

## RESEARCH ARTICLE



# Tourism and Tradition: How Community-Based and Ethnic Tourism Are Reshaping Chin Traditional Tattoos in Myanmar

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**Abstract**

In response to the increasing interest in local cultures and the preservation of heritage, the tourism industry has evolved beyond traditional leisure and recreation activities. This evolution has led to a surge in initiatives aimed at safeguarding the cultural identity, heritage, and traditions of developing nations. In the context of chin state in Myanmar, the resurgence of traditional face tattoos, once less prevalent, can be attributed to the rising tourism activity in the region. This study highlights how facial tattoos have been commercialized within the tourism sector, influenced by religious and ethnic dynamics. The commodification of these facial tattoos has paradoxically contributed to the preservation of this cultural practice among the Chin tribes by imbuing it with symbolic significance in the realm of ethnic tourism. Moreover, the processes of ethnic tourism have played a crucial role in reviving indigenous knowledge and promoting cultural sustainability in Myanmar. By intertwining tourism initiatives with the preservation of cultural heritage, ethnic tourism has emerged as a vehicle for revitalizing traditional practices and fostering a deeper appreciation for the cultural identity of the chin tribes. This intertwining of tourism and cultural sustainability underscores the importance of ethnically engaging with local communities and traditions to ensure the authenticity and longevity of cultural heritage in the face of evolving tourism landscapes.

Keywords: commercialization, cultural sustainability, heritage preservation, tattoos, tourism

**1. Introduction**

Recently, tourism has transitioned into a robust industry contributing significantly to global socioeconomic development, a trend exemplified in the scholarly work of Holden [1]. As accessibility to tourism has been democratized since the 1960s, it has increasingly been recognized as a vehicle for economic advancement and modernization in developing nations. The multifaceted nature of tourism development allows for examination through both economic and political lenses, often scrutinized under a neoliberal framework. Scholars like Nevins and Peluso [2] have observed a prevalent dedication to an economic enhancement approach through neoliberal strategies in many Southeast Asian countries. In this context, there is a persistent question concerning whether such a paradigm results in the anticipated economic and communal growth. Notably, within Myanmar's cultural mosaic and natural splendor, the government has strategically leveraged tourism over the past decade as a catalyst for economic prosperity. The landscape of Chin State, the poorest among Myanmar's ethnic states, showcases a rich tapestry of local tribes amid undisturbed natural beauty—a region characterized by stability in governance and substantial cultural diversity. Lacking significant natural resources, Chin State has historically attracted less attention from Myanmar's military administration, resulting in pockets of economic impoverishment and limited infrastructural development.

Moreover, the state's recent focus on tourism as a strategic development tool underscores the urgency for improved infrastructure, water, and electricity systems, and a holistic community upliftment approach. Recognizing the blend of cultural significance and economic potential, this research uniquely delves into integrating community-based tourism (CBT) in Chin State, spotlighting Saw Lawng Village in Kanpetlet township as a pioneer CBT hub. This study delves into the nuances of CBT development in Chin State, emphasizing engagements with diverse stakeholders encompassing the native Chin ethnic community, hoteliers, civil society organizations, and the

tourist populace of Saw Lawng village. Particularly significant is the study's attempt to unravel the intricate layers of ethnic identity promotion, cultural commodification, and the overarching theme of social and cultural sustainability, exemplified through the lens of CBT activities in the village's context.

With Saw Lawng Village standing adjacent to the majestic Khaw Nu M'cung National Park, colloquially known as Mount Victoria, and heralded as the inaugural CBT community since 2016, this initiative has been a collaborative effort steered financially by Forever Top Travels & Tours Company in technical partnership with ActionAid Myanmar, an international non-governmental organization (INGO). Initially centered on establishing traditional eco-lodges for tourist accommodations, the evolution of CBT in Saw Lawng Village has seen an expansion to embrace additional cultural offerings such as traditional dance performances, folklore presentations, and authentic local culinary experiences—all managed by local community members to showcase Chin cultural heritage to visiting tourists. Moreover, residents have found supplemental sources of income through CBT engagement, including roles as cleaning staff in the community lodge. This research endeavor is poised to uncover the emergent dimensions of social and cultural identities intertwined within CBT activities in the ethnic tourism landscape of Chin State, Myanmar. The paper's objective is to explore the impact of tourism on cultural heritage preservation in Chin State, Myanmar. It mainly focuses on the resurgence of traditional face tattoos and the commodification of cultural practices within the tourism sector. The study aims to understand how ethnic tourism contributes to the revival of indigenous knowledge and promotes cultural sustainability in the region.

