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PUBLIC-PRIVATE AND COMMUNITY COLLABORATION: A STAKEHOLDER COMMUNICATION CASE STUDY OF COMMUNITY- BASED TOURISM

ABSTRACT

By focusing on the perceptions and experiences of the Batlokoa owner community at the Witsieshoek Mountain Lodge in the Drakensberg, Free State, South Africa, this case study examines the collaboration between tourism companies, communities, and government departments. A stakeholder communication approach is applied within a reverse cultural studies analytical framework. The findings suggest that the lodge was viewed by the Batlokoa owners primarily as a place of employment and secondarily as a place of heritage. The study examines the many hurdles encountered, and how the decaying lodge became financially sustainable. This analysis draws on the case study of internal lodge communication and visioning that was conducted during a refurbishing phase led by a new hotel operator during 2010 to 2011 and which, updated to 2024, reveals clear community benefits and effective stakeholder communication. The lessons learnt from the early case study are contextualized for contemporary relevance.

Keywords: stakeholder communication, participatory communication, community communication, community-based tourism, identity, post-apartheid, management, heritage, Batlokoa

INTRODUCTION

South African tourism policy encourages the practice of “responsible tourism” that embraces strategy, planning, product development, and marketing to enable positive economic, social and environmental impacts (DEAT, 2003). Even though community-based tourism (CBT) is one solution, inviting participation can be a practical challenge. CBT can increase the employment of semi-skilled individuals in remote regions as “tourism owned and/or managed by communities and intended to deliver wider community benefit” and resource groups wider than those employed by the initiative

(Goodwin & Santilli, 2009: 4). Participants include local citizens, government officials, developers and businesspeople. Participation is not reserved to merely working at the venture, but extends to community-wide stakeholder communication protocols, and operational and decision-making processes (Okazaki, 2008).

The nature of stakeholder involvement determines participants' relations within it and with each other. In the case of what is a small lodge, the matrix of stakeholders can be bewilderingly complex, integrating private enterprise, multiple national and provincial departments, traditional authorities, implementing agents, service providers, funders, donors, and the individuals employed as both management and staff. Adding to these complexities, locals often lack the knowledge, skills and financial literacy, resulting in conflict (Ashley & Roe, 2002; Manyara & Jones, 2007). As a consequence, many CBT ventures are unable to compete with commercial enterprises and close soon after donor funding ends (Manyara & Jones, 2007; Goodwin & Santilli, 2009).

The survival of CBT ventures and their associated multiplier effects is thus often dependent on partnerships between local communities and commercial tourism companies (Roberts & Tribe, 2008; Wilson *et al.*, 2009). The multiplier effect refers to broader commercial transactions beneficial to local communities. For example, lodge guests may use public and rented transport, buy local arts and crafts, goods and refreshments from local stores, and participate in recreational activities. The addition of foreign currencies into developing economies strengthens local socio-economic linkages between tour operators and communities (Brohman, 1996). Engagement with tourism ventures is often the only avenue available to remote communities that lack resources in terms of financial and human capital, educational qualifications, or infrastructure (Ivanovic, 2008; Mbaiwa, 2003; Ashley & Roe, 2002). Reduced alienation results when local communities and businesses realise enclaves of wealth that replace dependency poverty (Britton, 1982).

The Batlokoa obtained custodianship of the Witsieshoek Mountain Lodge in 2001 due to it being situated on land that belonged to them. Precursors of the lodge had stood on this site for over 50 years. Although Batlokoa communities reside in other parts of South Africa (Quinlan, 1988), the scope of this study is limited to Witsieshoek. The research questions guiding the study included:

- ◆ What was the Batlokoa community's relation to and perception of the lodge when it was initially established?
- ◆ What was the historical significance of the lodge as attributed by the Batlokoa?
- ◆ What was the community's relation in 2010-2011 to, and perception of, the lodge after it had entered the partnership with the contracted lodge operator? (see Sathiyah 2013).

