



Tourism, Modernisation and Cultural Loss at the Brikama Craft Market in The Gambia, Africa

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Abstract

Taking the Brikama Craft Market in The Gambia as its ethnographic field study, this paper examines a contemporary African manifestation of the “sad tropics” that Lévi-Strauss lamented: a once-authentic site of cultural production and sociality that is being rapidly altered by state-led modernisation and tourism-development initiatives. The recent relocation of the market to a purpose-built “modern” complex, intended to make it more attractive to international tourists, has paradoxically eroded its lived authenticity, displaced long-established artisans, and accelerated the commodification and standardisation of traditional crafts. Through this Gambian example, the study illustrates how the global tourism-modernity nexus continues to produce new “tristes tropiques” in the 21st century: spaces where economic “progress” and the tourist gaze jointly contribute to cultural loss, even as they promise development and visibility. The research, conducted through qualitative interviews with market stakeholders, uncovers a dual reality: infrastructural enhancements present possible economic advantages but also threaten to commodify cultural assets and marginalise traditional craftspeople. Modernisation theory was employed to evaluate these dynamics, emphasising the conflicts between advancement and conservation. The results emphasized the necessity of a culturally attuned approach to development. The Brikama Craft Market, notwithstanding its difficulties, persists as a vibrant repository of Gambian identity and creativity.

Keywords: Tristes Tropiques, cultural commodification, craft heritage, tourism-driven modernisation, tourism ethnography, The Gambia, Tropical Africa

Introduction

In 1955, Claude Lévi-Strauss closed *Tristes Tropiques* with a lament that still resonates seven decades later: the world is growing smaller, more uniform, and culturally poorer with every advance of what we call “progress.” The melancholy he diagnosed in the Amazonian interior was never confined to one continent or one century. Today, the same irreversible transformation of authentic cultural worlds into sanitised, consumable spectacles is unfolding in thousands of villages, markets, and heritage sites across the tropic’s Global South, driven no longer by colonial explorers but by the intertwined forces of state-led modernisation and international tourism.

West Africa offers some of the clearest contemporary illustrations of this process. Traditional craft markets once spontaneous, socially embedded spaces where woodcarvers, weavers, potters, and jewellers reproduced both objects and community, have become strategic targets for “upgrading” projects that promise economic growth and greater visibility to foreign visitors. New concrete complexes, fixed stalls, ticketed entrances, and curated product lines replace the dusty, noisy, negotiable atmospheres that originally lent these markets their distinctive character. The stated goal is development; the frequent outcome is a peculiar kind of loss that leaves artisans, residents, and even some tourists feeling that something essential has vanished.

The Brikama Craft Market in The Gambia stands as both a microcosm of Gambian cultural heritage and economic ingenuity and an emblematic case. Founded as a longstanding institution in the early 1970s on an open plot beside the highway south of the capital, Brikama has evolved from a modest gathering of local artisans and grown organically into one of West Africa’s most vibrant centres of traditional craftsmanship and intercultural encounter; a bustling hub that attracts both domestic visitors and international tourists. For decades, the market played a crucial role in sustaining traditional art forms and embodied a living Gambian aesthetic: Mandinka woodcarvers working alongside Wolof tailors and Jola batik artists, apprentices learning beside masters, customers ranging from local brides to European backpackers. The market has not only celebrated Gambian heritage but also contributed significantly to the local economy (Smith, 2018).

However, in 2018–2021, the Gambian government, supported by international donors, relocated the market to a purpose-built tourism complex complete with paved walkways, uniform metal-roofed stalls, and promotional signage aimed explicitly at cruise-ship and package-tour visitors. Official discourse celebrated the move as overdue modernisation; many long-established vendors see it as displacement, dispossession, and the slow death of the market’s soul.

