

The most marginalized people in Uganda? Alternative realities of Batwa at Bwindi Impenetrable National Park

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous peoples such as the Batwa in Uganda are predominantly seen as marginalised groups, leaving little room for foregrounding their power, influence and involvement in tourism and development. Inspired by Foucauldian discourse theory and Actor-Network Theory [ANT], we use the concept of relational agency to analyse how the Batwa contribute to conservation and tourism development, and deepen our understanding of agency in the context of the Batwa at the Bwindi Impenetrable National Park (Uganda). Based on this conceptualisation we analysed the dominant (academic and non-academic) discourses on the Batwa in the light of in-depth ethnographic research to seek for alternative Batwa realities. Whereas scientific, NGO and governmental literature predominantly reduced the Batwa to marginalised, poor and oppressed victims of development, our ethnographic research observed the Batwa as a vibrant community that deploys expertise on forest ecology, tourism entrepreneurship, organisational capacity and political activism. With such insights we discuss the consequences of agency reduction and the ways to take the Batwa's situational agency into account. Highlighting the multiple realities of Batwa-ness provide a starting point of relating with the Batwa in ways that acknowledge them as agential, rather than only marginalised.

1. Introduction

Globally, the position of indigenous people in conservation and (tourism) development debates is highly polarised. On the one hand, post-colonial and critical scholars predominantly portray indigenous people as victims of conservation and tourism development processes, marginalised and dispossessed of their land by governments and powerful consortiums of conservation organisations (Mbaiwa, 2016). On the other hand, some anthropologists have emphasised that indigenous peoples have always conserved and utilised wildlife better than anybody else (Kideghesho, 2008). Cunha and De Almeida (2000, p. 322) add that anthropologists' emphasis on the "agency of the indigenous peoples" led to the establishment of the International Alliance of the Indigenous-Tribal Peoples of the Tropical Forests, and acknowledgement of the role of indigenous communities in conservation at the 1992 Rio Summit.

Drawing on insights from Foucauldian discourse theory and Actor-Network Theory, this paper uses the concept of relational agency to engage with these debates in the context of the Batwa of Bwindi

Impenetrable National Park, south-western Uganda. We analyse the dominant marginalisation discourse in the light of ethnographic observations to highlight the agency of the Batwa in conservation and tourism processes at Bwindi.

People who identify themselves as Batwa are found in Africa's great Lakes region covering parts of Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Burundi (Kidd, 2014). The Batwa are seen as the first inhabitants of the Central African Forests, also known as the 'domain of the bells', referring to the bells on the collar of the hunting dogs of the Batwa (Nzita, 1992; Zaninka, 2001). In Uganda, the "majority of the Batwa, 66 per cent (3706 people), were found in western Uganda in of Kisoro, Bushenyi, Kabale, Bundibugyo and Mubende districts" (Kabanukye, 2011, p. 278). Out of the estimated 6200 Batwa currently living in Uganda (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2016), more than half (3463) live in 43 villages in the districts neighbouring Mga-hinga and Bwindi Impenetrable National Parks [BMCA] (Kakuru, 2016), with major concentrations at Buhoma and Rubuguri (Butynski, 1984, p. 22). Bwindi forest is located in south-western Uganda (see Map 1) on the eastern edge of the Albertine rift valley.

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The United National Environmental Programme-World Conservation Monitoring Centre [UNEP-WCMC \(2011\)](#) describes Bwindi as “one of the largest areas in East Africa which still has Afromontane lowland forest extending to well within the montane forest belt”, resulting in high biodiversity. The Batwa are believed to have been the first inhabitants of this forest, before the Bafumbira, Bakiga, Bakimbiri and Banyarwanda agriculturalists moved into the area ([Kabanankye, 2011; Zaninka, 2001](#)). Over time, Bwindi forest was designated various protection statuses and in 1991 it was declared Bwindi Impenetrable National Park. Currently, the park is a renowned destination for gorilla tourism ([van der Duim, Ampumuza, & Ahebwa, 2014](#)). The conservation process of Bwindi and implications on Batwa is summarised in [Table 1](#).

The Batwa of Bwindi Impenetrable National Park [Bwindi] have been at the heart of national and international conservation and tourism development debates. The majority of the publications portray the Batwa as marginalised victims of conservation and tourism development-induced evictions ([Kidd, 2014; Mukasa, 2017; Tumusiime, Bitariho, and Sandbrook \(2018b\)](#)). In academic and non-academic literature, Batwa are depicted as an icon of poverty, marginalisation, discrimination and forest dependency ([Musunguzi, 2016; Stafford & Garcia, 2016; Tumusiime, Bitariho, & Sandbrook, 2018a; Turyatunga, 2010](#)).

