

AUTHENTICITY AS INDIGENOUS MODERNITY IN NAMIBIAN ECOTOURISM

Two Contradictions of Hailom and!Xung Development under Neoliberal Capitalism

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Introduction

The San or Bushmen peoples¹ are generally considered Indigenous to southern Africa, but their status as Indigenous is contested by their governments, including in Namibia (Hays and Biesele 2011; Sapignoli and Hitchcock 2013).² For the purpose of this chapter, I focus on the Namibian San groups Hailom and!Xung, who are often seen as “authentic” stewards of nature (Fennell 2008; Koot 2018; West and Carrier 2004). They are frequently imagined and positioned as primordial people who belong to nature and therefore protect it better than anyone else, while similarly portrayed as “not yet modern.” Today, such images flourish in ecotourism and its marketing strategies (Koot 2018), which is the domain I focus on in this chapter.

The search for authenticity is an important characteristic of tourist modernity and is based on the belief that authenticity was lost somehow and only exists in the past or in other, faraway places. Modernity, with its Western tourists and dominated by capitalist values, is associated with inauthenticity (Goffman 1959; MacCannell 1976). This implies that the search for authenticity can serve as a remedy against modernity’s maladies, which can lead to the commodification of Indigenous cultures in which they are reduced to a good or product with a financial exchange value (Cohen 1988). Later, authenticity became seen as existential and more related to the experience of the tourist or the practitioner (De Bernardi 2024; Garland and Gordon 1999). Driven by consumer culture, “the 21st century is an age that hungers for anything that *feels* authentic” (Banet-Weiser 2012, 3). The “inauthentic” keep searching for real affects, emotions, and ideas in consumer culture (Banet-Weiser 2012). Importantly, these historical theorizations about authenticity often conflate and do not necessarily take place in a clear chronological order (De Bernardi 2024).

Authenticity is strongly prevalent in ecotourism. According to The International Ecotourism Society, ecotourism is “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education” (TIES 2024). Driven by consumer culture, ecotourism generates an expansion of neoliberal capitalism (Duffy 2015; Fletcher 2011), including in the world of Indigenous peoples. Ecotourism is generally regarded as a phenomenon in which nature is conserved, cultures are preserved, and simultaneously

the people of these cultures are economically developed (Cater 2006; West and Carrier 2004). However, ecotourism creates various problems associated with capitalist development, such as the creation of “inauthenticity” and poverty. These problems are then often addressed using capitalist mechanisms, values and systems again (Fletcher 2011; Fletcher and Neves 2012). In fact, today’s rise of neoliberal capitalism is often presented as “a gospel of salvation [...] to transform the universe of the marginalized and disempowered” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001, 2), neglecting the increasing global imbalances in incomes and the environmental problems it creates. Based on the assumption that marginalization can be eradicated through the “trickling down” of finances in a free market, private enterprises and entrepreneurial initiatives (including ecotourism) are believed to be crucial to creating wealth (Harvey 2005).

Inequality and environmental problems are strongly affecting Indigenous peoples (Whyte 2020). However, in ecotourism, Indigenous peoples can take up a more active part in modernization, creating “Indigenous modernities” (Sahlins 1999; see also Robins 2003; Van der Wulp and Koot 2019): in these, Indigenous peoples bend aspects of modernization to their benefit and strengthen their authentic Indigenous image, based on an increasing dependence on modern means of production, communication and transportation, such as rifles, radios, cell phones, and motorized vehicles (Sahlins 1999; Robins 2003; Wiessner and Hsin-ye Huang 2022). This integration of industrial technologies and systems into Indigenous cosmologies is what Sahlins (1999, vi) referred to as “Indigenous modernities”: “the integration of industrial technologies in Indigenous sociologies and cosmologies.” This means that they do not necessarily create a first response to the encroachment of the capitalist world and ideas in which “they” try to imitate “us”; they can use consumer products and capitalist ideas as Indigenous modernities to strengthen their identity, to become *more* authentic. In this way, many non-industrial people have not entered the capitalist world economy as passive objects of exploitation but as active agents (Sahlins 1992; Van der Wulp and Koot 2019).