The current study does not delve into the implications of representation in cultural tourism as it is not one of the attractions of the lodge.

Public-private collaboration

The Batlokoa entered into a collaboration with then national Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT) and in 2010 appointed Transfrontier Parks Destinations (TFPD), a small Cape Town-based Black Economic Empowerment compliant firm, to manage and market the Lodge (O' Leary, personal communication, 21 October 2010). This collaboration constituted a public-private community partnership involving different stakeholders from the governmental, commercial and community sectors (see Dyll 2012). A 25-year lease agreement was signed in May 2010. The traditional council had initiated the collaboration at a tourism conference in 2007 (Monei & Ramaili, personal communication, 2011). TFPD brought core business competencies such as grant proposal writing, securing public and private investment for refurbishment, and extensive knowledge of remote tourism.

Highly experienced in community collaborations, our previous research on TFPD-managed ventures recognised its unique skill in negotiating different levels of expertise and expectations between stakeholders (cf. Tomaselli, 2012). When host communities are alienated from decision-making processes and feel like intruders on their own land, the consequences could be violence, crime, resentment, and resistance to promoting tourism. TFPD recognises host communities as valuable sources of local knowledge, thereby promoting a sense of responsibility and ownership towards a communal asset (Brennan & Allen, 2001).

Reverse cultural studies offers an interpretive research practice that employs empirical observations, episodic narratives, and insights gleaned from members of the community from grassroots perspectives through their interactions with the observing researchers (Tomaselli, 2005). The reversal thus transfers agency to host communities to offer possible explanations and solutions for their problems, as opposed to researchers imposing externally derived solutions from afar. The latter had been an occasional experience by TFPD with ill-prepared international researchers parachuting in and imposing inappropriate explanatory references, thereby themselves imperilling such ventures (see Tomaselli, 2017).

Background of the Batlokoa community and the Witsieshoek Mountain Lodge

The Batlokoa emerged during the 19th century from different groups from the south of Basotholand (now known as Lesotho) under the leadership of Koos Mota. In 1873, after gaining permission from the (then) Orange Free State Republic, they settled in the Witsieshoek area. Mota's nephew, Chief Wessels Mota, accepted the terms of "separate development" legislation – the policy which led to the creation of African reserves known as "homelands", implemented by the apartheid government between 1948 and 1994. "Preserving ethnic unity" was a mechanism of control to keep the black labour force contained within specified rural geographical areas (Hawkins, 1982;

Quinlan, 1988; Pickles & Wood, 1992). This construct of “ethnic unity” also encouraged black communities living elsewhere in the country to live amongst their own “people” who shared cultural and linguistic norms (Quinlan, 1988).

The post-apartheid government redressed previous inequities by promoting business enterprises amongst the black population. The juncture between what communities can do, what the government is able to provide, and what is needed provides the entry point for private commercial enterprises such as TFPD. The private sector is one of the key stakeholders in providing the necessary operational, management and business skills that government departments are unable to provide to communities (Hottola, 2009).

The Witsieshoek Mountain Lodge is located in the Free State province of South Africa, nestled in the Maloti Drakensberg Transfrontier Conservation area. The Batlokoa live in the adjacent town of Tsheseng, next to the large, sprawling town of Phuthaditjhaba, from where most of the lodge staff hail. Historically this visually breathtaking elevated confluence occurs in an intersecting triangle comprising the Kingdom of Lesotho, as well as South Africa’s KwaZulu-Natal and Free State provinces, or to use historic names, Basutholand, Natal and the Orange Free State.