As an exception to much of this literature, [Kajobe \(2007\)](#) acknowledges the Batwa’s vast knowledge of stingless bees and [Tajuba \(2015\)](#) describes how Batwa have conserved their forest culture amidst the strong waves of modernity and development. Drawing on these few accounts, our assumption is that the dominant discourses on marginalisation may have overlooked other co-existing Batwa realities and

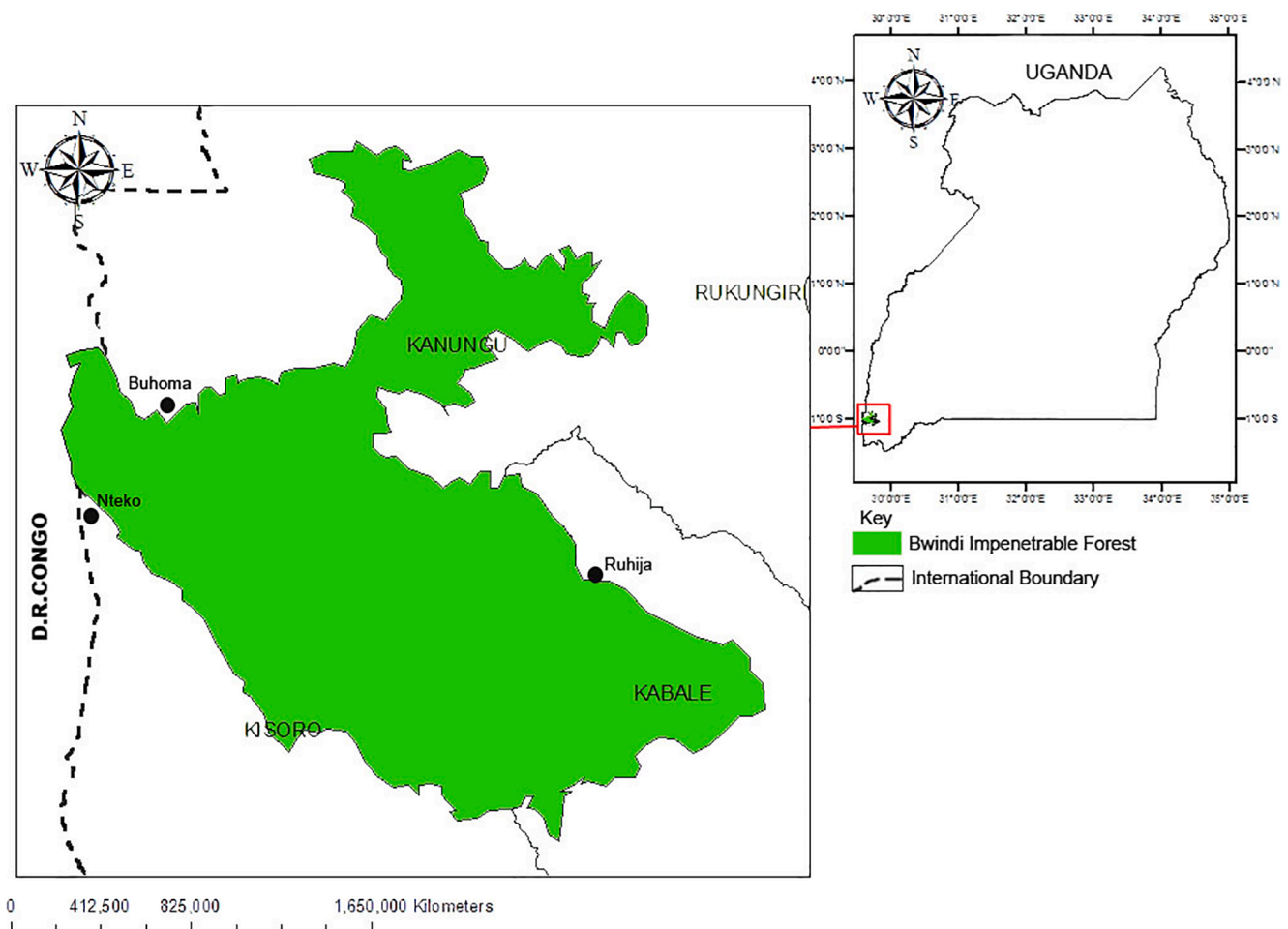
‘important facts’ that could inform policy interventions with a better and more grounded understanding of Batwa life (cf. [Kabanankye, 2011](#)). Our main contribution in this paper is to present an alternative analysis of the Batwa situation that pays attention to the complexities and relations that produce the multiple realities of the Batwa, other than singular accounts of seemingly passive victims of conservation and development processes. We argue that Batwa are incessantly entangled in various relations within and outside their communities to produce multiple realities beyond and perhaps overcoming marginalisation and victimisation.

To do so, we use a Foucauldian and Actor-Network Theory [ANT] inspired conceptualisation of the *enactment of situational agency* ([Menzel, 2018](#)) to analyse the various mechanisms and processes that *enact* particular versions of Batwa-ness ([Middelveld, van der Duim, & Lie, 2016; Ren, 2011](#)). Thus, we move beyond oppressor-oppressed dichotomies towards an understanding of how communities engage in multiple relations with other actors to co-create development and conservation.

This article proceeds as follows. We will first introduce our conceptual framework and methods used. We will then examine dominant and counter-narratives regarding the Batwa and end with a discussion on multiple situational agency and conclude that marginalisation is performed, has performative effects and is sometimes challenged through counter-narratives and practices.

2. Enacting agency: in/from discourses in/to practices

In this paper we use the concept of enactment to understand how



Map. 1. Location of Bwindi Impenetrable National Park.