## 2. Literature Review

The concept of CBT, coined by Murphy in 1985, relates to tourism and the development of local communities [5]. He suggests that the community is crucial in driving CBT to achieve sustainable rather than exploitative and destructive tourism. Thus, community members should mainly initiate CBT to generate collective benefits for all community members. Meanwhile, CBT is expected to bring significant changes to the village regarding social and cultural preservation, economic development, environmental sustainability, and equal benefit-sharing. In this circumstance, Murphy argues that the community must hold significant power to achieve social, cultural, and environmental conservation, including economic growth in the community society. Timothy Hvenegaard conducted his research in 1993 at Doi Inthanon, where many ethnic hill tribes coexist with their natural environment—his focus is mainly on the benefits of ecotourism and positive changes in the conservation process [6]. The findings revealed that the local community's perception, motivation, and interaction with tourists are critical to tourism development. Thus, he argued that local knowledge, attitude, and practice, which comes from myth, legend, story, and narrative, should be included in tourism studies. Taking advantage of Murphy, several scholars [7] have reflected that community-driven tourism ecotourism in Langkawi, Malaysia, is based on the inspiration and active participation of local entrepreneurs who are community members. They work together to achieve trustworthiness, benefit-sharing, environmental conservation, and economic growth in their culture. Indeed, this literature reveals the critical role of local entrepreneurs in community-driven tourism regarding opportunities and challenges.

Telfer and Shapley [8] assert that tourism has begun to include beneficial community development options for many developing countries worldwide. For example, the tourism industry promotes goods and services that offer more opportunities for the local community and strengthen the regional economy. At the same time, tourism can enhance infrastructure development because it is a vital source of employment, income, foreign exchange, and wealth distribution from the more affluent countries. Many scholars argue that tourism can increase economic development and environmental conservation, an idea that emerged in the global environmental movement in the late 1960s. Dolezal and Trupp [9] also argue that tourism has embraced economic growth and job creation. Still, it leads to inequality regarding access to financial benefits and resource control in the community. It has been expected to gain foreign currency to generate rapid economic development. However, it also brings power domination, environmental destruction, cultural alienation, loss of control over local

resources, and ethnic identity crisis among host communities. Consequently, it has still not been noted how the ethnic people perceived the meaning of development and compromised tourism as their way of development.

### 2.1. Cultural Commodification as Ethnic Tourism

Primarily, the term "ethnic" has its historical development [10]. Ethnicity means a minority group in the context of the nation-state. It means ethnic people have less economic, political, and social power. Meanwhile, "ethnicity" is about relationships in everyday interactions. Ethnic groups have less political, financial, and social power than mainstream group(s) in the society or country. However, when ethnic groups become culturally commodified, they have less control over relations. However, they have different strategies for power negotiation [11]. According to the existing studies, some scholars have already studied the meaning of tourism in a different culture and social context [12,13], the connection between ethnic people and their traditional practices [14,15], and the representation of culture in tourism setting and how it is perceived [16]. In this circumstance, most tourism scholars argue that the ways of life of ethnic people have been defined by tour operators, outsiders of ethnic people. Consequently, ethnic culture and their home have always been portrayed as a simple, un-spoilt, or untouched society.

By contrast, Erik Cohen argued that ethnic tourism is a means of development in developing countries [17]. Ethnic tourism brings tourism services - roads, hotels, and transportation- to meet the tourists' desires and create a high level of tourist satisfaction while they stay at the destination. Moreover, Nash also argues that tourism development brings 'live performances' of tourism through a cross-culture interaction between the hosts and tourists [18]. It can be called the 'touristic process' of how tourism is systematically developed and what incentives are being prepared for tourists. Importantly, it is relevant to ethnic tourism in China [19]. Chin has emerged to protect the cultures of minorities and minority cultural values of ethnicity.