The name “Witsieshoek” originated from the myth that a Sotho traditional healer and rainmaker named Ouetsi had sought refuge with his followers in that area during clashes in 1856 between the Sotho and European settlers due to Ouetsi’s cattle theft from both the Batlokoa and settler communities. This gradually transformed into an Afrikaans appellation meaning “Ouetsi’s corner”. Thus, the name Witsieshoek connotes a long-standing historical relationship with the Batlokoa (Quinlan, 1988; Inskeep, 1978; Legassick, 1969; Hawkins, 1982). Additional evidence attesting to the deep-rooted presence of the Batlokoa in the Harrismith vicinity is the gravesite of six successive Batlokoa chiefs, located in Verkykerskop, which date back to the late 17th century (Hawkins, 1982). Folklore in the Verkykerskop region in Harrismith recounts the narrative of the dauntless Queen Regent Mantatise who, together with her band of tall, robust warriors known as the Wildcats, protected their territory against invading warriors (Sharratt, 1968). These historical representations of the Batlokoa both at Harrismith and at Witsieshoek support both their long-standing presence in the area and underline their current ownership of the Witsieshoek Mountain Lodge.

The lodge in 2010 employed 46 staff: reception and reservation, the kitchen section, security, cleaning and room maintenance, laundry, garden and general maintenance, and specialist tour guiding. Eleven in-depth interviews of lodge staff from each service division were conducted during late 2011. The respondents were purposively selected due to their accessibility and for their particularly close and daily interactions at the facility. The sample was stratified in terms of gender, age and education for balance.

DATA COLLECTION METHODS

Reverse cultural studies is an interpretive practice that employs empirical observations, episodic narratives and insights gleaned from grassroots perspectives through their interactions with the observing researchers (Tomaselli, 2005). The reversal invites insider explanations and solutions as opposed to outside researchers imposing externally derived solutions.

Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted to elicit the views, attitudes and perceptions of a personal and often idiosyncratic nature. The interviews allowed for the observation of the respondents' body language which enabled the researcher to prompt greater elaboration on responses or to clarify issues of uncertainty during the interview. Participant observation was also undertaken, and field notes were recorded. The Batlokoa staff communicated primarily in isiZulu or Sesotho, with only a limited grasp of English. An isiZulu-speaking colleague from the University of KwaZulu-Natal served as the translator during the interviews.

Interview setting

Some interviews were conducted during the day; others in the evenings, when the lodge lounge was empty. The latter seemed to elicit more forthright answers than those that were conducted during the busy days. The lounge was familiar to the staff as a meeting place as advisory committee meetings were also held in the dining area. Following an upgrade in November 2023, meetings are now held in the conference centre, which was named to recognise the contribution of the late King Lekunutu Mota (the current King, Morena Montoeli Mota's father) and is called the "Morena E Moholo Lekunutu Mota Kgotla". Staff meetings in the lounge and now the conference centre would associate with the royal naming. The interviewee unease during the mornings could possibly be accounted for by using the concepts of "backstage" and "front stage" (MacCannell, 1973). The concept of the "backstage" serves as a symbolic shorthand to refer to the private, personal, and domestic aspects of one's persona, which is not intended for public consumption. This is opposed to the professional role employed for public consumption, the "front stage". Considering this differentiation between the different roles that individuals assume in different settings, it might have been better in certain instances to have conducted the interviews outside the lodge. Nonetheless, all interviewees were enthusiastic about offering their views and their nervousness abated as the interviews proceeded.

Sensitivity to racial inequalities is pertinent to this study as Witsieshoek was originally within an African reserve under apartheid legislation and became a "homeland" in 1975 under the name QwaQwa, an area with its own governance and civil service. Witsieshoek currently falls under the jurisdiction of the Maluti-A-Phofung Local Municipality (Aliber et al., 2006). Even though this study is temporally situated in post-apartheid South Africa, many of the current inequalities and historical representations originated during the apartheid era.

As Witsieshoek Mountain Lodge, or rather its humble forbearer, was commissioned by Chief Wessels Mota it can be assumed that the lodge holds intangible cultural value to the community, as well as tangible economic value that can be accrued through tourism. Therefore, it is necessary to understand how the lodge fits into the Batlokoa community's system of representation to fully ascertain its cultural value as well as to increase its economic value by fostering increased tourism at the lodge.