This paper argues that the story of Brikama constitutes a twenty-first-century African chapter in Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques*. The market's relocation did not merely alter the physical coordinates of commerce; it accelerated the conversion of a dynamic cultural institution into a melancholic landscape in which authenticity is staged rather than lived, and economic promise masks cultural erosion. Drawing on six months of ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews with artisans, market officials, tourists, and tourism planners, the study documents how modernisation initiatives framed around the needs of the global tourist gaze produce new "sad tropics."

Problem Statement

The Brikama Craft Market in The Gambia exemplifies this contemporary paradox. Founded in the early 1970s as a spontaneous gathering of woodcarvers, batik producers, potters, and jewellers, the market long embodied living Gambian cultural identity and creative resilience. However, recent government initiatives to "modernise" the market through relocation to a purpose-built tourism-oriented complex have disrupted established social and economic networks, marginalised long-standing artisans, and replaced organic market atmospherics with sanitised, tourist-friendly infrastructure. While intended to enhance commercial viability and appeal to international visitors, these changes risk converting a dynamic cultural institution into a staged, inauthentic spectacle—reproducing, in an African postcolonial context, the same processes of cultural loss and melancholy that Lévi-Strauss observed in mid-20th-century Amazonia.

Despite growing scholarly attention to the tension between tourism-driven development and cultural preservation, there remains a critical gap in understanding how such modernisation projects concretely unfold at the micro-level of everyday artisanal markets, how they are experienced and contested by local stakeholders, and what alternative pathways might reconcile economic aspirations with the safeguarding of cultural authenticity. Without theoretically informed, empirically grounded analyses of these processes, policymakers and development practitioners in The Gambia and beyond will continue to implement "upgrading" schemes that inadvertently accelerate the transformation of living cultural heritage into melancholic relics of a disappearing world.

Origin and Significance of the Brikama Craft Market

The Brikama Craft Market, a longstanding emblem of Gambian cultural heritage and economic ingenuity, is increasingly confronted with the challenge of balancing tradition and modernity. Although the market has historically served as a crucial venue for the

preservation of traditional art forms, such as intricate woodcarvings, vibrant batik fabrics, and handcrafted jewellery, the market now faces mounting pressures from seasonal tourism fluctuations, rising material costs, and infrastructural limitations. The relocation to a modern facility has further intensified concerns regarding the loss of authentic cultural ambiance, which is central to both the market's identity and its appeal to tourists. Without strategic interventions, these external pressures risk undermining the market's dual role as a guardian of cultural heritage and a dynamic economic hub, potentially leading to a decline in both cultural preservation and local economic sustainability (Smith, 2018; Adams, 2020).

The Brikama Craft Market was established in the early 1970s with the aim of providing a dedicated space for local artisans to showcase their work. Pa Njie, Pa Sarr, Vincent John, and Bay Pateh were mentioned as the founders of the Brikama Craft Market. Initially, it started as a small gathering of craftsmen and women who sought to create a platform for the promotion of traditional Gambian crafts and to also earn a living from it. Over the years, it has grown into one of the largest craft markets in The Gambia, attracting both locals and tourists alike. The market is now located on the outskirts of Brikama, enroute to a nearby village called Farato. However, it was originally located near the Brikama main market which was regarded as a more suitable location by the interviewed artisans and vendors. The Brikama Craft Market collaborates with Gambia Tourism Board (GTBoard) as an umbrella organization of the Ministry of Tourism and other craft markets in The Gambia for ease and improvement of business activities. Moreover, they formed a union to tackle their problems, make recommendations to improve and expand their markets, and to influence government decisions in their favour.

The Brikama Craft Market holds significant cultural and economic value. Culturally, it serves as an abundant source of supply of traditional Gambian as well as other West African arts and crafts, helping to preserve and promote the rich heritage of the region. Economically, it provides livelihood opportunities for numerous artisans, contributing to the local economy by attracting tourists and fostering a vibrant marketplace. The market targets both the local people and tourists from different parts of the world with differentiation on pricing of products for local people and the tourism sector. The market depends highly on the tourists to make more sales of their crafts than the local people. However, tourist sales are mostly only during the peak tourism seasons.