Consequently, ethnic culture reemerges as a marketable, profitable tourist attraction in developing countries. In this way, ethnic tourism has been expected to innovate to reconstruct ethnicity, redefine ethnic boundaries, and reintroduce, display, maintain, and preserve sustainable knowledge of ethnic people. In addition, ethnic tourism also emphasizes commodification in tourism development [20] and cultural commodification [21]. According to Cohen, many ethnic people from Northern Thailand get involved in ethnic tourism as the owners of homestays, trekking, and cultural presentations. It reflects the work of Mac Cannell [22], who argued that ethnic culture becomes a commodity and 'the tourist gaze' by Urry [23]. Indeed, commodification emerges as the 'reconstructing ethnicity' process in tourism development. In this way, the locals will maintain and preserve their traditions by presenting them to tourists for their satisfaction and attracting more visitors soon. Following these arguments, Erik Cohen sees how the locals who 'play the natives' produce the tourists' image, mainly through cultural dances and arts [24]. Significantly, ethnic skills have become a commercial product, and they are essential factors in the ethnic tourism of Northern Thailand. The products have become very popular because local ethnic entrepreneurs have produced them and are widely advertised by the media. Besides, cultural dance becomes a commodity for tourists to experience the ethnic culture and the way of life. Critically, it provided lots of meaning for ethnic people as well. For instance, dance and movement are the politics of culture [25], dance is a powerful tool for reshaping national identity, dance, and activity [26], and dance is an intellectual politic rather than creating cultural subjects or 'invented traditions' [27].

Moreover, dance can be seen as an expression and practice of power relations, protest, and resistance in society [28], particularly in ethnicity, national identity, gender, and class society. Thus, cultural dance expresses and reconstructs ethnic identity, cultural politics, aesthetics, and ritual practice. Artistic presentation can create new meanings for local people or cultural identity, self-representation, and interpretation.

### 3. Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative research technique to investigate the effects of community-based tourism (CBT) on the commodification of culture and socio-economic development in Saw Lawng Village, Chin State, Myanmar. The selection of key informants was done using a snowball sampling strategy, a non-probabilistic method particularly suitable for exploratory research [29]. This method entails the selection of initial participants who subsequently refer more participants, continuing until the necessary sample size is achieved. This approach particularly successfully investigates specialized communities where possible members are interconnected [30]. The initial participants were selected based on recommendations from community leaders and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with knowledge and experience in cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) initiatives. Each original participant subsequently referred more individuals who were either active in or knew about the CBT activities until the desired sample size was reached. The study consisted of a sample size of 20 individuals who were either directly or indirectly involved in community-based tourism (CBT) activities. This sample included four staff members from tour operations that support CBT, two members from the hotelier committee, three local tour guides, three representatives from local government institutions, and five representatives from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that promote CBT. The data were gathered via individual, semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Each interview ranged from 45 to 60 minutes and occurred in a secluded location within the hamlet to guarantee the participants' ease and secrecy. An interview guide with a semi-structured format was utilized, which included discussions on cultural presentation, the effects of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), and Indigenous knowledge. The interviews were recorded with the participant's permission and transcribed word-for-word for analysis.

The researcher engaged in participant observation during the high tourist season in February 2019, explicitly studying community-based tourism (CBT) activities in Saw Lawng Village and eco-tourism activities at Khaw Nu M'cung National Park. The observations were conducted to comprehend Chin's traditional way of life, livelihood activities, and interactions with tourists. The data were subjected to thematic analysis to detect recurring themes and patterns. The interview transcripts were coded accordingly, and thorough field notes were taken to record observational data. These field notes were then compared with the interview data to increase the validity of the findings.

The research sought to examine the dynamics of cultural representation in community-based tourism (CBT) activities, the development of local knowledge in ethnic tourism, the involvement of the local ethnic community in CBT, and the effects of CBT on the social and cultural identity of the village. By adhering to these comprehensive instructions, another researcher can reproduce the methods and acquire an understanding of the cultural and socio-economic effects of CBT in a comparable community setting.

### 4. Results and Discussion

Tourism in Myanmar has been perceived as a tool for development that can contribute to the development of society, culture, and economy and preserve the environment. In many places worldwide, tourism can create job opportunities, generate income, and bring economic growth for people to reduce poverty. In the case of Myanmar, tourism has recently been recognized as an essential mechanism for poverty reduction and income generation for local people. Recently, the government invited national and transnational investors to invest in the tourism sector by proposing tax exemption and allowing international investors to hold 100% ownership [31]. For instance, the Chin state government sees the tourism industry as a sector offering economic diversification outside deforestation and agriculture. Ecotourism has historically been the focus of tourism in Chin State. More local attractions and cultural heritage need to be promoted. Growing tourism has the potential to lessen poverty. Instead of being entrepreneurial, most of the community involvement in tourism has been passive and takes the form of income sharing. As a result of field interviews, CBT development in Chin State might positively contribute to the community's growth and conservation of natural and cultural resources with adequate planning, high levels of community engagement, and community capacity strengthening. The development of CBT can simultaneously give visitors authentic and lasting experiences.