Historical analysis

Historically this region may be adeptly applied to Turner's (1935) theory of historic frontier characterised by a laxity of rules, conflicting cultures, and the neighbouring "wilderness". This fluidity is illustrated by the very existence of the Batlokoa, as the community was consolidated for political reasons to gain access and tenure to land. As the Dutch descendant boer government of the then Orange Free State allocated land to groups with indigenous tribal authority, in 1874 a cohort of about 50 black people splintered off from the "Harrismith Tlokoa", then under the leadership of Koos Mota, and settled in the Witsieshoek region (Quinlan, 1988). There was no inherent group similarity other than the fact that this group chose to follow the leadership of Koos Mota. However, this allocation of land on a communal basis did not clash with traditional Sotho beliefs of land ownership. It was believed that the ancestors dwelled in the earth and, therefore, the splitting of the land, as is done with individual ownership, was considered to be an insult to the ancestors. The prevailing norm was that the chief controlled the land on behalf of the community (Riep, 2005). It is difficult to ascertain what the true beliefs of the Batlokoa community were and are, as the constructs of "chief" and "tribe" are sometimes attributed as ideological agents employed by the apartheid regime to subjugate indigenous communities through indirect rule by installing comprador chiefs who would then do the bidding of the apartheid state (Quinlan, 1988). The question thus remains, does tradition dictate that land should be communally owned or was the tradition created in response to existing conditions?

Witsieshoek Mountain Lodge: A place of employment

In contrast to romanticised notions of the lodge's value to the Batlokoa as a symbol of cultural heritage, few interviewees expressed emotional attachment or any deeper sense of connection to the lodge. One respondent articulated it so:

I am only here because of work ... my homestead is not far from here. Staying here on the premises allows me to be away from the day-to-day domestic responsibilities of living at home but it is also close enough to my homestead that I can walk home on my days off (Respondent A, interview, 6 December 2011).

His decision to work at the lodge was not necessarily influenced by a need to express his cultural identity or to promote and highlight the Batlokoa belief system. More often than not, there were mundane incentives to work there. Such respondents were interested in the development of the lodge because it was their place of employment, their source of reliable income; moreover, if they were offered better salaries elsewhere, they would not hesitate to leave.

One respondent was especially grateful to TFPD for breaking what he claimed was the nepotistic past practice of hiring staff:

... before TFPD took over, only the Chief or the Chief's family or friends were working at the lodge, whether they knew anything or not. Now TFPD hires on the basis of whether we are suitable for the job or not (Respondent D, interview, 6 December 2011).

Prior to TFPD, most benefits were alleged to have accrued to a small group linked to the chief. A few respondents noted that some unqualified staff vacated their jobs once TFPD came aboard. One observed that since TFPD started hiring, they soon implemented a meritocratic basis for appointments:

I only heard that they needed staff, so I brought my CV and came for the interview. I don't have much family in the area. They took me for my qualifications (Respondent C, interview, 6 December 2011).

Responsible tourism guidelines seek to "recruit and employ staff transparently, aiming to create a diverse workforce in terms of gender, ethnicity, race and disability" (DEAT, 2003: 10). TFPD reports that it was not aware of allegations of nepotism and stressed that under its management the King has not been involved in either operational or staff matters. He is invited to celebrate achievements such as the Global Responsible Tourism Award or the opening of a new facility at the lodge (O'Leary, personal communication, 3 October 2024). Note that the original leader with whom TFPD contracted was Morena Lekunutu Mota. He had "King" status under the COGTA hierarchy. On his death, his son, Montoeli, was coronated as a Principle Traditional Leader – a rank lower than King. They chose to retain the title Morena (translated as King) and the words "E Moholo" (the equivalent of "His Royal Highness") for cultural and ceremonial purposes.

