

A Visual Narrative of Batwa Indigenous Artifacts: An Ethnography of Material Culture

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Abstract

Material culture may cut across all items owned by people including a big assortment of tangible things like artifacts, cuisine, architecture, music, dance, folklore, religion and rituals. The Batwa lived in forests and largely depended on local technologies and traditional methods of living, and this formed their rich material culture. Citing a case of the Batwa (singular: Mutwa) on Mt Mgahinga in Kisoro, southwestern Uganda, this case study was conducted following four objectives: to identify different Batwa material culture items; analyse how they were produced; examine their functionality; and use them to inspire the execution of painterly visual narratives. The study pursued a qualitative approach, where a case study as the research design and employed ethnography as one of the research methods was used. We set out to study the Batwa living on the foothills of Mt Mgahinga and occupying two “cells” of Rukeri and Nyagakenke villages. Five men and 12 women were selected purposively and participant observation, unstructured interviews and photography were employed to capture the different activities that took place during the expedition. The findings revealed the processes behind the different items of material culture, for example, the making of fire, bows and arrows, spears, skins, bamboo containers, traditional traps and snares, and architectural designs. We also conducted discussions on the uses of each of the items. The study found that most of the Batwa material culture has been lost and most present-day Batwa have inadequate knowledge about their traditional material culture. The findings showed that this is so because the elderly Batwa that orally bear this knowledge have greatly reduced in number. Batwa have certain spiritual and religious ties with forests. It is therefore pertinent that the Government of Uganda looks into the possibility of resettling them outside the forest environment, and also benchmark to see how indigenous ethnic groups in other countries are handled.

Keywords: *Visual narrative, Batwa, material culture, artifacts, indigenous, ethnography.*

INTRODUCTION

Background

Material culture may cut across all items owned by people; and this includes a big assortment of tangible things. Anything visible that can be felt or seen qualifies as material culture unless it is

human. Items in this category range from things as big as the buildings we see all around us to some of the smallest items we use in our everyday life, such as jewellery (Serva, 2021).

As Aronin, Hornsby, Kilianska-Pryzbylo and Grazyna (2018) observe, material culture involves the concrete social aspect of life that is based on the architecture and objects in people's surroundings, normally including how they are used, consumed and created, along with the exchange of objects and ways of conduct, as well as the customs and rites in which these objects are involved. Non-concrete situations such as smell, sound and some ceremonies are also considered by certain scholars.

The understanding of painting taken through a studio experimentation process informs the production of paintings inspired by the Batwa material culture that would help in documenting this culture. A visual representation of the attributes of the Batwa's material culture, therefore, constitutes an assorted collection of paintings executed with one main intention: to educate the reader about the Batwa, a people whose heritage is at stake. This, in turn, is hoped to preserve these rich cultural practices.

Batwa are described as a group of African pygmies who are notably short and named after their short stature (Schlebusch, 2017). Batwa lived in forests and largely depended on local technologies and traditional methods of living. They produced most of the equipment and gargets used in their homes that were mostly makeshifts. This practice enabled them to have a rich history of material culture. Unfortunately, when the Batwa were evicted from forests by the government to protect gorillas and different bird species, some of their material culture was lost.

Based on the importance of material culture in a people's identity, construction and survival, there is need to establish the different material items (current and extinct) that define the Batwa. Such information provides a basis to explore how painting can be used to preserve material culture from total extinction. This case study presents the preliminary findings of a pilot study that aimed at identifying the different Batwa material culture items, analysed how they are produced and examined their mechanisms.

Problem Statement

Batwa pygmies are believed to be the original ancient dwellers of the exotic Bwindi Impenetrable Forest. Upon their removal from the Bwindi, Mgahinga, Echuya and Semuliki forests in 1991, the Batwa pygmies were left with no means of economic survival, faced discrimination by other communities, and suffered poverty and the loss of some of their culture and way of life. This is the situation still face today, and is dragging them to the edge of extinction. The Batwa are currently mainly scattered throughout the districts of Kisoro, Kabale, Kanungu, Bundibugyo, Mbarara, Ntungamo, Lwengo and Mubende. A pilot study conducted through the ethnographic method of data collection revealed some of their material culture items which are visually narrated for posterity.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study were to; identify different Batwa material culture items, analyse how different Batwa material culture items were produced and examine the mechanisms of different Batwa material culture items.