Additionally, locals could accommodate traditional house and bed and breakfast accommodations, which are just opportunities for them and other social and economic well-being of its residents through selling their goods like costumes, trinkets, and agricultural products. Locals could participate directly in various economic opportunities, such as tour guides, porters, and interpreters. Improvements in sociocultural sustainability, long-term support for Chin State economic growth, and a more sustainable lifestyle diversification with high living standards, followed by the construction of basic infrastructure like transit systems, hotels, and other facilities, can be further benefits. Significantly, Chin women's facial tattoos have become a tourism commodity in Chin State's tourism signature.

#### **4.1. Ethnic Tourism as A Cultural Commodification**

Significantly, the study found that local Chin ethnic people directly engage with CBT in the village through various tourism activities. For instance, the villagers present "chin traditional wine" making. Most traditional wine production is led by women and sold in the CBT lodge. Chin traditional wine is produced locally from millet seeds, sticky rice, and rice. With a combination of alcoholic grape juice and lemonade, the flavor is almost identical. Traditional Chin wine is a crucial component of Chin culture. So, the conventional chin wine is one of the most critical items to incorporate into the everyday life of the villagers and a welcoming drink to host the guests in the village. Significantly, the production of local wine is compromised with the indigenous knowledge of the Chin ethnic people. After the Chin people converted to Christianity from animism, very few people produced traditional wine because the local churches prohibited wine production. As a result, the indigenous way of conventional wine production has nearly disappeared, but it has returned after the villagers started the CBT in the village. For example, the older people explained and demonstrated to the tourists in the town how to make a traditional wine. As a result, a new generation can learn the traditional winemaking process in touristic activity. The latest generation especially understands how to preserve eco-friendly indigenous seeds with the Chin state and conserve biodiversity for environmental sustainability.

On the other hand, traditional dances are significant in Chin culture and the people in Chin state. The Chin people are incredibly proud of their diverse traditional dance styles based on their tribal lifestyle. Typically, many chin dances are innovated and linked to seasonal festivals and ceremonial events like Chin National Day, harvesting festival, hunting together, and funeral service. When they present cultural dance to tourists at night, they usually serve traditional wine and explain the process of conventional winemaking by telling stories about the ways of life of the ethnic people in the community. Therefore, tourists can learn indigenous knowledge and learn about the way of life of the ethnic Chin people in the community.

#### **4.2. Revival of Chin Facial Tattoos**

Among cultural commodifications in Chin ethnic tourism, Chin women in the Khaw Num Tung national area are famous for facial tattoos. This custom stands for Chin women's beauty, strength, and bravery. Tattoo needles can be made out of thorns or bamboo skewers. The tattoo ink is produced from lard, herbs, soot, and ox bile. In the past, most Chin women had tattoos on their faces, which was particularly common in Mindat, Kanpetlet, and Paletwa townships. The tattoo designs vary depending on the ethnic group a person belongs to. Due to CBT in the Chin state, many Chin customs and traditions have been reconstructed to present in the CBT.

Interestingly, the traditional ritual presentation related to Chin traditional facial tattoos reemerged in the tourism community. Facial tattoos have become less eminent since the 1960s, but they have emerged in tourism presentations, traditional customs, and ritual presentations to tourists. For instance, the local guides usually presented the oral history and cosmology of native Chin people, which were probated by the state and Christianity. Indeed, Chin facial tattoos are an organic form of body art that is absorbed from the roots, grass shoots, and leaves to create tattoo designs (Figure 1). The grass shoots are put at the end and serve as a bandage and natural healing cover in addition to adding color and functioning as a disinfectant. Sharp cane thorns apply the mixture to the face; they pierce the skin to

produce the design. As access to Chin State improves and tourists begin to trickle in, women with prominent facial tattoos have become the star attraction for many tourists.



