

## Brand Positioning for Sub-Saharan Africa's Rural Tourism Development

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**Abstract:** Well-conceived and effectively managed rural tourism brand in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) can help build favourable reputation which enhances the confidence of tourists. The purpose of this paper is to formulate brand essence (functional and emotional benefits derivable from a brand) and brand position statement, for SSA's rural tourism development. This study conducted descriptive analysis of brand essence for SSA's rural tourism development. It is exploratory, rather than conclusive in nature. Functional benefits of SSA's rural tourism include her diverse natural and cultural attributes, friendliness of population, climatic conditions, and unique rural landscape. Her emotional benefits include the 'feel-good' factor when tourists are offered the 'rural idyll' experience not found in any other continent or sub-continent, or buy local foods and souvenirs. This positive feeling of visiting SSA's rural areas adds richness and depth to the tourists' experience of being involved with her brand. The knowledge of rural tourism brand essence can help SSA's local communities, local governments and national governments to communicate not just the functional values, but also the emotional values of visiting rural areas to tourists. This will lead to particular relationships between local communities and stakeholders to enact these emotional values or rewards. SSA's rural tourism brand positioning statement could read: *"To tourists seeking nostalgic experiences, novelty and escape, rural SSA offers authentic rural landscape, 'rural idyll' experience, and amazing friendly populations"*.

**Keywords:** Brand essence, brand positioning, rural tourism, tourism development, sub-Saharan Africa

### 1. Introduction

Rural tourism is an international subject. Researchers all over the world (such as Dong, Wang, Morais & Brooks, 2013; Ezeuduji, 2015; Hernández-Maestro & González-Benito, 2013; Fleischer & Felsenstein, 2000; Fleischer & Pizam, 1997; Sharpley, 2002; Wilson, Fesenmaier, Fesenmaier & Van Es, 2001) have documented evidences from different countries that rural tourism is a suitable form of socio-economic development in rural areas and requires collaboration of stakeholders for success. Fleischer and Pizam (1997), in Israel, claimed that rural tourism is in many but not in all aspects, similar throughout the world, as it is generally seen as an alternative means of income. However, Dong et al. (2013), in USA, posited that rural tourism is different in various cultural contexts, due to tourists' broad travel preferences (from outdoor activities to shopping and dining in restaurants). Sharpley (2002), in Cyprus, stated that rural tourism is essential in peripheral rural areas where traditional agrarian industries have declined. Fleischer and Felsenstein (2000), in Israel, and Hernández-Maestro and González-Benito (2013), in Spain, posited that public assistance for rural tourism is able to generate considerable returns. Wilson et al. (2001), in USA, concluded that rural tourism development and entrepreneurship cannot function in the absence of participation and collaboration of businesspersons who are directly or indirectly involved in tourism.

Many studies on rural tourism in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) have enquired the implications of tourism development on local communities and challenges of development, analysis of the internal and external environment of rural tourism development, factors that are critical for successful community-based tourism, market segmentation of rural tourists, and competitive strategies with which SSA can compete in the global tourism marketplace (such as Akama & Kieti, 2007; Ezeuduji, 2015; Ezeuduji & Rid, 2011; Kibicho, 2008; Manyara & Jones, 2007; Musasa & Mago, 2014; Rid, Ezeuduji & Proebstl, 2014; Sotiriadis & Nduna, 2014). These studies also reached the conclusion that rural tourism has been embraced as a viable form of socio-economic development in rural areas, and also require collaboration of rural tourism stakeholders and capability-building for success. This study however will enquire into SSA's rural tourism brand essence and possible brand position statement which could be incorporated into its integrated marketing

communications, as none was available at the time this study was conducted. A clear outline of functional and emotional benefits derivable from visiting SSA's rural areas by tourists will help form basis for focused and consistent integrated marketing communications with tourists and publics.