Table 1
Chronology of conservation events and their implication on Batwa.

Chronology of events and Bwindi status	Implication for the Batwa
Pre-1932-gazettement period	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No policy regarding the protection of Bwindi forest. The Batwa had full access and control of the forest imposing levies to caravans. Feared warriors who would occasionally be hired as war mercenaries/warriors by Rwandan Tutsi Kings in case of an invasions from the Hutu tribes (Zaninka, 2001; Kabanankye, 2011; Kidd, 2008; Mukasa, 2017). Practiced silent trade with farming settlers (Unpublished compilation from Bagorogoza Christopher, 2019). Paid homage and danced at royal ceremonies in the Kings' courts.
1932 two forests gazetted as Kasatoro and Kayonza crown forest reserves by the British colonial office	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The forest continued to be economically and culturally important and accessible for the Batwa.
1942 The BINP & MGNP were combined and gazetted as impenetrable central crown forests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The colonial office strategy was conservationist, but respected the Batwa's rights and access to the forest (Mukasa, 2014)
1961 'The entire Reserve was gazetted an Animal Sanctuary under the Game Preservation & Control Act of 1959, as amended 1964, to grant additional protection to the mountain gorillas' (UNEP-WCMC, 2011, p. 2).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The report by FPP and UOBDU finds no clear effects of the policy on the Batwa at that time (Mukasa, 2014)
1964 The Forest and Farm Act were introduced in Uganda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of hunting dogs, possession of hunting weapons, residing, hunting, and farming in the forest was made illegal (Mukasa, 2014) and residence inside the forest was prohibited (Butynski, 1984).
The 13th August 1991 resolution turned the two forest and game reserves into Bwindi Impenetrable National Park by Statutory Instrument #3, under the 1952 National Parks Act ((Mukasa, 2014; UNEP-WCMC, 2011)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Batwa were permanently evicted and restricted from accessing the forest, without any resettlement and compensation (Mukasa, 2014).
1993: gorilla tourism was officially opened at Bwindi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Despite the Batwa's extensive knowledge of the forest, they could not secure jobs in conservation and tourism departments because they lacked formal education ((UNEP-WCMC, 2011).
1995: Bwindi Mgahinga Conservation Trust was established. The Dutch Embassy provided additional funding to the Trust focused on the Batwa component of Trust's work. One of the conditions of the US\$ 2.7 million for 1997 to 2000 fund from the Dutch government was for the Trust to implement a mechanism for representation of the Batwa as a discriminated group.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Various reports indicate that it has taken quite long to implement the objectives of this fund (Kenricks, 2000; Kidd, 2014; Mukasa, 2014). Meanwhile, Kakuru (2016) reports that the BMCT has so far bought 406 acres of land for the Batwa.
2000 the United Organization for Batwa Development in Uganda (UOBDU) was founded	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Batwa representatives started processes of engaging various local and international actors.
June 7, 2011 a tourism product, the Batwa trail, was officially launched.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Batwa employed as tourist guides in Mgahinga Gorilla National Park.
13th February 2013 UOBDU petitioned Constitutional Court of Uganda seeking recognition of their rights and redress of long-time marginalisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> By the end of this study in 2020, this court case had not yet been concluded. So, the Batwa were still engaged in these legal processes.
April 2019 the Bwindi Batwa Forest Experience was launched as one of the tourist activities of Bwindi Impenetrable National Park	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Batwa employed as site guides at the various sites in the forest. A Batwa music and dance group was formed.

particular forms of agency are produced, challenged and negotiated. Our point of departure is that anything that appears real becomes so only because it is enacted as real (Mol, 2002). According to (Law, 2009) and (Michael, 2017), reality is enacted and distributed in discourses, practices, technologies, and bodies. Understanding the detailed mechanisms through which realities are enacted necessitates unpacking the processes through which particular realities are produced and distributed.

In this article we will do so by first problematising the discourses through which the agency of the Batwa are discursively produced, and thereafter compare this to a situational understanding of Batwa agency in actual practices. We will first elaborate how discourses author a singular view of agency, followed by some critiques on this approach. Then we will provide a perspective on agency as multiple and situational. In this view, we explain how various forms of agency can coexist in multiple enactments simultaneously producing both discursive and situational agency.

2.1. Discursive agency

A Foucauldian conceptualisation of discourses focuses on dominant discourses and often assumes that subjects and objects are produced within discourses without problematising the agency of the subjects involved: their resistance, refusal to be categorised, incentivised, subjugated, or disciplined (Dressler, 2014; Gregory & Vaccaro, 2015). Implicitly, such studies assume "that individual subjects will incorporate control mechanisms and internalise norms (...) and that this leads to new publicly auditable forms of self-regulation" (Rap & Wester, 2017, p. 293). This particular view of discourse tends to "author a single account of reality" (Law, 2004, p. 122) or, in this case agency, as reserved for the powerful governmentalities or structures at the expense of multiplicity, difference, alternatives and complexity. Therefore, we agree with Rap and Wester (2017) and (McKee, 2009) that the consequences of dominant discourses or governmentalities (like co-shaping of certain subjectivities, policies and practices) should not be taken for granted. Although dominant discourses make it hard for alternative realities to be spread (Beunen, Van Assche, & Duineveld, 2013), such alternatives co-exist alongside dominant realities.