Despite the refurbishment of the lodge and the renovation of the infrastructure being cited as the main developments that TFPD brought to the establishment, a few respondents voiced their discontent that the lease agreement between the Batlokoa community and TFPD runs for 25 years. Observed one respondent:

... they might as well take the lodge away from the Batlokoa. Twenty-five years is such a long time. The Chief will be dead before there are lots of profits ... there is no strong leadership to take over (Respondent B, interview, 6 December 2011).

While tourism investment is long term in nature, this statement reflects a perspective of which stakeholders need to be aware, so that they might critically address such fears during community meetings. A suggestion was that a member of the Batlokoa could keep track of the financial information at the lodge to ensure that neither the Chief nor TFPD was "robbing the community". However, the financial reports of lodge performance, audited financial statements and bank accounts accompanied by a personal presentation and all questions answered have been presented nearly 50 times at advisory committee meetings over the past 12 years. "It is in the practice of the repetition, the consistency, and the availability of leadership from the lodge

and TFPD to answer questions that today we are not aware of individuals who might suggest there is a need to audit the auditors” (Eleanor Muller, personal communication, 3 October 2024).

One respondent, however, was firm in their conviction that the Batlokoa was fully involved in the assessment of the lodge. She stated:

I have seen community members attending the meetings. If there are major changes, the community is consulted. With each and every decision that is taken, the community is included (Respondent C, interview, 6 December 2011).

TFPD was implementing a process called community visioning when holding meetings. Community visioning fosters community involvement in management procedures by encouraging members to discuss their ideals, values and plans for the community (Chitakira et al., 2012).

The lodge as a symbol of cultural heritage and unity

Although most respondents were pragmatic in stating that the lodge was merely useful as a place of stable employment, a few held that the lodge was testament to the unity and perseverance of the Batlokoa community:

I would never want to work anywhere but here. This place is my home. It is the place of my ancestors. This is the legacy of the Batlokoa for my children (Respondent G, interview, 22 October 2012).

This admission exhibits a conviction that the lodge is imbued with cultural significance. The Batlokoa welcomed the establishment of the lodge in their community as it was built in the mid-1950s under the auspices of the Batlokoa paramount chief Wessels Mota. Mota had been concerned about the plight of stranded mountaineers in the vicinity of Witsieshoek. He responded by building a basic shelter for hikers to rest in before they ventured into the Drakenberg mountains (Monei & Ramaili, interview, 8 December 2011). The shelter was constituted into a tourism venture in the early 1970s, when the QwaQwa homeland government turned the infrastructure into a resort. In the late 1980s QwaQwa reclaimed the lodge, and it was managed by their department of tourism (Moloi, personal communication, 18 February 2013). A series of white managers ran the lodge until custodianship was given to the current Batlokoa paramount chief in 2001 (interviews, 6-8 December 2011).

Wessels Mota also took the initiative to commission the creation of a road, known as the Chief’s Road, to be carved out from the valley up to the car park at the foot of Sentinel Peak (Hawkins, 1982). Chief Mota enlisted the help of every Batlokoa family to aid in accomplishing his goal of building a road and a shelter for hikers. This narrative holds a place of pride in the collective memory of the Batlokoa community. The respondents offered impassioned accounts of how they, or their parents, were called upon by the Chief to accomplish the seemingly impossible task of creating a path through the mountains. As each family had to build and maintain a section of the steep road, the entire community, in one way or another, contributed to the building of the road leading up to the lodge or to the lodge buildings. This was an amazing

feat as the community was only equipped with rudimentary tools and their physical labour. This joint endeavour for stranded hikers is illustrated in a mid-September 2024 incident, as described by a TFPD staffer:

... heavy snowfall in the Free State area caused significant problems, particularly affecting Witsieshoek. When guests needed to leave, we faced a challenging situation. Lodge staff began digging through kilometres of snow, sometimes hip-deep, to create a path for vehicles. Simultaneously, a member of the traditional council who sits on Witsieshoek's advisory committee, contacted government departments for assistance. Despite initial equipment shortages due to the N3 highway crisis, by 10 PM that Monday, the government TLB, working by the light of cars, finally cleared the road. The traditional council member personally supported these efforts throughout the night.