Integrated marketing communications are defined by Shultz and Kitchen (2000: 65) as "a strategic business process used to plan, develop, execute and evaluate coordinated measurable, persuasive brand communication programmes over time with consumers, customers, prospects, and other targeted, relevant external and internal audiences". The subject matter of the marketing communication is brands, and the intention is persuasion and sometimes reinforcing behaviour. As brands are the organization's repository of core meanings and values, it provides coherence and consistency in how and what the organization communicates (O'Sullivan, 2010). SSA's rural tourism may therefore position its integrated marketing communications, as forces to reinforce behaviour (as in advertising), or as a way of achieving mutual understanding between SSA and her publics (as in public relations) in order to justify and preserve its asset of reputation. This study conducted descriptive analysis of brand essence for SSA's rural tourism development. It is exploratory, rather than conclusive, with concepts that are generality in nature, giving rise to study limitations, but can serve as a guide for future conclusive studies. SSA is chosen for this study as Rogerson (2006) and Spencely (2008) have highlighted the importance of maximising tourism projects and their local development impact in Africa, and Rogerson and Rogerson (2010) called for further research to explore the understanding of local economic development policy and applied practices (rural tourism, for example) across SSA. Rural tourism brand essence formulation will support focused and consistent integrated rural tourism marketing communications in SSA. Rural tourism involves tourists' visits to a rural area to experience the rural landscapes and participate in a rural way of life (Ezeuduji, 2014). African rural tourism comprising visits by tourists to rural Africa to experience the culture and natural environment of the local populations is considered one of the strategies within the management portfolio of sustainable rural development (Ezeuduji & Rid, 2011).

## **2. Key Assets for Tourism in Sub-Saharan Africa – an Overview**

Africa, especially sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), in comparison to other continents is peculiar for the great diversity of her environment Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Her people are very diverse, even within a particular country, and this diversity offers a rich mixture of vibrant cultures. Her scenery, sunshine, vegetation, wildlife, hot deserts, mountains, lakes, and beaches create a high diversity in her environment, which cannot be replaced by any other part of the world (Ankomah & Crompton, 1990; Filani, 1975). The varied ecology of SSA as a sub-region has endowed her rural places with much concentrations of wildlife. SSA designates all African countries, excluding northern Africa, found fully or partially situated south of the Sahara, including Sudan and South Sudan (United Nations Statistics Division, 2011). SSA also includes the African island states that are offshore of the eastern and western coasts, namely, the Indian and Atlantic Oceans (Dieke, 2013). People and attractions drive tourism and these attractions represent how unique and diversified the cultures and geographical features are. For SSA, the cultures and geographical resources combine to provide her with significant tourism development opportunities (Ankomah & Crompton, 1990). Countries found in SSA include Uganda, Rwanda, Kenya, situated in the East of Africa; Nigeria, Ghana and The Gambia, situated in the West of Africa; and South Africa, Namibia, Zambia, and Botswana, in the Southern Africa.

**Tourists' Motivationsto Visit Rural SSA and Environmental Implications:** Rural SSA is endowed with unique natural and cultural attributes with which it can create and position itself favorably in the rural tourism marketplace. These natural attributes include forest types and diverse savannah, wildlife species, and rural landscape. The cultural attributes include the local music, traditional dances, rural way of life with myths and legends, local festivals, traditional rites and local handicrafts. It is therefore common knowledge that mostly Europeans and North Americans perceive rural SSA as having the 'rural idyll' symbols and these stand in huge contrast to their countries of origin (Ezeuduji, 2015). There is dearth of literature on the motivational dimensions of tourists visiting rural SSA. However, Table 1 shows the documented motivational dimensions of rural tourists to SSA. Therefore, some evidence exists that tourists visiting SSA are seeking 'rural idyll' experiences. Ezeuduji (2015), in his analysis of key success factors for rural tourism development in SSA posited tourists' demand to be seeking for 'rural idyll' symbols which are authentic rural lifestyle and rural experience, differentiated and diverse natural and cultural heritage. He further stated that the major dimensions of rural tourism market competition are authenticity of experience, quality of offerings, and

marketing communications. Analysis done by Ezeuduji (2015) further suggested that superior competitive position in the global rural tourism marketplace can be achieved through clear value position, operational excellence, and strong customer relations. He further recommended that SSA could have a unique selling proposition within the international tourism industry by offering unique experience setting schemes through events, planned and organized in rural areas highlighting rural image and cultural attributes within natural space.