To say that discourses have consequences implies that discourses are performative. So, we use the concept of performativity to analyse these consequences (such as agency reduction and the 'benefits' thereof). Tomassini, Font, and Thomas (2019) argue that discourses can prompt actors to act in ways that conform to the story they tell. Yet, discourses can also fail, or create new subjects. More importantly, people never act alone, but only and always through a variety of networks (Law, 2008; Ren, 2011). Social action implies agency, which shapes people's varying social practices and collective responses to policy and governmental technologies in specific social and institutional contexts (Rap and Wester (2017). We further elaborate this idea through the concept of situational agency.

2.2. Situational agency

In line with ANT's relational conceptualisation of agency, we assume that agency is not a possession. It is not something one can have, but a relational outcome. It is enacted in relations among various heterogeneous actors – thus a reality effect of such enactments (Latour, 2014; Law, 2000; Michael, 2016). Limited, no or strong agency arises from the different ways in which actors relate to different sets of other actors in particular situations (Menzel, 2018; Ren, 2011). This conceptualisation of relational agency is very much in line with Foucault's notion of power (see e.g. Foucault, 2006). His perspective is that power is always relational: "Power in process is power that needs to be reproduced in a recursive manner, from one event to the next one. (...) such a concept of power, away from object–subject distinctions, away from moralising too, and away from rigid subject–structure distinctions" (Van Assche, Duineveld, & Beunen, 2014, p. 2389).

A relational conceptualisation of agency implies that it becomes imperative to describe the relations and practices that: a) enact the dominant single story – in this case, marginalisation; b) enact other alternative stories – beyond marginalisation (Law, 2015) and; c) reality effects of such enactments “rather than seeking to determine who or what imposes or determines what” (Ren, 2011, p. 862). It is in view of such insights that we find the combination of discourse analysis and ethnographic fieldwork appropriate for a detailed understanding of how Batwa agency is enacted.

3. Methods

For this qualitative study, the first author purposively selected five villages surrounding Bwindi. Four of the five villages were selected based on their level of development as described by the Batwa research assistants as: poorest of the poor (1), moderate (2), and advanced (1). The fifth village (Ruhija) was selected for the uniqueness of its establishment as an upcoming, yet popular, settlement for tourism that started through an agreement between the Batwa and an individual entrepreneur from a neighbouring tribe.

Ethnographic village visits were conducted by the first author who also participated in daily activities permitted by the residents, workshops, conferences and project meetings. These visits enabled participant observation of day-to-day activities of the Batwa, as well as how the Batwa engaged with each other, neighbours, NGO staff and their environment.

In addition, the first author conducted 23 unstructured interviews with persons drawn from Batwa-NGOs (4), non-Batwa NGOs supporting Batwa (5), Uganda Wildlife Authority (4), local leaders (5), lodges that support the Batwa (2), researchers who have spent more than 20 years working around Bwindi (2) and one news reporter. Recurring topics during the interviews were descriptions of the Batwa by both Batwa and non-Batwa, daily practices and engagements with the Batwa, non-Batwa and their environment. Additional data, especially on discourses, was obtained through an extensive study of various documents (government and NGO reports, tourist blogs, social media posts (Facebook), websites that promoted the Batwa experience, reviews of the Batwa experience posted on TripAdvisor between 2016 and 2018, and newspaper articles reporting about the Batwa of Bwindi from 1988 to 2018 (accessed via LexisNexis database). Thematic analysis was conducted to identify the key patterns of ideas (Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, & Terry, 2019) arising from a critical reading and interpretation of both explicit and implicit information contained in the responses, gestures, reports and comments. Using NVIVO 12 software, we ran word frequency and text search queries. The results were organised into a word tree that guided the formulation of major themes.

4. Dominant Batwa narratives: Marginalised and victimised Batwa

In the papers, reports and media, we observed that the Batwa are described as passive victims of powerful forces of conservation and tourism development processes, marginalised through their eviction from the forest. Even when the Batwa are described as being involved in tourism, they are portrayed as mere objects of the tourist gaze other than active and engaged subjects negotiating this gaze (Laudati, 2010). The marginalisation narrative has become so popular, that Kawczynska (2014) pondered the possibility that the Batwa are the most marginalised people in Uganda. We will now dissect these discourses and explain how the Batwa are discursively observed as bio-ecologically unique, primitive victims, vulnerable and poor.

4.1. Bio-ecological uniqueness

In various scientific articles the Batwa have been delineated from other tribes by their physical/biological make up: their stature/height,

their facial features, and how they are supposed to live. Their relatively short stature, for example, is linked to forest habitation (Arnold, 2014; Fagny et al., 2015; Perry et al., 2014; Stafford & Garcia, 2016). The bio-ecological-cultural differentiation also appeared in metaphors used by some NGOs:

The forest is like an umbilical cord to the Batwa like it is to a child and its mother (...) Whatever is to be done for the Batwa should include forest access for the revival of the Batwa culture (Interview with UOBDU staff, 2017).