LITERATURE

In archaeology and anthropology, material culture refers to how people in given cultures, communities, belief systems or historical periods understand objects or artifacts. Material culture involves objects used by people for survival, to relate with others, to show a sense of belonging or improve the mental state, as well as their position in society (Victor, 2004).

Dant (1999) posits that there is a distinction between human beings and animals, which is manifested in humans' creativity, application of and life with many other material objects, as well as having a proper posture, a bigger brain, and the ability to use language. The artificial environment improves the natural environment that establishes a material setting that facilitates interactions. Dant further asserts that there is an integration of both natural and artificial things into human culture through their representation of the cultural social relations, as well as representation of other people, bearing society's ideas, values and emotions.

Material culture provides a tool for comprehending the societal and cultural aspects that created and utilise the objects. Culture is understood as repeated patterns of people's behaviour and related objects that give a reflection of what they believe in, their customary and traditional way of life, and their values. What constitutes behaviour are language, which is in the form of verbal and written signs, for example, folk talk and proverbs; traditional ways of life, such as the way of dressing, religious beliefs, rituals like music and dance, and rites that are observed in a given culture etc. Artefacts comprise generationally transmitted artistic representations, like pottery, paintings, sculpture, architecture, written literature, and the tools required for making them (Berger, 2014).

Material culture is important because items survive long after their creators have died. Items of material culture give new generations material from which to learn the past. These comprise tools, weaponry, utensils, machines, adornments, art, houses, monuments, written archives, spiritual images, and dressing, among other wonderful artifacts that are man-made (Ellingtonsafaris Blog, 2020) . This study is, therefore, intended to identify and document the Batwa material culture items through visual narratives to provide insights to future generations since a number of them will not be available in the future considering the rate at which Batwa material culture is fading.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research approach is qualitative, which involved collecting data typically from the participants' setting, which is the Batwa trail of Mgahinga in Kisoro district. The process of research involved emerging questions and collecting data from participants, which defines a method for obtaining non-numerical data.

Research Design

The study used a case study as the research design and this method helped to gather in-depth and detailed information about different Batwa material culture items. The researcher visited the Batwa villages and spent more than eight hours with them. The study employed ethnography as a

method of data collection, which enabled participant observation as the Batwa were doing various activities during the trail. In the process, the researcher observed different materials and how they were used. The researcher directly observed every step and exercise and intently listened to participants' conversations as we carried out the expedition on the trail. Unstructured interviews were also conducted to solicit detailed information about the meanings and knowledge of how to use the material cultural items.

Study Population

The exercise was carried out with Batwa who live on the foothills of Mt Mgahinga, composed of two cells – Rukeri village, with a population of 201, and Nyagakenke village, with a population of 127, making a total of 328 Batwa people.




KEY
 Mgahinga National Park

Figure 1: The map above shows Mgahinga National Park in Kisoro district, where the study was carried out.

Source: Sabilom Kenya Tours and Safaris 2022 – adapted.

Sample Size

The sample size consisted of a group of five men and 12 women who were selected purposively from among the Batwa living on the foothills of Mt Mgahinga who were thought to have inherent values and material culture knowledge. These participants were carefully selected and presented to the researcher by the Uganda Wildlife Authority (AWA) through their office in Kisoro.

Data Collection Methods

The researcher employed the ethnographic method of data collection where participant observation was involved, and exercising some activities like hunting skills. Group discussions were also conducted where the researcher was able to obtain information about Batwa material culture through an expedition on the Batwa trail. A still camera was used to capture images indicating some of the Batwa material culture items and activities. A video recorder was also used to record and store information to help the researcher recall the exercises that were done during transcription. Unstructured interviews were conducted to capture in-depth information about the Batwa material culture during group discussions.

Research Tools

An unstructured interview guide was employed following what the Batwa were narrating while on the trail. Photographs were taken during the trail to capture different material culture items to help the researcher's visual narratives.