This collaborative effort exemplifies the mature, supportive relationship we have developed with the community. It is a modern manifestation of the Batlokoa's heritage of kindness and assistance to stranded travellers, echoing the spirit of Koos Mota's original establishment (Muller, personal communication, 4 October 2024).

The lodge initially comprised of a single, long, hut-like structure which provided rudimentary and temporary shelter for travellers. The structure was built in the mid-1950s, and the materials used to build it were pulled up from the valley on sleds harnessed to oxen. Some respondents viewed the lodge as symbolic of Batlokoa unity and collective identity. The impetus for Chief Mota's magnanimous gesture could be interpreted by the cynically minded as having been fuelled by his desire to appease the apartheid government as the ruling clan stood to benefit from the "independent homeland" policy. This meant that the paramount chief of an allocated area had jurisdiction over the finances and provision of amenities in an area.

Chief Wessels Mota accepted this policy because he stood to gain dominance over the Mopeli settlers who possibly had more claim to the area due to their prior settlement (Quinlan, 1988). Although the lodge does seem to have cultural resonance amongst the Batlokoa community, and this is acknowledged by the culturally themed interior and artefacts at the lodge, the enterprise is not marketed as a cultural venue. The lodge is popular with birdwatchers, hikers, mountaineers and nature enthusiasts, and is marketed primarily as an ecotourism venture. The lodge provides beneficial socio-economic involvement by employing 44 out of 46 staff from the local Batlokoa community.

Hurdles in public and private partnerships

Part of the aim of the DEAT in funding projects such as the renovation of the lodge was its endeavour to promote skills and development training, poverty alleviation, as well as to redress racial inequities (DEAT handbook, 2003). However, there is often blurring as to whose responsibility it is to implement these. While positive societal change may be one of the effects of the proper management of the lodge, the main role of the tourism operating company is to ensure that they operate a commercially viable tourism facility.

TFPD was appointed on behalf of the Batlokoa to manage the operations of the lodge. It does not necessarily mean that because the Batlokoa community own the lodge they should also manage it. A person who owns shares in a business entrusts the management of that business to professionals who are suitably qualified and experienced. In similar vein, the Batlokoa may own the lodge, but they entrust its upkeep to TFPD (O' Leary, presentation, 11 May 2011).

When allocating public funds for community projects, of which Witsieshoek Mountain Lodge is a beneficiary, the DEAT appoints implementing agents to ensure compliance. The implementing agent receives a percentage "off-the-top" of the allocated funds and is responsible for hiring contractors to complete the project (O' Leary, interview, 21 October 2010). Though in theory this acts as a security mechanism to safeguard public funds, these often inexperienced, undercapitalised and politically appointed agents imposed by the state on poverty alleviation projects sometimes complicate public-private and community partnerships. A common lament from the tourism operating company's management is that:

... due to miscommunication at times, the needs of the tourism operating company are not fulfilled in time as there is a delay when requests are channelled through the necessary bureaucratic structures (Respondent L, interview, 22 October 2012).

Although the above scenario is illustrative of the particular Witsieshoek site, the difficulties encountered and cost escalations could occur in any public-private and community partnership if channels of communication are compromised, and agendas are in conflict. Employees as stakeholders often know better than outside agents imposed by the government. Explained one:

The roof tiles aren't fitted securely; the strong winds are blowing the tiles off the roofs. I have suggested that more nails be used to secure the tiles, but this hasn't been done. If this is happening during the construction, I hate to see what will happen after a few years (Respondent L, interview, 22 October 2012).