Expressions of distinctiveness linked to the Batwa's forest habitation were also implied in policy documents. According to the Uganda National Culture Policy of the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development [MGLSD], the term indigenous communities refers to “distinct tribal groups indigenous to a particular area” (MGLSD, 2006, p. 39). The emphasis on difference [variation] in relation to a particular environment seemed to emphasise that indigenous people like the Batwa are not capable of surviving away from forests (Zaninka, 2001).

4.2. Primitive subjects

Next to the assumption of the Batwa's bio-ecological uniqueness, the lifestyle of the Batwa is often described as primitive based on where they live, their dress code, and how they conduct their daily life. In local newspapers, some journalists compared the Batwa with other communities and described them as:

forest people who (...) continue to be discriminated against, because of their way of life that seems primitive to other communities (...) still lead a purely traditional way of life by hunting game meat and collecting fruits from the forests (...) do not seek medical care from the conventional health facilities, but use herbs to treat their ailments.

(Womakuyu & Sejjengo, 2010:16)

Another popular idea among NGOs is that the Batwa are incapable of saving food, money and other resources for future use. They only survive on subsistence means dominated by handouts from NGOs and philanthropists and dependence on nature. Banbury, Herkenhoff, and Subrahmanyam (2015) list begging as one of the multiple subsistence economies of the Batwa. Probably the most implicit description of the Batwa as people whose mindset is set on short-term survival is:

mostly uninterested in subsistence strategies requiring long-term investments, many Batwa chose economic activities with quick returns on labour ... day labourers, bards and performers in the countryside...

(Lewis, 2000, p. 5).

This discourse was also evident in the agreements that defined the relations between NGOs and the Batwa for particular projects, such as the land occupation agreement between the Batwa and BMCT. Section 3 (iv) of the agreement states that: “the beneficiary(s) is not allowed to sell or mortgage the demised land unless with a written consent by the Trust Administrator acting on behalf of the Trustees”. When asked about the reason behind such restrictions, most NGO staff justified these restrictions by saying that the Batwa could easily sell the land in exchange for alcohol (UPCLG, 2017, Interview with director of Batwa-led NGO 2, 2017).

In tourism, the primitive ‘image’ of the Batwa is marketed as an authentic lifestyle. Almost all tourism promotional materials (brochures, websites of tour operators and promoters of the Batwa tourism experience) marketed the Batwa experience as one of the ‘must do’ activities, after gorilla tracking. These advertisements are dominated by high-resolution coloured pictures of Batwa scantily dressed, ready to showcase their primitive life. On the website Batwaexperience.org tourists were encouraged to book, and experience “ecotourism at its best” where the displaced Batwa help you to take a step back in time to experience ancient life.

4.3. Victims

Tales of the eviction, displacement, landlessness and poverty of the Batwa abound in almost all scientific and media articles, conversations,

meetings, press conferences, tourism conferences, films and video clips about the Batwa. For example, the Unrepresented Nations & Peoples Organization [UNPO] cited National Public Radio [NPR]'s reporter, and stated that "when the Batwa forest people of southwest Uganda lost their forest, they lost their identity" (Burnett, 2012, p. 1). Academic scholars argue that the Batwa have been consumed by a powerful system and consortium of conservation and development corporations that have dispossessed them of their land and heritage (Kenrick & Lewis, 2004). Similar opinions dominate other scientific publications about the Batwa, (Balenger, Coppenger, Fried, & Kanchev, 2005; Laudati, 2010; Moncrieffe, 2008; Namara, 2006; Tumusiime et al., 2018b).

Within policy discourses, ethnic minorities have been reduced to groups of people marginalised by development processes. For example, the Ugandan Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development [MGLSD], classifies ethnic minorities like the Batwa as:

people who face a number of challenges including displacement from their homes of origin, disruption of their way of life, high levels of income poverty, (...) often excluded and marginalised in the development process.

MGLSD (2011, p. 17) the media too play a significant role in portraying the Batwa as victims of conservation, and especially gorilla tourism development. Media reporter Musinguzi (2016) explains that: in the 1990s, the Batwa became casualties of a battle to save forests when what they called home, the Mgahinga and Bwindi forests were protected as national parks (Musinguzi, 2016: 20).

4.4. Vulnerable and poor subjects

Most academic reports indicate that the Batwa are living in extreme poverty due to alienation from their basic resources – the forest – and due lack of other resources to fall back to (Lewis, 2000; Turyatunga, 2010). Lewis (2000, p. 20) asserts that the Batwa – "who owned the forest and had lived there for generations without destroying it or its wildlife." – became one of the poorest tribes solely because they were evicted. Similar narratives are also told by NGOs, CSOs and other activists. For example, the home page of the United Development Organization of the Batwa Development in Uganda [UOBDU] states that:

most were left landless and impoverished (...). Today, the Batwa experience ongoing erosion of their cultural, spiritual, and social traditions, along with widespread social, political, and economic marginalisation.

(UOBDU, 2017, p. 1)

In the media, a LexisNexis search of the terms Batwa and Bwindi returned 94 articles mainly highlighting the plight of the Batwa. Notably, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) published a newspaper article describing the Batwa's situation as follows:

several ramshackle huts of sticks and grass lie scattered among the boulders. (...) these are the homes of the Batwa. They have lived here in abject poverty since being expelled from the forests they lived in as part of a much lauded conservation programme in the 1990s.