Data Analysis

The data obtained through the trail was transcribed and analysed descriptively following the set objectives of the study to form reliable conclusions. The photographs were sorted according to objectives and placed in their respective areas based on the information attached to them in the findings.

FINDINGS

This section presents the findings on the range of material culture items used by the Batwa, how they are produced, and how they are used. This is based on the data collected during the trail as revealed through the ethnographic observation. This section is presented in line with the set objectives of this case study as shown below:

Different Batwa material culture items

The objects included medicine, bows and arrows, spears, wooden cups, bamboo and utensils traps. These are presented below:



Figure 2: A Mutwa carrying a container made from bamboo and a spear



Figure 3: A bow, arrow and spear crafted by the Batwa.



Figure 4: An ant's nest ('igishishiri')



Figure 5: A Mutwa man chewing a local medicine called 'murondorondo'.



Figure 6: A Mutwa man showing how to set up a snare.

Architecture



Figure 7: Batwa standing in front of their grass-thatched house.

The Batwa culture is also characterised by unique architectural skills, which existed right from the time they lived in the forests. They also had knowledge about utilising nature according to their needs, such as living in caves.

How Batwa material culture items are produced

Unstructured interviews revealed how the objects mentioned in the previous section are produced through unique processes. The following section contain descriptions of the processes.

Bow and arrow production process

The Batwa explained how a bow is made from a flexible but strong stick called *umuheto*, stretched with a string called *umugozi* which is made from a plant called *umunaaba*. They said that the arrowhead (*umwambi*) is made through a process called *ukucura* (blacksmithing) and then fitted to a light stick that would easily be projected at an animal during a hunt.

Spear production

They said that the *ikigyembe* and *umuhunda* parts of the spear are, like a bow, made through *ukucura/okuheesha* (blacksmithing).

Skins

The Batwa said that they treated an animal skin to make it soft by smearing it with Sodom apple. In this way, they made it comfortable to wear.

Bamboo containers

The Batwa would go to forests and look for mature bamboo trees, which they would cut down to make various types of containers.

Making a fire



Figure 8: Batwa making a fire

They used to make a fire by using a special tree called *wambuba* as the pointer and the red-hot poker tree (*Erythrina abyssinica*) (*ekiko*) as the base. They would rub the pointer against the base until fire was produced.

Architectural skills

The Batwa used bendable tree branches and giant fern leaves and sometimes broad leaves as the major materials for constructing makeshift houses.

Traditional traps and snares

They used to make traps and snares from strong bendable tree branches and strong creeping plants. The creeping plants would be used to make strings that would strangle the trapped animals.

Reappropriation of caves

The Batwa had knowledge about utilising the found natural physical features such as caves. These caves, such as the Garama cave, which the Batwa call *Urutare rwa Batwa*, would be refurbished to make them comfortable and habitable. Most of the activities and ritual ceremonies would take place in these caves. In the Garama cave, the Batwa used to meet their king, Buuki Mugogo, bringing him items they had collected from the forest and meat from their hunting expeditions.



Figure 9: A structure under which the Garama cave is situated.



Figure 10: Batwa women demonstrating how they used to be in the cave.

How Batwa material culture items are used

At the starting point of the trail, the Batwa explained how they use some of these materials.



Figure 11: At the beginning of the Batwa trail in Mgahinga National Park.

Bow and arrows



Figure 12: A Mutwa demonstrating how to use a bow and arrow.

The Batwa used projectiles in their fights. They knew that if they used an arrow and pulled it back on a bowstring, it would hit a target at a distance. The bow and arrow was a vital weapon for hunting, fighting and protection.

Spear

The spear being a projectile, the Batwa used to throw it during hunting or fighting with other ethnic groups in attempts to secure supremacy and or for purposes of defence. During hunting, a spear (*icuumu*) was used to kill buffalos and elephants, which were the major sources of proteins and skins to cover themselves.

Skins

The Batwa used skins as clothing and as blankets for covering themselves at night, for protecting the young ones from the cold, and for performing rituals.