**Table 1: Motivational dimensions of tourists visiting rural SSA**

| Motivational variables  | Broad category/<br>Dimensions | Authors and place of study   |
|---|-------------------------------|--|
| a. learn about endangered species, learn about animals, learn about plants, for educational reasons             | Knowledge seeking             | Kruger and Saayman (2010): travel motivations of local tourists to Kruger and Tsitsikamma National Parks in South Africa |
| b. to attend conferences, to attend events, hiking  | Activities                    |  |
| c. accommodation and facilities, brand of parks, climate of location, hiking trails                             | Park attributes               |  |
| d. family recreation, grew up in park   | Nostalgia                     |  |
| e. explore new destinations, socializing with friends   | Novelty                       |  |
| f. to experience wildlife, experience different species, learn about nature, appreciation of endangered species | Nature experience             |  |
| g. photograph animals, photograph plants  | Photography                   |  |
| h. routine vacation, relaxation, get away   | Escape and relaxation         |  |
| i. natural areas, history, traditions and culture, rural landscape  | Heritage and nature           |  |
| j. stay among locals, strong feelings of experience, local food, rural way of life                              | Authentic rural experience    |  |
| k. local languages, traditional dances, myths and legends, local handicrafts                                    | Learning                      |  |
| l. Sun, sand and sea  | Sun-beach experience          |  |

Butler and Hall (1998: 117) suggest four main characteristics of rural imaging processes, namely: (a) the development of a critical mass of facilities and visitor attractions; (b) the hosting of events and festivals; (c) the development of rural tourism strategies and policies which are often associated with new and renewed regional tourism organizations and the related development of regional marketing and promotion campaigns; and (d) the development of leisure and cultural services and projects that support regional marketing and tourism efforts. Hence, rural tourism strategy that focuses on hosting of events and festivals (with associated regional marketing and promotion campaigns) and reflect cultural attributes of a region can become a way of showcasing local community life and its integration with the landscape (forming the critical mass of facilities and visitor attractions). This is often an important part of the rural tourism marketing image and branding of the rural tourism products and services (Roberts & Hall, 2001). It can be done without compromising or damaging the way of life around which the local attraction is derived (Edwards, Fernandes, Fox, & Vaughan, 2000). Events are globally considered important motivator of tourism, essential in the development and marketing plans of most nations or destinations, and becoming increasingly critical for destination competitiveness. The emergence and growth of event tourism sector in the tourism industry has been described as spectacular (Getz, 2008). Tourists do constitute a potential market for planned events and the tourism industry is a definitive stakeholder in their success and attractiveness. However, not all events are tourism oriented and some may fear the potential negative impacts associated with adopting marketing orientation to planning and hosting events. It is nonetheless noted that events (including tourism oriented ones) play roles of fostering national identities, cultural development, community-building, and

village or urban renewal (Getz, 2008). A successful event planning in rural sub-Saharan Africa will need marketing knowledge of the motivational dimensions of visitors, as outlined earlier in this section.

Rural tourism development in developing nations might raise environmental concern. Roberts and Hall (2001) posited that in order to achieve a sustainable tourism growth, regions that are marketing themselves as tourist destinations are advised to monitor how the regional environmental quality may be put at risk by planned processes of tourism development. Strategic environmental assessment (SEA) and Environmental impact assessment (EIA) procedures were put together by the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) to maintain the desired environmental standards (ECA, 2005). In SSA, all tourism development processes should go through the EIA process. Monitoring and keeping environmental objectives in the long run, however, is quite a challenging task for any developing country, especially in SSA. Spenceley and Meyer (2012) reviewed a research on tourism development assessment of impacts and concluded that one of the major trends is the need to develop new techniques and resources for monitoring and evaluating tourism impacts (Spenceley & Meyer, 2012). Therefore, ensuring sufficient resources and monitoring of environmental standards for rural tourism development as prescribed by EIA in the earlier stages of tourism development will require stakeholders' cooperation based on four pillars: (a) monitoring and evaluation by governmental bodies, e.g. by the National Environmental Agencies in SSA, (2) the programmatic work of not-for-profit organizations in rural areas of SSA, (3) the local communities, e.g. planning and implementing community-based natural resource management (CBNRM), and (4) tour operators' and investors' commitment and thoughtfully negotiated environmental agreement (see Simpson, 2008).