In this chapter, I aim to show how some Indigenous Hai||om and!Xung in Namibia are not only exploited by more powerful forces that are shaping their environment, such as colonialism and capitalism; they are also active agents engaging in and benefitting from a contemporary modern environment. To be able to do so, they sometimes embrace their Indigenous status as authentic people who are well-connected to nature. This creates two related contradictions that I will explore here. First, through ecotourism, “authentic” Indigenous peoples adapt to an “inauthentic” modern life in a capitalist world. To do so, it is necessary that they remember or reinvent their traditions based on market demands and thereby continue to act as authentic stewards of nature. Second, based on their image as authentic natural stewards, ecotourism is supposed to support economic development based on consumerism, which is harmful to biodiversity and climate change (Duffy 2015; Gössling 2011; IPBES-IPCC 2021; Wiedmann et al. 2020), creating an ideological drift away from natural stewardship.

My results are based on ongoing visits to several San groups in southern Africa since 1999. For the first time, I stayed with Hai||om and!Xung in Tsitsabis, northern Namibia, as an anthropology student doing ethnographic fieldwork for six months in 1999. Later, from 2002 to 2007, I lived among them as a practitioner on a community-based tourism project called Treesleeper Camp (Hüncke and Koot 2012; Koot 2016). Subsequently, in 2010, I studied three Namibian San groups as part of my PhD fieldwork (Koot 2016) and have kept visiting them ever since, leading to a longitudinal relationship (O’Reilly 2012) that also includes regular email and WhatsApp communications during my physical absence. Two of these groups were the Ju/’hoansi of the Nyae Nyae Conservancy, a sub-group of the!Xung (Barnard 2019), and the Hai||om and!Xung of Tsitsabis.

In what follows, I provide in-depth descriptions of the two contradictions. In these, I provide empirical examples with a further theoretical discussion. I then wrap up in the Conclusion by analyzing both contradictions and the role of Indigenous modernities therein.

The Two Contradictions

In 2010, I held an interview with a development fieldworker about (eco)tourism among the San of southern Africa. Having worked with San groups for decades, she explained:

For us with a Western background and coming from a capitalist mindset, you see so clearly the potential of something that can be done but you don't see the community networks that exist around it. And those community networks is their [the San's] economy. We don't see that economy, we just see 'o, but you can get much more money' but you don't see how that economy imposed on their economy is going to destroy the fibre of the other one [...] Tourism has in its core the force of destruction what it is that we want to sell. So you want to sell this product, the beauty of it, while the capitalist world and culture and means that we bring in that they also want, that has the potential of destroying what we try to sell. How do you toss that game? [...] It has positive elements of self-esteem and cultural knowledge, preservation and also income-generation, but it has in its core [...] the people fear that it keeps them back, it keeps them who they were and they want to move on.

In the above quote, the two contradictions are revealed that come about through the implementation of ecotourism among Indigenous peoples. I will now move to the first one.

Authenticity and Inauthenticity

Today, the San are often still considered stewards of nature, while in reality they have gone through a brutal history and continue to live under harsh and marginalized conditions (Gordon and Douglas 2000; Hitchcock and Babchuck 2011; Koot 2023). Nonetheless, ecotourists' search for authenticity also highlights the "authentic people of nature" and as such they are also an important tourist attraction. It seems as if "Indigenous spokespeople have the authenticity and accumulated wisdom that their audiences seek" (Abidin et al. 2020, 396). By tapping into this image, local people take up a position *in* a capitalist system instead of *away from* it: they become (part of) an ecotourism product. In the above quote, the fieldworker refers to this, for example, by mentioning the "destruction" of what "we want to sell" (the product) and that "it keeps them who they were and they want to move on." However, this does not necessarily mean that without tourism the Hai!om and!Xung would be left "untouched"; ecotourism is only one influence from the broader political economy. As a Ju/'hoansi tour guide told me in 2010:

You have to explain to them [tourists], if you want to see a real Bushman you will never see a real Bushman [...] Not like the traditional way, but I can still show you some of the things that they still have [...] But ehm, the culture is busy, I mean, changing and so on, and very soon it will die.