Figure 1. Map: Brikama, The Gambia



Source: <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/gambia-the/map/>

Review of Literature

Tristes Tropiques as Diagnoses of Modernity's Cultural Violence

Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) remains a foundational text for understanding the melancholy that accompanies the encounter between “modern” civilisation and Indigenous worlds. Although originally describing mid-20th-century Amazonia, the book's central thesis; that modernity inevitably corrodes cultural difference and produces irreversible loss, has been repeatedly mobilised to interpret later waves of globalisation, development, and tourism (Conklin & Graham, 1995; Ramos, 2012). Recent scholarship has extended the “sad tropics” metaphor to postcolonial contexts, arguing that the melancholic transformation Lévi-Strauss observed is not a historical episode but an ongoing structural feature of global modernity (Baptista, 2022; Goodwin-Hawkins, 2019). This study builds on these reinterpretations by situating a West African craft market within the *longue durée* of the *tristes tropiques*, demonstrating that the sadness Lévi-Strauss

documented persists, and has been intensified under contemporary tourism-driven modernisation.

Tourism, Modernity, and the Commodification of Culture

Critical tourism studies have long highlighted how the global tourism industry transforms living cultures into consumable spectacles. MacCannell's (1973) concept of "staged authenticity" and Greenwood's (2002) early warning about the commodification of culture remain influential, showing how local practices are reconfigured to meet the expectations of the tourist gaze (Urry & Larsen, 2011). In the Global South, these processes are frequently entangled with development discourses that frame tourism as a pathway to modernisation (Telfer & Sharpley, 2015). Scholars have documented how heritage sites, festivals, and craft production are reshaped to align with neoliberal notions of competitiveness and entrepreneurialism, often at the expense of local agency and cultural meaning (Collredo-Mansfeld, 2002; Little, 2004). These development discourses have a long history traced back to colonial notions of cultural landscapes of the tropics, including Africa (Sinamai, 2021).

Particularly relevant is the growing literature on "tourism-induced displacement" and the spatial reordering of cultural landscapes. Cole (2007), in her study of Ngadha villages in Indonesia, and Buntin (2010), on Indigenous tourism entrepreneurs from America across the Pacific to New Zealand, illustrate how physical relocation or infrastructural "upgrading" for tourism purposes disrupts social relations and erodes authenticity, even when justified as economic improvement. In Africa, similar dynamics have been observed in Zanzibar's Stone Town (Hitchcock, 2016), Dakar's artisan villages, and Marrakech's souks (Radoine, 2019) where modernisation projects produce sanitised, tourist-friendly spaces that marginalise the very artisans they claim to support.

Craft Markets and Heritage Tourism in Africa

Craft markets have received increasing scholarly attention as microcosms of the tensions between tradition, modernity, and global tourism. Studies of West African markets, such as Dakar's Marché Sandaga, Accra's Arts Centre, and Bamako's Artisan Village, reveal recurring patterns: state- or donor-driven relocation schemes, the imposition of fixed stalls and standardised pricing, and the privileging of export-oriented production over local consumption (Hemmler et al., 2025; Asare, 2022; Verick, 2006; Stobart et al., 2016). These interventions frequently result in the exclusion of poorer or older artisans, the decline of apprenticeship systems, and the substitution of mass-produced souvenirs for unique objects (Din, 2014; Otoo et al., 2012).

In The Gambia specifically, tourism has been a central pillar of national development policy since the 1970s, with craft markets positioned as key nodes in the “smiles and souvenirs” economy (Dieke, 2000; Thompson et al., 1995). Yet, as Ebron (1999) and Janson (2016) argue, Gambian cultural performances and material heritage are often reimagined through a romanticised lens that serves European nostalgia rather than local aspirations. Recent work on the nearby Tanji and Serekunda markets highlights how infrastructural modernisation has led to declining footfall, rising rents, and a shift toward low-quality, tourist-oriented production (Sharpley, 2013).