The lodge's forms of stakeholder communication

In line with community visioning, the management agreement between the Batlokoa and TFPD provides an advisory committee with voting powers of representatives from the Batlokoa (4), and TFPD (4), and more by invitation. Consensus has been the modus operandi. The Batlokoa representatives are appointed by the King (Principal Traditional Leader). The King himself remains at arm's length and is available to be consulted by his appointed representatives.

Observer status included representation from NDT, the local municipality, the Maloti Drakensberg Transfrontier Conservation Area (TCA) representative, and the provincial tourism department. Four annual meetings are chaired by a representative from the National Department of Fisheries, Forestry and the Environment (DFFE) Transboundary Directorate. Agendas deal with lodge trading results covering occupancy statistics, achieved rates, turnover, operating expenses, and profit or loss. Crucial for stakeholder communication is input from the community representatives on matters affecting the lodge, for example road rehabilitation.

The Traditional Council is 60% appointed by their leader, with 40% elected by the community through processes supervised by the Independent Electoral Commission. TFPD/Witsieshoek may be invited to address the Council, for example, on the grazing of livestock, fire control, or community support initiatives. It was through a mass meeting that the King informed the community to appoint TFPD to manage the lodge and its precinct.

Written minutes of advisory committee meetings are circulated electronically. As TFPD's Eleanor Muller observes, the Batlokoa's strong, multi-generational governance structure has established processes for information dissemination. While not every community member may be privy to all financial details, the governance approach is considerably more stable and transparent than many other communities encountered by TFPD (Muller, personal communication, 4 October 2024).

Public-private and community partnerships are often fraught with disputes. The following incident reveals one example of difficult collaborative relations between the tour operator and the governmental sector:

The implementing agent looked me in the eye and assured me that he had ordered more building materials and that they were on the way. However, that was more than two months ago, and the materials still haven't arrived (O'Leary, personal communication, 22 October 2012).

This was the frustrated O'Leary's response on dealing with the situation. The renovation of infrastructure was delayed for nearly a year. Reasons cited included inclement weather, difficulty in sourcing the specified materials, and absence of a vehicle supplied by the agent to transport builders contracted by him to the site.

The Batlokoa Witsieshoek Foundation NPC disburses the monies earned by the community from the trading company, Witsieshoek Mountain Lodge. TFPD presents the Foundation's bank statements at quarterly meetings because it was invited to act as its accountant, with the TFPD CEO on the board, where it has sight of the money collected and how the community will use it. The King requires the Foundation hold a reserve of R1 million, because they see themselves as having a business owner responsibility to have capital available to support their business when required. It was this fund that saved Witsieshoek during the Covid-19 lockdown. When the trading company loans from the Foundation it is repaid with interest. In 2023, the Foundation sponsored solar lighting in the four local high schools.

Since re-opening in 2011, Witsieshoek reported an accumulated regional economic benefit of R77 million up to 2022. Sixty-four percent of the value was created by local procurement policies and practices. Support was provided to upskill and capacitate local businesses where none had previously existed. Seamstresses were trained to make curtains and to extend their business beyond just clothing manufacture. Tefo Magasane, the potter, innovated a range of functional ceramics to create a unique bedside light base, as well as several unique décor items. The home carpet weavers not only supplied the bedside and décor rugs for Witsieshoek but were also commissioned by other lodges managed by TFPD. The localisation of small home industries significantly exceeded government targets, which had been maximized

during construction (TFPD, 2022). While the responsible tourism policy to procure from local traders increases costs over cheaper national supply chain companies, "... knowing that this margin goes directly into the local economy makes it worthwhile" (TFPD, 2022).