In another example, I met a Dutch tourist in the Nyae Nyae Conservancy, Namibia, who mentioned that he was "more interested in their [the San's] own roots instead of what they have taken over from the West." More specifically, he was looking for spirituality among the San. After watching

three movies about them, including the influential *The Great Dance* (Foster and Foster 2000), he had become inspired by their “spiritual experience of nature.” To find this, he contacted the director of *The Great Dance*, who recommended him to “go to [the Ju/’hoansi of] Tsumkwe [in the Nyae Nyae Conservancy], because there it is accessible and according to his feeling it would be *more authentic*” (my italics). This shows how some people consider specific groups of San to be “more authentic” than others, based on their preconceptions of what authenticity entails in this regard. In general, the Ju/’hoansi of the Nyae Nyae Conservancy in Namibia and the Dobe Area in Botswana are often regarded as “pure” or authentic San, based on colonial, historical and anthropological accounts (Garland and Gordon 1999). This idea about authenticity is subsequently used by other groups: a Haillom tour guide at Treesleeper Camp explained that during a village tour, they show tourists!Xung houses. She explained that

[t]he village tour is just a show [...] One of the!Xung houses is not exactly built in the style as these people used to build houses [...]. They also do not always speak!Xung, but I as a guide just say that they do.

(cited in Hüncke and Koot 2012, 683)

As Garland and Gordon (1999) note, what counts as authentic has no fixed content and even though cultural characteristics, such as ethnic originality and historical stasis, are conflated with authenticity, these are not the same thing.

Altogether, this led the Haillom manager of Treesleeper Camp to wonder rhetorically: “What do tourists want to see? Do they want to see how Bushmen [are]? Should we change because of tourists or should tourists accept how we are?” (cited in Hüncke and Koot 2012, 682). In many cases, ecotourism leads Indigenous groups to (re)invent their traditions, to create commodities for the tourist market, ostensibly because the tourist market becomes a facilitator of the preservation of cultural traditions that would otherwise perish (Cohen 1988). For most Haillom and!Xung, however, ecotourism mainly functions as a potential strategy for generating revenues through which they conform to consumer culture, i.e., the inauthentic.

Fennell (2008, 129) called the image of natural stewardship the “Myth of Indigenous Stewardship,” in which he highlights the example Indigenous peoples can have for non-Indigenous peoples to live sustainably. This “mythification” can be noted in an example from a former client of Treesleeper Camp, Nomad Africa Adventure Tours, who would explain that the San “have much to offer our modern way of living in terms of a sustainable existence with nature” (Nomad 2015). This brings in the elevated status of Indigenous peoples as the sustainable authentic steward. However, if the ecological impact within traditional societies was often low, this is not only because of conservation-mindedness, but it can also be attributed to local conditions, such as low population density, the absence of a market, and different technology (Fennell 2008; Ingold 2000), conditions that have now undergone profound changes and continue to do so. Ironically, the people used for such advertising may well be unable to afford the products themselves (Tomaselli 2005). Western idea(l)s about nature and the people living in nature are enacted through the free market, creating products based on the tourists’ consumptive needs, including their wish to live sustainably. In this way, tourists spread “inauthentic” capitalist ideas and values through the market system instead of supporting “authentic” Indigenous practices (Carrier and West 2004), or the “preservation” of these cultures.

As also shown in the above examples, encounters between hosts and guests can result in the locals’ adoption of the tourists’ expectations, based on the tourists’ pre-existing image of the villages, leading to performances with little resemblance to local traits, original rituals, or

normal conduct (Tomaselli 1996). Therefore, tourists get to see a “staged authenticity” (“front regions” or frontstage), as opposed to “back regions” (backstage) where the hosts’ lives take place (MacCannell 1976). This staged authenticity is constructed by the hosts, based on the guests’ expectations. It seems as if the attraction the Hailom and!Xung hold for tourists is the focus on their (ascribed) identity as the primordial others of a pristine fantasy, semi-officially marked and marketed by indicators as being a scarce resource, off the beaten track, or even as almost extinct (Garland and Gordon 1999; Guenther 2002).