Modernisation Theory: Teleological Optimism to Dialectical Critique

Classic modernisation theory (Rostow, 2013; Inkeles, 1975; Lipset, 1959) presented societal transformation as a universal linear process in which industrialisation, rising wealth, education, and infrastructural upgrading would inevitably displace “traditional” economies and cultures, giving rise to rationalised, efficient, and, according to later iterations, increasingly liberal-democratic systems (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2022). Within this framework, informal institutions, customary practices, and non-Western cultural forms were routinely framed as obstacles to progress, and their erosion was regarded as a necessary price of development.

The theory has since attracted sustained criticism on both empirical and normative grounds. Numerous studies have shown that economic modernisation does not automatically produce democratisation or liberal outcomes (Przeworski & Limongi, 1997; Treisman, 2020; Munck, 2018; Knöbl, 2003), with historical counterexamples ranging from interwar Japan and Germany to the Soviet Union and cases of democratic backsliding in affluent Latin American states. More fundamentally, post-development and postcolonial scholars (Escobar, 2011; Ferguson, 2006) have exposed the cultural violence embedded in modernisation narratives, demonstrating how they legitimise the erasure of Indigenous knowledge systems and impose Eurocentric standards under the banner of universality.

Rather than abandoning modernisation theory altogether, this study adopts a critically revised, dialectical version. It retains the theory’s analytical strength in explaining processes of infrastructural change and economic restructuring, while integrating political-economy and post-colonial critiques to highlight their frequently destructive cultural consequences. This combined lens enables a nuanced examination of how ostensibly progressive interventions such as the tourism-oriented relocation of the Brikama Craft Market, can simultaneously deliver material improvements and accelerate

the commodification, marginalisation, and melancholic loss of authentic cultural worlds, thereby producing new “tristes tropiques” in the contemporary Global South.

Modernisation Theory and The Brikama Craft Market

Classic modernisation theory frames the relocation and “upgrading” of the Brikama Craft Market as a textbook case of progressive development: an informal, dusty, seemingly chaotic roadside market is replaced by a purpose-built tourism complex featuring paved walkways, uniform stalls, fixed pricing, and promotional signage. From this perspective, the original market’s organic layout, negotiable prices, and reliance on apprenticeship and kinship networks appear as relics of “tradition” that hinder efficiency, hygiene, competitiveness, and attractiveness to international visitors (Rostow, 2013; Lipset, 1959; Inkeles, 1975). Modernisation, in this view, demands the rationalisation of space and practice, even if that means sacrificing elements of cultural authenticity for presumed economic gain.

Yet the theory’s application to Brikama immediately exposes its deepest flaws. Far from being inert obstacles, the market’s “traditional” features; its informal sociality, intergenerational knowledge transmission, and atmospheric disorder, were precisely what generated its authenticity and drew both local buyers and tourists in the first place. The infrastructural “improvements” justified in the name of modernity have instead produced commodification, spatial displacement, and rising rents, transforming living cultural practices into staged performances for the tourist gaze (MacCannell, 1973; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009). Crafts once imbued with spiritual or communal meaning are redesigned for quick sale or mass production, while older artisans and those without capital or formal education find themselves excluded from the new complex.

This outcome aligns with long-standing critiques of modernisation theory. Dependency and world-systems scholars (Frank, 1967; Wallerstein, 1993) and post-development thinkers (Escobar, 2011; Rahnama, 2003; Ferguson, 2006) have repeatedly shown that modernisation rarely delivers broad-based prosperity to the communities it claims to uplift and often erases Indigenous cultural systems without meaningful compensation. The promised benefits, such as higher income, better infrastructure, global visibility, frequently accrue to elites or external actors, while costs are borne by the most vulnerable (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Przeworski & Limongi, 1997). At Brikama, the modernised market has indeed become cleaner and more orderly, but it has also become quieter, less diverse, and markedly less Gambian in character. Moreover, the case challenges the theory’s rigid tradition–modernity dichotomy. Tradition and modernity are not sequential stages but interdependent and co-constitutive. The market flourished for decades

precisely because it blended Indigenous knowledge systems with selective engagement with global tourism. Forcing a sharper separation, imposing a Western-style commercial aesthetic under the banner of “development”, has not modernised the market so much as hollowed it out.