It is vital to note that rural tourism schemes are quite heavily dependent on healthy environmental conditions and local communities. Therefore local communities, with the support of the other rural tourism stakeholders (national governments, not-for-profit organizations, tourism organizations, etc.) will have to decide the limits of acceptable change and the visitor carrying capacity regarding their specific natural environment (Ezeuduji & Rid, 2011). Heeding to this call will help in establishing and fulfilling sustainable and healthy social environment and the requirements of ecotourism products outlined by Wright (1994: 40). One of the examples of successful ecotourism projects in sub-Saharan African region is the Southern African Bird Atlas project (SABAP), Africa's biggest public participation biodiversity database which covers six southern African countries (Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland and Zimbabwe) where positive influences were reported on scientific endeavour (in terms of research output) and societal awareness of scientific issues through public participation in research (Harrison, Underhill, & Barnard, 2008). Another example can be found in the sacred Kaya Kinondo forest Ecotourism project of the Digo sub-group of the Mijikenda people situated by the south Kenya coast (East Africa), a biological and cultural significant site, where income (with the locals' high involvement) from the project have provided a huge support to a wide range of community projects, and the project does not transgress local community's cultural rights (Nyamweru & Kameru, 2008). It is noted by Roberts and Hall (2001) that regions marketing themselves as tourist destinations should be able to have a clear understanding of the ecological limits or acceptable range of change from tourism, and also should be able to monitor how the regional environmental quality can be placed at risk by new tourism development. SSA nations have National Environment Agencies charged with environmental impact assessment. These agencies can support local communities willing to be involved in rural tourism to maintain the desired environmental standards (Ezeuduji & Rid, 2011).

However, a study in South Africa (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004) indicated the challenges to be overcome if rural tourism sector is to achieve its goals. These include a lack of financial capital and capacity at the local government and community level, the difficulties of putting into operations, community-based rural tourism, and the dearth of management and entrepreneurial skills. Ezeuduji (2015) hence emphasized on creating a rural tourism stakeholder network and collaboration in SSA which will help institutional capacity-building (training in product excellence, operational excellence, and customer service). This will subsequently empower the local actors in the long term. He also suggested a creation of balance between implementing bottom-up values (i.e. local values and community ownership) and the accompanying need to utilize top-down resources (i.e. national governments and not-for-profit organizations being partners for business skills training and initial financing). With a cooperative and functional stakeholder network in place, it is easier to effectively develop a vision and strategy emanating from the values of the local community.

### 3. Functional and Emotional Benefits of SSA's Rural Tourism – Brand Essence

Brand concept is quite complex and in many cases, it is not apparent to managers, however Davidson (1997: 376) developed a tool that can help managers to learn and appreciate brand nature, called 'branding iceberg'. Davidson (1997) noted that branding iceberg has about 15% visible part above the water and about 85% invisible part beneath the water. Managers often discuss the visible part of brands (i.e. the name or logo) seen to the customer, rather than the key assets, competencies, and unseen value-adding processes inside the organization that will give the brand its competitive advantage and ensure reliable quality levels. These brand elements that are below the water encompass not just marketing factors but also company-wide factors such as the values, intellect and culture of the organization. de Chernatony & Harris (2010) therefore posited that it is only by taking a planned perspective that the roles of these diverse domains can be integrated to make sure that the brand is a holistic entity, whereby the claims that are implicit in the visible components are subsequently backed by the invisible systems. As such, brand management needs to be regarded as an integrated business process (Rubinstein, 1996) that is consistently performed across all business functions and areas.