(Trenchard & Marrier-d'Unienville, 2016, p. 5).

The performative effects of the dominant marginalisation narratives. Based on the dominant narratives about the Batwa, in general, we note that both academic and non-academic literature describe Batwa as victims of marginalisation, incapable of taking care of themselves and the future of their community. In short, passive subjects only occupying the subservient position in all their relations with others. This discursive reduction of Batwa to helpless victims had particular effects: it elicited sympathy, legitimised associated philanthropic projects, donations, and financial flows towards addressing the vulnerability of the Batwa.

Various 'help/support' schemes are in place to support the 'forgotten people': selling a book about the Batwa (Womakuyu & Sejjengo, 2010), volunteering trips and fundraising campaigns for a 'tribe in peril' (Blackburn, 2006; Mutebi, 2016; Scoon, 2016; Young, 2018) and financial flows. For example, in 2012 the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) invested 31,000 USD to train Batwa people to serve as guides and to improve lighting, walkways, and shelters along the Batwa trail (East African, 2012). The Bwindi Mgahinga Conservation

Trust spent 35,220 USD to support Batwa projects for the financial year 2013/2014 (Bwindi Mgahinga Conservation Trust, 2014). More recently, the Mbarara University of Science and Technology received 39,000 USD from the Indigenous Peoples Assistance Facility [IPAF] to build capacity of the Batwa for sustainable income generating enterprises including a Batwa forest experience trail for tourists in the southern part of Bwindi forest (Interview with Researcher, 2019). In addition, UOBDU together with two other local organisations; Pro-Biodiversity Conservationists in Uganda and Karamoja Women Cultural group received a grant of 49,000USD from World Bank to, among other things, build capacity of indigenous communities to engage with REDD + processes (World Bank, 2017).

All the media, academic and NGO reports that we analysed repetitively referred to the Batwa as 'landless people'. It is therefore no wonder that all the NGO's reports mentioned that they had bought or were planning to buy land for the Batwa, either in addition to or instead of giving handouts. The Bwindi Mgahinga Conservation Trust alone reported to have bought 400 acres for the Batwa and resettled 375 households between 1996 and 2015 (Baker & Brinckerhoff, 2015, p. 10). Yet, that was not all there was to say about the Batwa. Our ethnographic observations indicated that the Batwa were also actively involved in many other relations and activities.

5. Counter-narratives: Alternative Batwa realities

As soon as the first author arrived in the field many of the ideas and problems that dominated the Batwa realities 'on paper' were verified. Even the racist discourses from eco-literatures. People from neighbouring communities often pointed to the Batwa's physical and facial features, such as short stature and relatively hairy face, in attempts to explain how to identify the Batwa from others (Interview, transporter, 24.08.2017). Additionally, politicians (Interview, political leader, 18.07.2017), neighbouring communities and some Batwa (Interview, Batwa representative, 16.03.2017) indicated that Batwa children often dropped out of school while elders sold utensils and other donations for alcohol (Research Interviews with NGO staff, 23.07.2017; 24.07. 2017).

Even some Batwa referred to themselves as 'poorest of the poor' and 'marginalised'. This is illustrated by this excerpt from an interview with one of the leaders of a Batwa-founded NGO who indicated that:

I think that we the Batwa also have a weakness. I think that we could spend less than what we do on alcohol.

(Interview, leader Batwa-led NGO, 2018)

However, the fieldwork not only confirmed what has already been said about the Batwa, but also observed many Batwa as highly engaged and active people. This reality was reflected in stories and practices of the Batwa that portrayed them as forest ecology experts, tourism entrepreneurs, resource managers, community developers and political activists.

5.1. Forest ecology experts

Batwa contribute to various research projects by sharing their forest ecology expertise based on their interactions with various animals, plants, caves and waterfalls (Batwa Bwindi Forest Experience (BBFE) project meeting, February 2019). They share their knowledge on plants, animals, and products such as honey. As one of the Batwa elders employed by the ITFC explained: there is no part that I do not know about Bwindi, that is why I have been able to help many national and international researchers to attain their degrees.

(Interview with Batwa elder, Ruhija, 2019)

During meetings and conversations, Batwa emphasised their forest ecology expertise to challenge the ability of Uganda Wildlife Authority scientists and rangers to effectively understand and conserve the Bwindi forest. They frequently argued that those who studied ecology in the classroom could never be better conservationists than they, who spent many years in the forest (Conversation with Batwa elder, 25.08. 2017).

The forest ecology expertise of some of the Batwa was also recognised by an ecologist:

(...) he could provide accurate information to facilitate research (...) was an excellent guide (...) was often referred to as professor or GPS (...) was able to identify chimpanzee tools used for harvesting different types of honey (...) knew almost all the plants in Bwindi.

