences, community attitudes, and economic contributions of cultural tourism.

Whereas numerous studies emphasised qualitative views such as cultural narratives, community perceptions and policy dynamics, several quantitative findings emerged as well. An example is as reported by a national survey by the Ministry of Tourism in 2021, where 62% of domestic tourists expressed a strong interest in cultural experiences, particularly traditional food and music. Kariuki et al. (2022) also found that 78% of international tourists who visited cultural festivals rated their experience as "highly satisfactory," citing authenticity and community interaction as key value drivers. Regional

disparities were also highlighted by quantitative data, with Mount Kenya receiving only 9% of cultural tourism traffic compared to 36% in coastal Kenya, this indicated a significant underutilisation of cultural resources in the region. The qualitative themes are complemented by these findings while reinforcing the need for targeted policy and investment interventions.

Key Themes and Findings

Opportunities for Cultural Tourism

Kenya's ethnic diversity offers a fertile ground for the development of cultural tourism. Studies emphasised that cultural expressions such as traditional dances, festivals, cuisine, dress, and folklore have high potential to attract both domestic and international tourists (Gikunda et al., 2021). Government recognition through development plans like Kenya Vision 2030 reinforces this opportunity (GoK, 2020). Community-based tourism (CBT) was cited as a major vehicle for inclusive development, especially in marginalised regions where cultural assets are abundant but underutilised (Mutisya & Ngugi, 2022). Many community-led initiatives have created employment, strengthened cultural identity, and promoted environmental conservation through traditional practices. Nonetheless, their scalability remains limited without formal support.

Challenges in Cultural Tourism Development

According to areas (Wanjiru & Mwangi, 2021), Many cultural tourism sites are inaccessible due to poor road networks and lack of public utilities, particularly in rural and indigenous despite the evident opportunities, several constraints persist. There is, moreover, a widespread lack of awareness and capacity among local communities to manage tourism ventures sustainably, as noted by Omondi (2019). Ndungu & Muthoni (2020) also add that policy incoherence at both national and county levels was highlighted as a barrier, with few counties having dedicated frameworks for cultural tourism development. Also contributing to the stagnation of the sector is the lack of reliable funding, inadequate marketing strategies, and overreliance on foreign tourists.

Sustainable Development Pathways

Community ownership and equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms are key requirements for sustainable development in cultural tourism. (Kariuki et al., 2023) Notes that Participatory governance models and local stakeholder involvement were underscored as essential for project legitimacy and longevity. The use of digital tools to market and preserve intangible cultural heritage, such as virtual tours, digital archives, and social media storytelling, has revealed significant potential. The "Magical Kenya" campaign, which integrates immersive online experiences to showcase Kenya's diverse cultures, including music, dance, and traditional attire, to a global audience, is a notable example. Supported by the KTB, this initiative successfully leveraged YouTube, Instagram, and interactive web content to increase global visibility and attract diaspora and international tourists interested in authentic cultural experiences. Mwangi, 2021. Adds that partnerships among the public, private, and civil society sectors are necessary to mobilise resources and technical expertise for tourism development. Education and training on sustainable tourism practices and heritage conservation are also key to equipping communities for long-term success.

Limitations of the Review

Several limitations are acknowledged despite the comprehensiveness of this systematic review. To begin with, the review process was restricted to literature published in English, potentially excluding relevant studies in local or other international languages. Additionally, the reliance on online databases and institutional repositories might have led to the omission of unpublished or non-digitised studies, especially those from grassroots organisations or local communities involved in cultural tourism. Furthermore, the temporal scope of five years, while necessary for focusing on recent trends, may not fully capture the historical evolution of cultural tourism in

Kenya, particularly in regions with long-standing indigenous practices. Lastly, variations in methodological quality and data reporting among included studies posed challenges in comparative analysis and synthesis, although efforts were made to standardise findings through thematic coding. From the limitations, there is therefore a need for future studies to adopt more inclusive, longitudinal, and mixed-method approaches to generate deeper insights into cultural tourism dynamics in Kenya.