So simply by their attendance, ecotourists impose neoliberal capitalism onto other cultures. This imposition is covered under a “psychological fix” (Fletcher and Neves 2012, 66); marketing isolates the mysterious Indigenous cultures in the tourists’ minds, as if the Indigenous peoples are excluded from the problems of the “modern” world. Instead of accepting a situation in which they are turned into products because of the tourists’ presence, the creation of an image that is mysterious and harmless protects the tourists from potential feelings of guilt (Fletcher and Neves 2012). In this process, ethnic commodities become contradictory in the sense that, seen from the conventional assumptions about value and price, the appeal of such commodities lies in the idea that they resist the rationality of ordinary economics under neoliberal capitalism. This, however, does not mean that those who commodify their identities will always remain dupes of the market, although it might seem to be this way at first. There are numerous examples in which they enter into their small businesses based on the commodification of their culture, in which there is a good level of tactical and critical consciousness (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009). Hobsbawm (1983) wrote that invented traditions may initially be seen as a simplification of traditional cultures, but that these are also important responses to the forces of modernity. And today indeed more San seem to be taking up an active part in the process of imaging (Tomaselli 1999). To distinguish themselves, Indigenous peoples can compromise with dominant groups and ideas, for instance, through claiming to be natural stewards (Fennell 2008; Sahlins 1993), because this image itself has become a useful commodity, i.e., an important Indigenous modernity.

Authenticity and Development

Building on the above, the second contradiction refers to the development of Indigenous peoples through ecotourism, as described in the quote by the fieldworker at the start of this section by “self-esteem and cultural knowledge, preservation and also income-generation.” In another example from the Nyae Nyae Conservancy, the creation of a Living Hunters’ Museum with a camping site in //Xa/oba is a space where the Ju/’hoansi show their past in traditional gear to generate income and to preserve their culture. Income from the activities is distributed partly to the performers and partly to general village necessities, such as school fees for the children. This way, they become more active agents in a consumerist society. In August 2010, the Ju/’hoansi explained to me that, based on some early economic success of the project, they now wanted to see their project grow, attracting more tourists based on their authentic image as stewards of nature. It seems as if the more they embrace this image, the further they step away from the lifestyle it is based upon. Moreover, in the larger Nyae Nyae Conservancy, this also means an increase in competition. Due to its remoteness in the Kalahari, there are not many tourists visiting the area, meaning that other tourist campsites that were run for many more years but in a less accessible area (Djokwe or Makuri) now become less attractive for tourists to visit.

In ecotourism, development is promoted based on values and assumptions from capitalism. It is mainly a capitalist endeavor (Cater 2006), but neoliberal capitalism has been responsible for most of the recent global environmental decline through its support of consumerism and related resource

extraction and industrialization (Duffy 2015; Hickel 2020; Wiedmann et al. 2020). Therefore, its global domination and intensification needs critical analysis, especially in relation to solutions for social and environmental harm that are consumption-intensive, such as ecotourism (Wiedmann et al. 2020). Furthermore, by attaching financial value to nature and/or culture, the development of Indigenous peoples through ecotourism supports the promotion of an unsustainable consumer culture (Cater 2006). So the penetration of market forces into small-scale, subsistence, and exchange-based economies in development further spreads neoliberal values through ecotourism (Duffy 2015; Fletcher 2011). Capitalist economic terms are used as prerogatives and necessities to implement concepts such as “efficiency” and “economic growth” that are rarely justified but automatically assumed to be based on “economic correctness” (Ferguson 2006, 77–79).