(Interview with Behavioural Ecologist, 19.10. 2018)

The second story was told by one of the UWA staff employed in the research and monitoring department, and confirmed by the research assistant. While commenting on the role of Batwa in research, the UWA staff recalled that:

a herd of elephants was getting closer to our camp deep in the forest, one of the Batwa on our team assured us that he could herd those elephants. (...) He got up, took some ash and engaged the hugest elephant in kind of a circus movement by whipping it at its buttocks. Indeed after a few rounds, the elephants moved. (Interview, UWA research and Monitoring staff, 25.08. 2017)

This expertise of the Batwa was acknowledged in 1991 by Allan Hamilton, who proposed that their knowledge of the forest could help to locate kidnaped tourists (Sengupta, Buncombe, & McCarthy, 1999). Other projects that have utilised the Batwa's expertise include the P3DM and Participatory Mapping by Batwa for the conservation of mountain gorillas in Bwindi (Haas & Muchemi, 2011), the Batwa Cultural Values project (Flora & Fauna International, 2013; Nuwamanya et al., 2015), and Kajobe (2007) research on the nesting biology of equatorial Afro-tropical stingless bees at Bwindi, as well as several other field activities of the Institute of Tropical Forest Conservation (ITFC) (Interview with ITFC and UWA staff, 2017; 2019). Beyond these narratives, the Batwa's ecological expertise was evident in how easily they guided us in the forest compared to the non-Batwa guides, never losing their way. In addition, during the village visits, the Batwa women eloquently explained about the various plants, their habitat and dyes that can be extracted from each plant to make crafts.

5.2. Tourism entrepreneurs

The Batwa were and are involved in developing, designing and selling product for tourism. Some Batwa also own and run tourism enterprises, either as individuals, groups or in partnership with other people. The enterprises include the Batwa forest experience, Batwa craft shops, and a Batwa homestay accommodation. This is illustrated by the following extract from a conversation with the Batwa of Sanuriro:

This (...) is our visitor centre. We sweep the floor so neatly and spread a special type of grass on the floor (...) and entertain our guests in this hall (...) guests have a choice to either pitch their tents in here or stay in our guest house over there.

(Conversation with Batwa women, 26.07. 2017)

Members of the same village explained that their vast knowledge of plants enabled them to produce more marketable souvenirs made with natural dyes (Conversation with Souvenir shop attendant, 26.07. 2017). These observations reflect another reality of people who draw on their experiences with the forest to innovate, create and form relations with other actors such as businesses, other community members and tourists.

5.3. Community developers

The Batwa have established and actively participate in Batwa-only NGOs and various associations. These Batwa-led NGOs have played an important role in establishing relationships and networks with other actors (donors, anthropologists and other researchers) to secure scholarships for Batwa students, purchase land for the Batwa, establish livelihood projects, as well as in negotiating policy changes and representing fellow Batwa in national and international dialogues (Group Interview, Kalehe, 2017). These institutions illustrate Batwa's self-organising capabilities.

Our observations of the Batwa's negotiations with other partners

revealed that the Batwa valued honesty, togetherness and sustainability. To illustrate these values, we draw on the response by one Batwa leader to the suggestion that the alcoholic Batwa should be excluded from the project benefits:

they are drunkards and careless but (...) we have to focus on their future potential, not on the current problem.

(Batwa leader, 11.06.2019)

Besides, some Batwa were engaged in activities such as mining, teaching, tourist guiding, stone quarrying and agriculture in addition to daily home chores and leisure activities. In all conversations, most of the Batwa constantly associated Batwa-ness with hard work, dynamism, precision, creativity and intelligence. Based on our field observations and interactions, we are inclined to agree to a great extent with their assertion.

5.4. Political activists

As said before, some activists, authors, media, community and Batwa people concluded that the Batwa are not politically active, because they do not hold any political position. These observations seem to be correct; we could not find examples of Batwa that are formally in a political position. Yet they were and are involved in political processes. Some of them indicated that they chose not to vie for political positions at the start, but rather to mobilise their colleagues to support the political applicant who demonstrated concerns for their issues. This position was confirmed by politicians: "these people are Ugandans, they vote" (Interview, Local Leader, 18.07. 2017).

In addition, Batwa have been and are still involved in several negotiations, advocacy campaigns and other engagements with politicians. For example, as early as 2009, Batwa expressed discontent with their conditions and made their intentions known to petition government over land (Baguma, 2009). In 2014, Harrisberg reported that:

two elder members of Uganda's Batwa tribe, travelled (...) on an eleven-hour bus ride (...) to see President Yoweri Museveni, and ask him, first hand, when they would be able to return to their home in the aptly named Bwindi Impenetrable Forest (...) They wanted reparation.

(Harrisberg, 2014, p. 1)

Since then, Batwa continued their engagements with government actors. In January 2018, the leaders of the Batwa Development Organisation wrote a letter to the Prime Minister of Uganda highlighting their concerns, and a request to "establish a special committee to critically look into the issues of the Batwa community in Uganda" (Semajeri, 2018, p.2). On 27 March 2018, the Prime Minister convened a meeting to discuss the March 2018 letter. Thereafter, a technical committee was constituted to further analyse Batwa issues with a view of replicating the process with other minority groups in Uganda (Semajeri, 2018). These events illustrate that Batwa's activism has contributed towards keeping the Batwa debate on the national agenda.