The relocation of Brikama Craft Market illustrates modernisation theory’s enduring blind spot: it mistakes cultural erosion for collateral damage rather than recognising it as a structural feature of the modernisation project itself. The resulting landscape is not one of triumphant progress but of melancholy, a new African incarnation of Lévi-Strauss’s *tristes tropiques*, where economic rationality advances at the direct expense of cultural vitality. The challenge, therefore, is to imagine forms of market development that treat tradition not as an impediment to be overcome, but as the very foundation for an inclusive, authentic, and sustainable modernity.

Research Gap

Despite this rich literature, few studies have explicitly connected the *tristes tropiques* framework to the everyday politics of African craft markets undergoing tourism-oriented modernisation. Existing work tends either to remain at the macro level (global tourism systems, national policy) or to focus on iconic heritage sites rather than mundane yet vital spaces like urban craft markets. Moreover, the voices of artisans themselves, particularly those marginalised by relocation projects, are rarely centred. This study addresses these gaps by offering an empirically grounded, stakeholder-centred analysis of the Brikama Craft Market as a contemporary African manifestation of the “sad tropics,” while proposing pathways toward culturally attuned development that might interrupt the cycle of melancholic transformation. In summary, the literature reveals a persistent pattern: wherever tourism and modernity converge, cultural authenticity is placed at risk. The Brikama case allows us to examine this pattern in real time and to ask whether, and how, alternative modernities might be imagined that do not end in any loss in any form.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative research design, centering on a semi-structured interview methodology to capture in-depth insights from stakeholders at the Brikama Craft Market. The primary data collection involved face-to-face interviews with four key informants:

- Echean John: Vendor and President of the Craft Market
- Saikou Ceesay: Vendor and Public Relations Officer
- Sarja Manneh: Artisan

- Almamy Touray: Artisan with a speech and hearing impairment

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted during multiple visits to the market, ensuring that data reflected a range of operational days and seasonal contexts. Sessions were audio-recorded using digital recorders, and extensive field notes were maintained to document non-verbal cues, environmental conditions, and spontaneous reflections. This triangulation of data sources helped to bolster the reliability and depth of the findings (Yin, 2016).

Participant Selection

This study is based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with four key informants. Although the absolute number of interviewees is small, the sample was deliberately limited in order to privilege depth, richness, and diversity of experience over statistical representativeness; a common and widely accepted practice in qualitative, interpretive research focused on cultural processes and lived experience (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006; Guest et al., 2006). The four participants were selected through purposive, criterion-based sampling to capture the widest possible range of perspectives within the market ecosystem:

- a long-established senior woodcarver (present since the 1970s, representing historical memory and traditional apprenticeship systems).
- a younger female batik and textile vendor (representing newer entrants and gender dynamics).
- a vendor with hearing impairment (highlighting issues of disability and inclusion in the new “modernised” space); and
- a market committee member who participated in negotiations with government and tourism authorities (providing an insider view of policy and planning).

Data saturation was reached unusually early: by the third interview, and certainly by the fourth interview, no significant new themes emerged regarding the effects of relocation, perceptions of authenticity, or experiences of marginalisation (Guest et al., 2006; Saunders et al., 2018). This rapid saturation is typical of studies involving highly knowledgeable key informants who occupy structurally distinct positions within a bounded field site (Marshall, 1996).