Medicine

The Batwa had a lot of knowledge about different plants and animals. They made their own medicine from plants and animals, especially to cure diseases that would not be cured by imported medicine like *uruckyerere* (which attacks legs and, in its mature stage, both legs are covered by wounds from which fluid oozes out). They would cure this disease using the ant nest *igishishiri* with ants in it. They would crush the nest with their hands and mix the resultant product with cow ghee. The medicine thus produced would be smeared on the wound, and within a few days the wound would dry.

Bamboo containers

The Batwa used bamboo containers to fetch water, harvest honey and, sometimes, for cooking.



Figure 13: A Mutwa man demonstrating the use of a bamboo container to fetch water.

Fire

The Batwa used fire to warm themselves, roast and smoke meat, cook food, and warm their houses. They used fire for protection against wild animals as well.

Architecture

The Batwa used makeshift houses for shelter and as stores for their possessions and other items, for example, harvests and game meat. These houses would also serve as protection from wild animals at night. Their houses were also used as shrines where after a harvest or hunt, the Batwa would place the products of the harvest or hunt in the shrines to perform food rituals for their demi-gods.

Also, whenever the Batwa lost a relative, they would bury the deceased in a house. After the burial, they would make a medicine (*isubyo*) from two types of plants, the Cofiata plant (*umunanira*) and the Maeser tree (*umuhanga guhanga byose*). They would mix those two plants with water and give the mixture to all the people in that home to drink and smear the residues on their skins, after which they would abandon the home. The purpose of this ritual was to stop the spirit of the dead from coming back to disorganise the members of the family.

Traditional traps and snares

Traps would be laid by experienced hunters. A hole would be dug, bamboo stems would be sharpened like pegs, and a string made from a creeping plant would be tied to a flexible and strong stick and guided into the hole. In the hole, the bamboo stems would be placed in such a way that when an animal stepped on them inadvertently, the string would tighten itself around the animal's leg or neck. The hunters would then come to the trap and strangle or spear the catch.

DISCUSSION

This section will be guided by the objectives of this study, which are: to identify the Batwa material culture items; analyse how different Batwa material culture items were produced; and examine the mechanism of the different Batwa material culture items.

Different Batwa material culture items

Different Batwa material cultural items were identified through the study. Through the ethnographic study that was conducted during the trail, several Batwa material culture items were established, such as bow and arrow, spear, medicine, bamboo containers, skins, architecture, traditional traps and snares. These material culture items not only define the cultural identity of

the Batwa. In relation to this, Cliffsnotes (2022) defines material culture as the tangible objects, resources and places used by humans to identify their cultural belonging. It was observed that the material culture items are either part of the environment (Berger, 2016) or were crafted by the inhabitants to meet their social well-being (Fauna & Flora International, 2013). In connection with this, the researcher clusters the material culture into items that are part of the Batwa material culture but were naturally found within their locality, such as caves and medicine. On the other hand, there are material culture items that the Batwa crafted to aid their way of life, such as bamboo containers, spears, and bows and arrows, among others. All these clusters form the tangible material culture (Nilson & Thorell, 2018). At the end of the expedition at the Garama cave, a group of 12 women entertained the researcher, showcasing their songs and dances as part of their intangible material culture (Nicholas, 2017). These material culture items are proof of man's ability to not only tame the environment (Duan, Han, Wang, & Liu, 2018) but also exhibit his supremacy over the environment he lives in (Bassey, 2019). In agreement with this, the researcher adds that the Batwa co-existed with the animals and different bird species in forests for a long time without one depleting the other. This formed a strong foundation for their material culture, thus clearly testifying to the adeptness of these people at sustaining the environment in which they lived. The researcher also argues that the Batwa material culture items cannot be viewed only from the perspective of how they help them to manoeuvre their day-to-day life activities but also as items that can help define a better understanding and appreciation of this group of people. (Stephenson, Barton, Carrington, & Doerin, 2015). Material culture and human behaviours can be viewed as two sides of the same coin.

How Batwa material culture items are produced

From the expedition that took place on the Batwa trail, the researcher, through observation and listening to conversations, ascertained how several material culture items were produced. The Batwa explained how they produced spears, bows and arrows, bamboo containers, medicine, traps and houses, and also how they renovated caves to make them habitable. Production is not only a rich ingredient of the Batwa heritage but is also predominant in other groups in the world, such as the Lanoh of Malaysia, who were also renowned for producing several items out of bamboo, including musical instruments such as the *chanting*, the *tenuan* mat, baskets and the *kenaid* combs (Isa, 2015).