In this ideology, the current identity of Hailom and!Xung in ecotourism has gained a double nature, in which they are both the authentic cultural objects as well as modernizing producers of tourism, which creates a “double vision” (see Robins 2001). The idea of a double vision originates from NGOs that promote Western values and ideas on the one hand, such as democracy and income-generating activities, to help Indigenous peoples socialize into becoming “modern citizens.” On the other hand, however, to achieve this, they simultaneously promote the preservation of an authentic culture. In Western development thinking, there is a tendency to continue the artificial divide between modernity and tradition, instead of recognizing its hybridity. This is partly also due to the dependency of NGOs on Western donors who, in some cases, want the authentic people, who they often consider a homogeneous group, while at the same time advocating capitalist and democratic values, to imitate the Western lifestyle and to “become like us” (Robins 2001, 2003; Sahlins 1999). Ecotourism, with its strong focus on authenticity *and* development, resembles this double vision, but this does not necessarily mean that the Hailom and!Xung are only passively “accepting” their development, acquiescing in the imposition of modernist values and ideas. Quite the contrary, as Indigenous peoples, they grapple with modernity based on a history and culture that is classified as marginalized. As Indigenous peoples, they are not only “objects for tourist consumption; as modernizing subjects, [but] they must also be seen as producers, agents in the production and marketing of tourist artifacts and experiences” (Garland and Gordon 1999, 275).

For example, when I still worked for Treesleper Camp, a tour operator requested the Hailom bushwalk guides to wear traditional gear during the bushwalk, something we had until then avoided. Although the guides agreed, after a while one of them changed back to long trousers and t-shirt. He explained that local people, including children and family members, made fun of him when he wore traditional gear. Furthermore, he felt uncomfortable with young women among the tourists because in traditional gear, he walked around half-dressed. The issue was solved by the guides themselves. They decided to change into traditional gear only at the end of the bushwalk where they would explain about traditional grass huts and former livelihoods based on hunting and gathering. They even turned this into a joke with the tourists: at the start of the bushwalk, they explained that their twin brother would await them. And at the end of the tour, the guide rapidly goes into the hut and changes, coming out of the hut as an “authentic” Hailom while being far out of the uncomfortable village sight. This example shows their position as active stakeholders.

Thus, as modern producers of tourism, Indigenous peoples may emphasize not only their cultural difference from Westerners but also the ways in which they are similar, behaving as willing producers and consumers in capitalism. The first label of authentic locates them almost automatically outside modern time and space, and often in nature. The second, modernist label posits them as active agents and participants in the tourism industry in which they choose to benefit from commercial transactions. Interestingly, in ecotourism both discourses co-exist comfortably

and sometimes their status as “others” is the very thing that makes their modern role possible at all; it is the “authentic other” that they ultimately have to sell (Garland and Gordon 1999).

In another example, the Hailom manager of Treesleeper Camp explained to me in 2010 how the now defunct NGO NACOBTA (Namibia Community-Based Tourism Assistance Trust) supported the project with marketing, but that they misrepresented the project by using a picture he felt did not properly represent the project. The picture NACOBTA used was one of a marginalized person sitting in front of a grass hut, which he believed was not a good representation of Treesleeper Camp at the time. Subsequently, the manager was able to set up additional marketing activities through donor funding, because he followed a course on marketing, benefitting from capitalism to represent their Indigenous project in their own way (Koot 2018). In another example, the luxurious Intu Afrika lodge market their lodge as a place “[w]here the last few bushmen roam in freedom and harmony with the land” (cited in Garland and Gordon 1999, 277). However, they lived in a village about two kilometers from the tourists and only dressed up in traditional gear for tourist performances (Guenther 2002). The hybrid (i.e., not fully San), non-local, and in-migrated community was advertised as having traditional skills but lacked the basic training they required to turn their skills into income generation. Intu Afrika and the tourists served as benevolent do-gooders, taking the San out of their “undeveloped,” disempowered, and traditional state (Garland and Gordon 1999). Nevertheless, for the San at Intu Afrika working there was not a choice as they felt pressured into it by their poverty and lack of other employment opportunities. They complained of social tensions, unfulfilled promises of land acquisition, and a tourist levy by the owners. Moreover, the labor conditions led some workers to explain that they were just a duplication of those found on commercial farms (Koot 2023; Sylvain 2002).