**Figure 2.** Permanent facial tattoos of Chin



**Figure 1.** Painting facial tattoos of Chin Women

#### 4.3. Ethnic Tourism as A resistance Strategy

Despite the fascination the facial tattoos have for outsiders, the Myanmar military government forbade the practice, and the younger generation has little interest in it. The military government of Burma prohibited face tattooing during the U Nay Win era in the 1960s as part of a campaign to eradicate traditional practices that deviated from the Bamar norm. Similarly, Missionaries in China also denounced the practice as barbaric. It has been thought that 90% of the Chin people in Chin State are Christians. In terms of percentage, Chin State has the highest proportion of Christians in Myanmar. Rev. Arthur Carson, an American Baptist missionary, arrived in 1899 and established a mission station at Haka, the current capital of Chin state. They converted the Chin people to Christianity and the gospel, and many new converts took on new traditions imported by the missionaries [32]. Given their increased exposure to the outside world, many young Chin do not find face tattoos attractive or fashionable. However, a new generation of tourists can enjoy facial tattoos by applying ink painting on the face instead of permanent tattoos ( Figure 2). Therefore, ethnic tourism brings a priceless benefit and experience of sustainability and cultural revival in the Chin State of Myanmar. Chin women's tattoos are reconstructed in different forms of tourism attraction.

Meanwhile, many chin traditional practices have reemerged in tourism activity and become business opportunities for the local community. For instance, traditional houses have been built to accommodate tourists and allow them to enjoy local and traditional practices in the community. Community-based tourism and conventional ways of culture presentative can bring holistic cultural preservation to a new generation. Thus, traditional practices and native indigenous knowledge should not be neglected or ignored in the tourism industry. It is a crucial foundational activity for everyone to preserve and promote the traditional ways of life of the native people.

On the other hand, ethnic tourism brings a resistance strategy to encounter religious domination in the Chin state. For example, ethnic tourism introduces indigenous ways of living of the ethnic people to the tourists as tourism commodities. Typically, ethnic people face multiple threats from social, economic, and political under the state and religion in the society. Mostly, they face discrimination and are marginalized by the state or religious institutions, not practicing their indigenous ways of living and cultural presentation in their land. Their rights have been limited to representation in the political institution and denied improving their existence and self-development. For instance, many indigenous ways of life have been prohibited in Christian society because it has taught that it is associated with evil and sins. In this circumstance, some indigenous ways of living are re-emerged as tourism commodifies.

Meanwhile, some families are starting to take pride in their adorned grandmothers, with their homes proudly exhibiting photos of the tattooed women posing in their houses. Photographers, journalists, and historians travel to Chin State to capture the vanishing custom. As a result, chin facial tattoos become a chin identity in Myanmar and an essential commodity in Khaw Nu M'cun National Park of the southern Chin state, Myanmar. It is evident that the revival of culture is not just a tourism commodity; it also introduces a new space to study the resistance strategy of ethnic communities under state and religious domination. It can be called "the weapons of the weak," critiqued by James Scott [33]. By adopting the critics of James Scott, the revival of traditional tattoos in temporary ink presents a resistance strategy for ethnic Chin people rather than a tourism commodity in Myanmar. Therefore, the resistance strategy can be studied through the indigenous knowledge of ethnic people in tourism studies that reflects cultural sustainability in modern society.

## 5. Conclusions

Community-based tourism (CBT) activities play a vital role in fostering the emergence and preservation of social and cultural identity within local communities, particularly in the context of ethnic tourism. Engaging community members in tourism initiatives through CBT provides a platform for showcasing unique cultural heritage and traditional practices to visitors, enhancing mutual understanding and appreciation. Through active participation in CBT, community members deepen their connection to their social and cultural identity, recognizing the importance of preserving and promoting their heritage. This exchange of cultural information enriches visitors' experiences, nurtures a sense of pride and identity within the community, and highlights the value of cultural practices for future generations.

Within the realm of ethnic tourism, CBT activities serve as a conduit for the transmission of indigenous knowledge within the community, revitalizing traditional practices, rituals, and crafts that were at risk of disappearing. The collaborative efforts of community members in developing and managing tourism projects strengthen social bonds and cultivate a collective identity and solidarity among the community. The case study of Saw Lawng village in Chin State illustrates how the commodification of traditional chin tattoos in Myanmar has positively and negatively impacted the Chin tribes, showcasing the complex interplay between economic opportunities and cultural preservation.

While the increased interest in chin tattoos among tourists has helped preserve this cultural practice as a symbol of identity, legitimate concerns exist about the potential dilution of authenticity and cultural significance as commercialization grows. Balancing economic benefits with cultural heritage preservation is critical for sustaining Chin cultural traditions in the face of evolving tourism trends. Therefore, promoting sustainable tourism practices that prioritize community involvement, environmental conservation, and the safeguarding of cultural heritage is essential for ensuring the long-term vitality and authenticity of Chin cultural identity within the context of ethnic tourism.

## Author Contributions

**SVB:** Conceptualization, Data Curation, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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