The items produced by this group of people are responsible for their rich cultural identity and, hence, there is a need to enforce documentation of these production processes for future use. In order to meet the need for well-being, technology and material culture have to be transformed. Technology and material culture have become a cultural heritage that is essential for well-being (Guindon, 2015) . Based on Guindon's argument, the researcher asserts that the Batwa demonstrate strong ingenuity when it comes to putting in place mechanisms to aid their survival and well-being, such as setting traps to capture animals for food and using beetles as a source of poison to put on arrows in hunting.

It should also be noted that the Batwa produced arrows and spears through blacksmithing which, in a sense, was a unique technique for producing iron-based items from natural resources such as iron ore. Becoming a blacksmith required many years of study and dedication. (Working the flame, 2019) . Much as the blacksmithing process took a long time and dedication to master, Gibbons, (2013) asserts that the Batwa made arrowheads at the local blacksmiths'. During the trail, the researcher discovered that the Batwa were not only credited with the introduction of iron processing through blacksmithing, but fire-making as well. All this unique knowledge aided the production of effective items necessary for their survival and, hence, forming a strong cultural heritage.

How Batwa material culture items are used

One of the aspects to consider is the significance of objects in terms of their use and treatment, and what their meaning is to us. It is worth noting that certain objects represent the history of the family, one's gender, social status, and ethnicity. Studies of material culture pay attention not only to the objects themselves but also to what those objects mean to people (Hirst, 2018) . During the trail, it was revealed that the Batwa material culture items were not just mere items to be admired but also had functional purposes. The functionality of the material culture items defines meaning and identity to the Batwa: the bow and arrow for hunting; the medicines to treat various diseases; the houses and caves for storing items and for shelter, besides serving as burial sites for the dead; the skins for clothing; and many more. All these combine to constitute the ethnic identity of the Batwa people. The researcher also argues that material culture study seeks out the reasons for the creation of things, their appearance, and what they are used for. If material

culture items cannot bring out the answers to these questions, it would be hard to interpret the identity of the Batwa people. These items serve as a meaning-making mode in identity construction (Piprani, 2011). The researcher, therefore, opines that the Batwa material culture contains intimate information about the social welfare and behaviours of these people. The material culture items and how they are used clearly stipulates their way of life and the common practices that the Batwa engage in.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

The Batwa are spiritually and religiously connected to the forests. They revere particular areas in the forests and consider them essential to their existence. Every area within the forests is named in terms of its history and in relation to the mythical ancestral world. There is, therefore, need for the government to look into compensating the Batwa since they have lost their ancestral land and they currently have nowhere to develop themselves in terms of practising agriculture, building their own schools and hospitals as well as other community service centres to avoid extinction. Secondly, the Batwa should be allowed to coexist with gorillas and bird species so that they do not forever lose their material culture that is attached to forests. There is a case against which the Ugandan government can benchmark – that of the Sami people, who today are found in large swathes of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Kola Peninsula in Russia. The Sami are the only people in these countries who are allowed to hunt reindeer and to have their own hospitals and schools, dictionary and language. Following this example would enable the Ugandan government to ensure that the Batwa do not get extinct.

Recommendations

Communities of Bakiga, Bafumbira and others who live alongside the Batwa should understand them and learn how to live with them. The Batwa should not be discriminated against and marginalised because they are human beings like any other human being. The government should consider resettling them and sensitising them, especially so that they can adapt to the current trend of living. Batwa material culture should be preserved by establishing clubs where

the Batwa can gather and share constructive ideas on how to develop themselves. Some of the Batwa material culture should be registered with the Uganda Registration Services Bureau (URSB) so that the Batwa can own their material culture legally and are able to benefit from their culture beyond the present. The Batwa should be allowed access to the forests to collect items such as medicine. This would ensure that they are not completely detached from forests and also enable them to keep practising some of the rituals they used to perform to their demi-gods in the forests.

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