In this line, I also experienced how common it is to uncritically emphasize the economic importance of ecotourism, so that tourists will be encouraged to consider themselves as helpful agents in the Hailom and!Xung’s processes of development. This happens in guidebooks, brochures and at guest farms, lodges, NGOs and among tour operators. For example, about Treesleeper Camp, I have myself written marketing texts in which I explained that this tourism project “will stimulate the small scale economy” (Treesleeper Camp 2015) and the already mentioned Nomad tour operator explains that tourism provides “much needed funding for the conservation of the area and their way of life” (Nomad 2015). Interestingly, at Nomad, it is even assumed that funding is now a necessity for San to continue “their way of life,” instead of an outside influence that will, for good or ill, change the local dynamics. This completely disregards the second contradiction in ecotourism, which is that to focus on development based on capitalist values has enormous environmental consequences too (Duffy 2015), also when the “people of nature” conform to this lifestyle (and assuming the development would be “successful”). I want to emphasize that I do not disregard their right to join the fruits of capitalism, but here I stress the inherent contradiction of this economic development model: ecotourism will, if leading to successful development, contribute to an increase of environmental crises including biodiversity loss and climate change.

Of course, there are tourists who seek an authentic experience in which they are willing to accept that the tourist product itself is not necessarily “authentic.” Tourism then becomes a quest for authenticity, in which the tourists are looking for an ideology that enables them to see their modern selves as authentic, even if the San are clearly not (Garland and Gordon 1999). They might easily regard Hailom and!Xung who are engaged in tourism as “undeveloped” and modern at the same time, halfway through an imagined development process, but still based on Western socio-economic development ideals. In this way, tourists can consider themselves their patrons instead of exploitative consumers. This authentic quest then denies the historic and contemporary circumstances that have contributed to the current marginalized status of the Hailom and!Xung

while positioning them below the fully modern status of the developed tourist (Garland and Gordon 1999; Koot 2023), and legitimizing the tourists' "developed" lifestyles despite its environmental shortcomings. In this discourse, ecotourism is often regarded a kind of "fair trade tourism," based on a so-called "social fix" (Fletcher and Neves 2012, 65), which suggests that local communities, who were often unjustly treated in the past, are now developed into equal world-citizens who receive proper wages and good treatment. Through marketing, rhetoric, and certification systems, tourism mediators become the power holders, negotiating between the Indigenous peoples and the outside world. For these mediators, it is important to show that they "do good," thereby increasing the value of their business by using rhetoric about fair trade and assumed economic trickle-down effects (Cater 2006). Furthermore, by being an ecotourist instead of just an "ordinary" tourist, tourists themselves show that they are social through the support they generate for the development of marginalized Indigenous peoples.

Conclusion

Indigenous peoples, such as the Hai||om and the!Xung of Namibia, are positioned in ecotourism as authentic and modern at the same time. As an exponent of neoliberal capitalism, tourism creates contradictions and environmental anthropologists doing research on ecotourism should be aware of those. The first contradiction is the tourists' search for authenticity, while the tourists' presence is itself an imposition of values and ideas from the modern, capitalist world; it automatically makes the authentic people inauthentic. The second contradiction builds on this. It refers to the fact that authenticity is largely based on the Indigenous peoples' connection with nature, while their development is a core element of ecotourism and is largely focused on capitalist values and activities, creating only more consumers if successful, which would be environmentally destructive. Furthermore, this focus on development legitimizes the tourists' own polluting and unsustainable lifestyles: they can now feel good about themselves as supporting consumers of "helpless" Indigenous peoples. However, tourists are generally (relatively) affluent and therefore involved in high levels of consumption (Hickel 2020; Wiedmann et al. 2020), including through aviation. Therefore, ecotourism substantially *contributes to* climate change, which in turn negatively affects the global loss of biodiversity (IPBES-IPCC 2021; Trisos et al. 2020). Two recent developments are relevant in this regard.