6. Conclusion and discussion: Agency reduction, performative effects and situational agency

In this paper we critically analysed the claim that the Batwa are the most marginalised people in Uganda. We looked at how discourses reduced the Batwa into passive victims of conservation and tourism development, and how the Batwa internalised and reproduced this version of Batwa-ness alongside an actively engaged Batwa-ness. We conclude that marginalisation is performed, has performative effects and is sometimes challenged through counter-narratives and practices.

6.1. The performativity of agency reduction/marginalisation discourse

The version of marginalised Batwa-ness has been produced through those narratives and practices that, using Mol's (2010) observation, give most credit to 'external forces' such as conservation and development actors while underrating the Batwa. The portrayal of the Batwa as a

specific, homogenous group of marginalised people discursively stripped them of any form of agency by depicting them as helpless victims, pushed to the margins of society through conservation and tourism development processes (Harrisberg, 2014; Laudati, 2010; Moncrieffe, 2008; Mukasa, 2017; Trenchard & Marrier-d'Unienville, 2016; Zaninka, 2001). Therefore, the most prominent effect of these dominant discourses is the production of a passive, marginalised, and helpless Batwa unwittingly following directions to stage or participate in activities purely designed by their oppressors (Laudati, 2010).

The Batwa have internalised some of these discourses and reproduced them by telling stories about their plight, either directly to tourists and other people or via social media. We further observe that agency reduction through often sensational, one-sided and stereotypical, reporting keeps certain practices and money flows in place, elicits sympathy and legitimises philanthropic projects and donations.

Our observations echo debates within the planning and development literatures where the ongoing discursive foregrounding of problems, failures and shortcomings are interpreted as instrumental to organisations (Mosse, 2005). Conservation and tourism development were thought to create win-win situations for local communities and conservation (Ruan & Xiao, 2003; Spenceley, 2012). This view has been challenged by some authors such as Roe and Elliott (2006), while others have totally dismissed this view as either a false promise or a false premise (Tumusiime, & Vedeld, 2012). Our nuanced analysis has indicated that the implementation of conservation, tourism and development interventions is not a straightforward process as it produces various realities that might not be fully reconciled. Rather, these dynamics are inherent in such processes. As Van Assche, Beunen, and Duineveld (2012, p. 578) argue:

Failures, in terms of local and regional development, are a necessity for the system to reproduce itself. (...) The answer to planning problems is more planning, and this necessitates the constant finding (and hence discursive creation) of planning problems (...).

For academics, agency reduction is a result of the discourses they help to reproduce, but also productive for reproducing certain claims made within critical scholarship. Academics, who, for example, are part of a wider discourse that is critical of conservation and development, who work in a tradition that constantly highlights the perversions of neoliberal governmentalities for local communities, will more likely focus their empirical work on these negative consequences (Büscher, Sullivan, Neves, Igoe, & Brockington, 2012; Igoe & Brockington, 2007) than on the adaptive capacities of communities.

Secondly, as Jean-Klein & Riles (2005:176) argue, research can be part of a focus on 'victims', which often involves co-construction, that is, "moral and analytical engagement with subaltern subjects in the field of study (...), which becomes the medium through which moral and social or political support is administered".

However, we reiterate that it is obvious that such one-sided accounts that tell single stories will not escape the pitfalls of agency reduction, such as further victimisation or, even worse, institutionalising victimisation and marginalisation, because all accounts, critical or otherwise, are performative (Jeffery & Candea, 2006). Following Jeffrey & Candea's (2006) observation, it is imperative that we highlight other perspectives, such as the Batwa's multiple agencies, instead of only dwelling on marginalisation.

6.2. Taking into account the Batwa's multiple situational agency

Agency reduction, we argued, can be seen as a way to legitimise practices of organisations (NGO's, governments) and academics. Since it is a self-reinforcing mechanism, other directions or alternative, more complex understandings of situations become overlooked or understudied (Van Assche et al., 2012, p. 579). Our deliberate attempt to provide a different understanding of the Batwa by means of an ethnographic study challenged previous reductionist narratives about the Batwa as objects of the tourist gaze (Laudati, 2010), or as being

marginalised to near extinction (Harrisberg, 2014; Stafford & Garcia, 2016; Trenchard & Marrier-d'Unienville, 2016; Tumushabe & Musiime, 2006). Although discourses have disempowering effects (Hancock & Georgiou, 2017), we note that agency can be discerned even in seeming passivity. For example, that the Batwa have contributed to the sustained enactment of the marginalisation narrative alongside other forms of Batwa-ness is, in our view, a manifestation of how particular relations enact agency, and others a lack of agency. Thus, in line with (Bergthaller, 2014), we argue that agency is not a property of subjects or organisations, but is enacted in discourses and practices of marginalisation as well as through active engagement. By deconstructing one-sided accounts of Batwa-ness, and analysing them as multiple, complex and enacted, enables us to view the Batwa as knowledgeable resourceful conservationists, amidst marginalisation. It is this kind of knowledge that could inform policymakers and NGOs, among others, to think about other modes of relating with the Batwa that acknowledge, enhance and utilise their existing conservation and ecological expertise.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Christine Ampumuza: Conceptualization, Writing - original draft.
Martijn Duineveld: Visualization, Supervision. **René van der Duim:** Supervision, Funding acquisition, Project administration.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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