From a consumer's perspective, brands do help to identify the product/producer behind the product and simplify the buying process. According to Berry (2000), knowledge about brands, especially the ones with which the consumer has previous experience, reduces search costs and reduces perceived risk (financial, functional, social, etc.). To develop a brand requires time and money (investment), which if properly managed should yield healthy rewards. To move from a commodity to a brand, the core offering needs to be augmented with added values. These are the extra functional or emotional benefits that differentiate the organization's brand from the core commodity or other competitors' brands (de Chernatony & Harris, 2010). The knowledge of the nature of the brand also known as brand essence (functional and emotional benefits derivable from a brand) can help employees of an organization to communicate not just the functional values, but also the emotional values of the brand to consumers leading to particular relationships between staff and stakeholders to enact these emotional values or rewards (de Chernatony & Harris, 2010). As stated by some authors, consumers do not simply pay for services; they pay for service brands (de Chernatony & Harris, 2010; Ezeuduji, Lete, Correia & Taylor, 2014). As Kapferer (1997) pointed out, the value of a brand emanates from consumers' awareness of it, their trust in it and the image and reputation it has for them. Brands offer consumers various tangible and intangible benefits over unbranded offerings and, through these, the value of the companies owning the brands increases. Successful brands are those that represent valuable marketing assets through the coherent blending of marketing resources. Through well-conceived and effectively managed brands, firms can build favorable reputations which enhance the confidence of buyers and users (de Chernatony & Harris, 2010). deChernatony and McDonald (1998: 20) defined a successful brand as "an identifiable product, service, person or place, augmented in such a way that the customer or consumer perceives relevant, unique, added values which match their needs most closely".

As stated earlier, SSA's rural tourism does have a global reputation of offering tourists the rural idyll experience that is not found in any other continent or sub-continent (Ezeuduji, 2015). This image has complex physical and socio-psychological attributes and beliefs that are attached to it. For example, tourists coming from Europe or Northern America are well aware that the 'rurality' of their homes is quite different from that of SSA. These tourists do largely see SSA rural areas as being more 'rurally' rustic and authentic than their homes' rural areas (Ezeuduji & Rid, 2011). 'Rurality' as a concept is used as an expression that different rural areas are not being homogeneously defined. 'Rurality' is defined by Chigbu (2013:815) as "a condition of place-based homeliness shared by people with common ancestry or heritage and who inhabit traditional, culturally defined areas or places statutorily recognized to be rural". It has been pointed out that SSA's rural spaces are richly endowed with physical assets which include natural attributes (such as rich wildlife species, savannah and forest types, rural landscape, etc.) and historical attributes (such as archaeological sites, pre- and post-colonial sites, etc.). Intangible assets in SSA rural places include invaluable cultural attributes (such as local music, traditional dances, local festivals and rites, rural way of life, myths and legends, local handicrafts, etc.). It can then be said that SSA offers her tourists the functional benefits of experiencing her diverse natural and cultural attributes, friendliness of population, climatic conditions, and unique rural landscape. Tourists are also offered the emotional benefits of going home with the 'feel-good' factor after having that particular 'rural idyll' experience not found in any other continent or sub-continent,

or after buying local foods and souvenirs. This positive feeling of visiting SSA's rural areas adds richness and depth to the tourists' experience of being involved with her brand. As Keller (2003) posited, consumers often develop a relationship with brands as they are avenues to express their personality, self-image and beliefs. In essence, by consuming certain types of products/brands, tourists convey how they would like to be, identifying themselves with their rural origins – where it all began. Functional and emotional benefits derived from consuming a particular product or service, or visiting a particular destination are described as the 'brand essence' of the product, service (de Chernatony & Harris, 2010), or destination. A brand can also be described as a promise of particular benefits and value. Brand essence is the single most compelling thing we can say about the brand that differentiates it from competitor brands as perceived by the consumer. The most powerful brand essences are rooted in a fundamental consumer need. Tourists' need to find their original selves and identify themselves with their rural origins – where it all began, is in line with Kruger and Saayman's (2010) findings of tourists' motivations of knowledge seeking, nostalgia, novelty and escape, and Rid et al. (2014) reported tourists' motivational dimensions of heritage and nature, authentic rural experience, and learning in SSA. Brands, therefore, involve physical and socio-psychological attributes and beliefs. Consumers may refer to the symbolic meanings of products/brands to construe and preserve their identity, for example, consumers may purchase rural tourism products to show they care for the local people. Brands may, therefore, play a role in the construction of consumer identity (Elliot & Wattanasuran, 1998). This behaviour often leads to consumer loyalty allowing for the development of relationships (de Chernatony & Harris, 2010).