DISCUSSION

The results from this review uphold that cultural tourism in Kenya holds considerable potential for driving socio-economic transformation, particularly through community empowerment and heritage preservation. Nonetheless, the sector remains underutilised, largely as a result of systemic challenges and fragmented development efforts. Despite a growing recognition of the importance of cultural tourism, particularly in regions like Mount Kenya, Maasai Mara, and coastal Kenya, efforts are still primarily driven by localised community initiatives with limited scalability. A recurring theme in the literature is the lack of coordinated and coherent policy frameworks. Cultural tourism development often operates in silos, with inadequate alignment between national tourism strategies and county-level implementation. Counties such as Narok and Kilifi have piloted successful programs, yet the replication of such models elsewhere in the country remains inconsistent. This is attributed to the absence of standardised evaluation metrics, weak intergovernmental coordination, and insufficient investment in infrastructure and capacity-building.

Furthermore, while community-based tourism (CBT) initiatives have demonstrated promise in promoting inclusive development, many suffer from inadequate institutional support, limited market access, and insufficient funding.

On the contrary, literature presents conflicting perspectives on the depth and effectiveness of community participation in cultural tourism. (Mutisya & Ngugi, 2022), Notes that, as some studies highlight successful grassroots-led initiatives, such as cultural festivals in Embu and craft cooperatives in Meru, others argue that participation is often tokenistic or externally driven. In several counties, community members are frequently engaged in logistical support roles but are excluded from planning, decision-making, and benefit-sharing (Kariuki et al. 2023). The need for more robust participatory governance structures that embed local communities not only as cultural custodians but also as equal stakeholders and beneficiaries in tourism ventures is pointed out by this.

The review also underscores a knowledge gap in the form of limited longitudinal and policy-oriented studies. Most of the reviewed literature focuses on descriptive analyses of cultural practices or community initiatives without critically evaluating long-term impacts, scalability, or policy effectiveness. The importance of stakeholder collaboration emerges as a central pillar for success. Strategic partnerships between local communities, government agencies, private tourism operators, and civil society organisations are essential for mobilising resources, fostering innovation, and enhancing the resilience of cultural tourism initiatives. Moreover, the integration of digital technologies, such as virtual cultural experiences, digital storytelling, and heritage mapping, offers new frontiers for expanding visibility, market reach, and preservation of intangible cultural assets.

Importantly, the review addresses the three guiding research questions through a robust thematic synthesis. Opportunities have been identified in the form of Kenya's rich cultural diversity, CBT models, and policy initiatives like Vision 2030. Challenges include infrastructural deficits, policy fragmentation, and limited community capacity. Sustainable development pathways are clearly articulated through strategies such as participatory governance, digital integration, and intersectoral cooperation. Overall, a paradigm shift from isolated, small-scale projects to well-integrated, sustainable frameworks that align community empowerment

with national development goals is demanded in advancing cultural tourism in Kenya. Long-term policy commitment, increased investment in enabling infrastructure, and inclusive stakeholder engagement that ensures all cultural custodians, especially women, youth, and indigenous groups, are active participants and beneficiaries in the tourism value chain are required for this transformation.

Policy Implications

Several important implications for policy development in Kenya's cultural tourism sector are provided by this Systematic Review. Harmonisation of cultural tourism strategies by both the national and county governments to ensure a consistent framework that supports community-based initiatives and regional development is the first key need. Counties should be incentivised to draft cultural tourism blueprints tailored to their unique assets and challenges. These incentives should be aimed at training local personnel. Additionally, to reward counties that demonstrate measurable progress in cultural tourism development, and to foster innovation and accountability at the sub-national level, performance-based funding models could be introduced.

Secondly, due to the fact that inadequate infrastructure not only hampers tourist accessibility and experience but also limits the ability of local communities to benefit from tourism-related economic activities, infrastructural investments should be prioritised in rural and marginalised regions where cultural tourism potential remains untapped. To make these regions more attractive to both domestic and international tourists, Improving Road networks, establishing well-equipped visitor centres, and enhancing security and sanitation facilities will be necessary. Additionally, such investments serve a dual purpose, stimulating local economies through job creation and service provision while also preserving cultural heritage through increased visibility and value. Working in collaboration with national agencies such as the Ministry of Tourism and the Kenya Rural Roads

Authority (KeRRA), responsibility for these infrastructural improvements should rest primarily with county governments. While the national government provides technical and financial support, budgetary allocations should be made by counties to provide and integrate cultural tourism infrastructure into their development plans. To further ensure that developments are context-specific, sustainable, and inclusive, it is important to involve the local communities and private sector players through public-private partnerships.