The impact of the historical significance of the lodge on the community

The social narrative surrounding the lodge has become a legend amongst the Batlokoa and reminds of the obstacles that were resolved in the process of building it in the 1950s. This fosters a sense of pride in the community by establishing a shared history and identity bound to this geographical region. The sense of historical resonance is supported by the strong presence of traditional Batlokoa iconography incorporated in the décor of the lodge, from the wall tapestry depicting traditional activities engaged in by the Batlokoa community to the large copper etching of the paramount Chief Wessels Mota that is displayed in the reception area. Many other smaller items such as cushion covers and floor rugs are also imbued with Batlokoa cultural significance and iconography. A few respondents viewed the lodge as the cultural legacy of the Batlokoa that had to be preserved to be passed on to their children. They were adamant that they would never want to work anywhere else as they were the custodians of the Batlokoa heritage at the establishment. Employment was felt to be a privilege as it was central to their history and identity. The Batlokoa cultural historians interviewed (Monei & Ramaili, interviews, 2011) emphasised that Batlokoa iconography was used in the decoration. Representatives from the Traditional Council, including the advisor to the Chief, were interviewed to gauge their opinions and historical perspectives on the establishment of the lodge.

The lodge was viewed as more than a historical reflection of Batlokoa history and representation. It was also viewed as a vital source of income to an otherwise impoverished community. The respondents expressed appreciation towards TFPD for enabling their salaries to be paid regularly, unlike previously when mismanagement deterred tourism:

Regular salary payments have become the norm, despite some disruptions during the Covid-19 pandemic. What we're experiencing now is akin to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. With basic needs met, the conversations with staff today would reveal a different range of topics. As is common in the hospitality sector worldwide, some staff members express a desire for higher pay. You'd also hear about individuals who started as junior interns and have progressed to become department heads, gaining experience and learning on the job (Muller, personal communication, 2024).

The respondents were also appreciative for the refurbishing of the lodge, facilitating infrastructural renovations and basics like the re-stocking of supplies for the restaurant.

Implications for other public-private-community partnerships

Public-private-community partnerships (PPCP) between indigenous communities and other stakeholders are commonplace due to the socio-economic integration being fostered in South Africa. These strategic linkages have the potential to ensure that resources are utilised optimally (Palmer, 2006). This case study of the partnership

between the Batlokoa and the other Witsieshoek Lodge stakeholders can shed light on other PPCPs irrespective of whether the collaboration occurs in the tourism sector. It is acknowledged that these are not always easy collaborations due to the numerous differences between stakeholders that emerge because of their different backgrounds and experiences. The value of this research lies in the example of how to maintain collegial channels of communication between partners in an enterprise. The different goals of each institution or organisation make it difficult to find a common starting point from which to work. The added layers of suspicion and miscommunication due to racial differences can sometimes compound the difficulties.

As opposed to other cultural tourism enterprises, the Batlokoa at Witsieshoek do not form part of the cultural attraction. While prominence is placed on the Batlokoa heritage in the design, marketing and furnishings at the lodge, the community is not exoticised nor does it exoticise itself.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

In the first nine years after the community acquired the lodge (2001-2010), it had steadily declined into a state of disrepair until it was almost uninhabitable. The staff were often unpaid because the lodge could not meet its overhead costs and tourism had dwindled due to disrepair and poor service (O' Leary, interview, 21 October 2010). Internal communication channels were lacking, and oversight was non-existent. The lack of skills, managerial knowledge and financial support were addressed when TFPD was appointed in 2010. Fourteen years on, smooth functioning communication internal to the lodge underpins the successful collaboration between the different stakeholders. TFPD's communication strategy was similar to that earlier studied by Dyll (2012) for the community-owned !Xaus lodge in the Kalahari Desert. The Witsieshoek success, like the !Xaus research-in-action, unfolds through facilitating communication between different stakeholders during periods of development and/or refurbishment. The research model applied there was derived to assist TFPD's planning during the refurbishment phases of the two ventures. Previously rotting infrastructure was saved and revitalised through PPCPs. Witsieshoek's remuneration and benefits in 2022 topped R25 million in the reported period. With a 96% local staff complement of 60, their income directly enters the local economy where it generates another cycle of economic activity, with each earner supporting an average of seven people.

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Conflict of interest statement

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