**Brand Positioning for SSA's Rural Tourism:** From the previous discussion, it is evident that SSA's rural tourism has a distinctive offering for tourists. It has been noted that brand essence is the single most compelling thing we can say about the brand that differentiates it from competitor brands as perceived by the consumer. For SSA's rural tourism, this most compelling thing is the 'rural idyll' experience, which manifests itself in the friendliness of the populations, unique and authentic rural landscape, rural way of life, natural and cultural attributes. These can fulfill tourists' functional needs and offer them the 'feel good' factor they so much desire. Communicating the brand essence of SSA's rural tourism to tourists will require a brand positioning statement. Rossiter and Percy's (1996) structuring for a brand positioning statement will be particularly useful for SSA's rural tourists and rural tourism stakeholders to know who the SSA's rural tourism brand is for, what the brand is and what it offers. They (Rossiter & Percy) argued that a good positioning statement should have the structure: 1. To .....(target audience) ....., 2. .... is the brand of .... (category) ....., 3. that offers ..... (benefit) .....

This positioning structure is concerned with three linkages: (1) the link between the brand and the user, (2) the link between the brand and the category need, and (3) the link between the brand and the benefits.

SSA's brand essence (the functional and emotional benefits) can thus be linked to its competitive advantages of local populations' friendliness, authentic rural landscape and 'rural idyll' experience. Using Rossiter and Percy's (1996) structuring for a brand position statement, SSA's rural tourism brand position statement could read: *"To tourists seeking nostalgic experiences, novelty and escape, rural SSA offers authentic rural landscape, 'rural idyll' experience, and amazing friendly populations"*.

This position statement communicates core functional benefits (friendliness of the populations, authentic rural landscape, rural way of life, natural and cultural attributes.) and emotional benefit ('rural idyll' experience) of SSA's rural tourism brand. Offering 'rural idyll' experience in a destination can be done through building dynamic capabilities with the help of an engaged rural tourism workforce who can in turn engage the tourists. Trainings in best practice service quality showcasing the 'spirit of Africa' or African values are critically important for this development. Hence, focusing on initiatives that communicate and drive the values and behaviors that SSA's rural tourism will like to see reflected in its employees, as they deliver this brand promise to tourists, is vital for success. The trainings should be aimed at assisting operational staff in delivering consistent, quality, memorable service experiences and to enable all functional areas to engage and coach their front line staff. SSA's rural tourism may therefore integrate this brand position statement into its integrated marketing communications to reinforce tourist behavior (e.g., in advertising), and as a way to achieve mutual understanding between SSA's rural tourism and herpublics (e.g., in public relations) in her continual endeavor to justify and preserve her assets of reputation.

#### 4. Conclusion

SSA's rural tourism potential for competitive advantage can be derived through developing dynamic capabilities aligned to tourists' value position. Having identified the rural tourists' value position built around authentic rural experience, SSA rural tourism can then position itself to design and continuously align her internal processes to match tourists' wants and values according to changing environments and markets. SSA could have a unique selling proposition within the international tourism industry by offering unique experience setting schemes through events organized in rural areas incorporating cultural attributes within natural space (Ezeuduji, 2015). If SSA's rural tourism is to strive after new capabilities; a strong brand that addresses tourists' value position (rural tourists seeking nostalgic experiences, novelty and escape) can help attract repeat-visit tourists, while supporting its brand promise of 'rural idyll' experience. Communicating SSA's rural tourism to tourists requires knowledge of changing customer profiles and specific market segments' needs. Adventure tourists, 'slow' tourists and rural events' tourists will visit rural spaces, but are likely to have different wants and needs. The knowledge of rural tourism brand essence can help SSA's local communities, local governments and national governments to communicate not just the functional values, but also the emotional values of visiting rural areas to tourists. This will lead to particular relationships between local communities and stakeholders to enact these emotional values or rewards, and attract repeat-visit tourists.

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