First, considering Indigenous peoples' role in biodiversity conservation, it is important to mention the recent *Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework* (GBF) that was adopted by the Convention of Biological Diversity in December 2022. In this, Indigenous peoples are positioned to further elitist conservation agendas based on a neoliberal discourse promoting economic growth with an important role for ecotourism. In the *Kunming-Montreal* GBF, 30% of the (terrestrial and marine) Earth should be preserved for biodiversity conservation by 2030 (hence, in short, "30 × 30"). One of its main mechanisms to achieve this is the promotion of global tourism to these natural areas (CfN 2021; Smith 2021; Waldron et al. 2020): 30 × 30 proponents position ecotourism as an important long-term financial strategy in which "Indigenous People Could Lead the Way" (Sengupta et al. 2021). However, the initiative disregards tourism's enormous contribution to global consumption and pollution, and the fact that tourism revenues generally hardly support livelihoods based on farming, herding, fishing, or hunting and gathering that in varying degrees take place outside of dominant growth models (Agrawal et al. 2021). Moreover, it neglects that climate change and biodiversity loss are not caused by humans *in general*, but by the growth imperative that benefits an affluent *minority* (Wiedmann et al. 2020). Recently, Indigenous peoples have protested against 30 × 30, which they expect to become a colonial-style land grab,

reducing many to landless poverty (SI 2020), while they have thus far remained unrecognized as negotiators in the process (Agrawal et al. 2021; Sengupta et al. 2021).

Second, while the global tourism industry is currently recovering after COVID-19, most institutional and industry proposals for “transformations” in tourism continue the promotion and management of tourism’s conventional economic growth model, based on activities similar to the pre-COVID-19 situation (Rastegar et al. 2021). In fact, “the focus of most tourism industry leaders was recovery and returning to ‘business as usual’ as soon as possible” (Higgins-Desbiolles 2020a, 66). But to envision a truly sustainable pathway for post-COVID-19 tourism, there is an urgent need to acknowledge tourism’s negative consequences for nature and society (Higgins-Desbiolles 2020b), including for Indigenous groups in ecotourism, even if tourism itself can be considered an economic success.

However, although these critiques on tourism are valid and worrying, in this chapter, I showed that Indigenous peoples are not only exploited through ecotourism. Their continuously changing and hybrid life-world does not automatically mean that the modern takes over the traditional but simply that values of modernization are integrated as Indigenous modernities, just as rifles, cars, cement houses, and cell phones have been. Therefore, “Indigenous modernities” are material and immaterial (Van der Wulp and Koot 2019). Today, values such as democracy, profit maximization, marketing, and entrepreneurialism have become influences and ideas in the daily lives of Indigenous groups in Namibia, who exercise agency in their negotiations with external agents and forces.

In Namibian ecotourism, Hailom and!Xung are still portrayed as the authentic people who know nature best, but who are not yet fully modern, so who are still in need of development. This image can be heavily criticized, and up to a degree it should and it is, but it is also an immaterial Indigenous modernity that is sometimes claimed by the Hailom and!Xung. From an Indigenous perspective, this makes sense: whether it is true or not that (s)he really *is* “the best ecologist” does not matter; it is *the idea* that (s)he is the best ecologist that matters and that can now be regarded as a commodity that Hailom and!Xung can use to their advantage.

Notes

- 1 Both terms “Bushmen” and “San” have derogatory and patronising elements (Gordon and Douglas 2000). Despite this, they “signify important identity markers of belonging to the larger regional group that shares cultural similarities and experiences of marginalization” (Koot et al. 2023). When applicable, I use their own language group names such as !Xung (and Ju/’hoansi) and Hailom.
- 2 The question who is Indigenous has been subject of long debates. Namibia signed the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples from 2007 and several other international agreements that affirm its values (IWGIA 2024). Despite this, the government denies special Indigenous status to any group in the country. Globally, indigeneity is mostly structured around four characteristics that are all contested for different reasons: Genealogical ancestry, cultural difference, non-dominance and self-ascription (for details see, e.g., Barume 2014; Van der Wulp and Koot 2019). For broader debates on the meaning of indigeneity see further Kuper (2003) and special issues in *Anthropology Today* 2000 16 (4) and 2004 20 (2), *Social Anthropology* 2006 14 (1) and *Current Anthropology* 2004 45 (2) and 2006 47 (1).

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