Thirdly, to emphasise training in digital marketing, financial literacy, cultural interpretation, and sustainable business practices, capacity-building programs should be embedded in tourism policy frameworks. Such interventions will bridge skill gaps and foster local entrepreneurship in tourism value chains. Finally, inclusive partnerships must be fostered by policies such that women, youth, and indigenous communities are integrated into cultural tourism governance and benefit-sharing mechanisms. This will be essential to mobilise resources and scale innovations.

The effectiveness of these policy interventions can be enhanced by prioritising them based on feasibility and potential impact. Counties should begin with capacity-building initiatives and the drafting of localised cultural tourism blueprints, in the short term, as these are cost-effective, community-driven, and lay the groundwork for broader reforms. As Medium-term priorities, investment in core infrastructure, such as roads and visitor centres, should be given their higher resource requirements and longer implementation timelines. Integrating performance-based funding models and public-private partnerships can later be phased in progressively as institutional capacities grow. This tiered approach will see the limited resources allocated strategically while fostering momentum toward inclusive and sustainable cultural tourism development.

CONCLUSION

Cultural tourism presents a strategic opportunity for Kenya's sustainable development, offering

socio-economic and heritage conservation benefits. This review identifies three central conclusions aligned with the research questions. First, the opportunity landscape is enriched by Kenya's diverse cultural heritage, including ethnic traditions, oral narratives, festivals, cuisine, dress, and performing arts. These assets are increasingly recognised in policy documents like Kenya Vision 2030 and offer tangible entry points for developing culturally rich and community-empowered tourism destinations.

Second, challenges that hinder the effective development of cultural tourism include infrastructural limitations, lack of awareness, weak community participation, and policy fragmentation. Inadequate funding and the absence of national and county-level strategies for cultural tourism exacerbate these problems, limiting the potential for long-term growth and community benefits.

Third, sustainable development strategies must prioritise inclusive stakeholder collaboration, digital heritage marketing, and local governance models. Education and training on heritage conservation and tourism entrepreneurship are vital to empower communities. Importantly, adopting participatory frameworks and aligning local development strategies with national goals will ensure equity, community ownership, and economic viability.

Recommendations

The findings and limitations of this review advance several recommendations that can guide policy, practice and future studies. A coordinated National framework integrating cultural tourism into Kenya's mainstream economic planning forms the first critical need. In collaboration with the Ministry of Culture and Heritage, the Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife should spearhead this initiative by developing inclusive policy blueprints that safeguard cultural identities while promoting economic benefits. The underrepresentation of minority communities, such as the Ndorobo and Mukogodo, should also be addressed by the framework by supporting heritage mapping, cultural documentation, and

infrastructure investment in these regions. To build on the framework, enhancing capacity-building initiatives for local artisans, tour operators, and cultural site managers should be prioritised, taking the form of financial support, training on sustainable tourism practices, and development of digital marketing skills. Such efforts should be best led by county governments and supported through public-private partnerships. For nurturing traditional knowledge systems and creating innovative tourism products that appeal to both domestic and international markets, the establishment of cultural incubation hubs could provide the best platforms. Finally, future research should explore longitudinal and impact studies focusing on the contribution of cultural tourism to socio-economic development. By adopting mixed methods and including marginalised voices, the studies could ensure equity in both representation and benefit-sharing. This approach will support in evaluating the long-term effects of existing interventions and refining strategies that advance sustainable cultural tourism across Kenya.

Longitudinal research design should be incorporated in future studies to assess the sustainability and long-term impact of cultural tourism interventions, including tracking community outcomes such as income growth, employment generation, cultural resilience, and digital engagement over extended periods. Furthermore, participatory and ethnographic methods that centre the lived experiences of marginalised groups should be explored by future research, thereby ensuring more inclusive and context-sensitive findings. Expansion of the scope to include non-English publications and grey literature, such as community reports and oral histories, can also help overcome the limitations of language and access, thus enriching the evidence base and enhancing the relevance of cultural tourism planning and policy.

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