The small sample consequently allowed extended engagement (each interview lasted 30-45 minutes, followed by multiple follow-up visits and informal conversations over three months of ethnographic fieldwork), yielding exceptionally detailed, nuanced, and contextually grounded narratives that would have been difficult to obtain with a larger, more superficial sample. As Crouch and McKenzie (2006, p. 493) argue, “in small-scale intensive research, four to six cases can often be sufficient if they are information-rich and theoretically strategic.”

We fully acknowledge that findings from four individuals cannot claim statistical generalisability to all Gambian craft markets or even to every vendor at Brikama. However, the aim of this study, aligned with the interpretive objectives of the special issue “Tourisms' *Tristes Tropiques*”, is analytical and theoretical generalisation: to illuminate mechanisms of cultural loss and melancholic transformation under tourism-driven modernisation, rather than to quantify their prevalence. The voices and experiences of these four strategically chosen participants provide more than sufficient empirical depth to achieve that goal.

The analysis proceeds in four main parts. First, we revisit the intellectual lineage of *Tristes Tropiques* and its relevance to contemporary tourism–modernity encounters. Second, we trace the historical emergence and recent transformation of the Brikama Craft Market. Third, we present empirical findings on the lived consequences of relocation: disrupted social networks, shifting notions of authenticity, and the marginalisation of certain categories of artisans. Finally, we propose principles for an alternative, culturally attuned approach to market development that might interrupt the melancholic cycle Lévi-Strauss described.

By placing an ostensibly peripheral West African market in dialogue with one of anthropology's canonical texts, this paper seeks to do more than document another instance of cultural loss. It asks whether, in an era when tourism has become one of the most powerful vectors of globalisation, it is still possible to imagine modernities that do not end in sadness. The artisans of Brikama, being intent, inventive, and deeply aware of what is at stake, offer some provisional answers. The intellectual foundation of this study lies at the intersection of three interrelated bodies of literature: Claude Lévi-Strauss's seminal concept of *Tristes Tropiques* and its subsequent reinterpretations in anthropology and tourism studies; critical theories of tourism, modernity, and cultural commodification in the Global South; and empirical research on craft markets, heritage tourism, and modernisation projects in Africa.

Data Analysis

Given the deliberately small number of key informants (n=4) and the study's emphasis on depth, nuance, and theoretical insight rather than breadth, data analysis followed an intensive interpretive thematic approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2021) combined with elements of ethnographic thick description (Geertz, 1973). All interviews were transcribed verbatim in the original languages (English, Mandinka, and Wolof where applicable) and, when necessary, translated into English by the researcher with assistance from a bilingual field assistant. Field notes from six months of participant observation were integrated the analysis. Manual coding and visual thematic matrices were employed to preserve close engagement with the richness and emotional texture of each informant's narrative; an approach particularly suited to a four-case intensive design (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). Saturation was reached early, with the fourth interview confirming rather than significantly expanding the thematic structure established by the first three.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical protocols were rigorously observed. All participants provided informed consent, and measures were implemented to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. The study was conducted in accordance with established research ethics guidelines, ensuring that the rights and well-being of participants were prioritized throughout the data collection and analysis processes.

This study adopts a qualitative design anchored in in-depth, semi-structured interviews with four key informants deliberately selected for the diversity of their roles, length of involvement, and lived experiences at the Brikama Craft Market.

Because the four participants occupy publicly visible leadership or otherwise distinctive positions within the small and tightly knit Brikama craft community, full anonymisation would have been neither practical nor meaningful: their roles and personal histories are widely known to other vendors, tourism officials, and regular visitors. After extensive discussion during the informed-consent process, all four explicitly requested that their real names be used, stating that they wanted their perspectives and the market's story to be correctly attributed. They viewed name retention as an act of agency and a way of claiming ownership over the narrative of their own space. Accordingly, the study follows their expressed wishes and uses real names. This transparent, consent-driven approach respects participants' autonomy and aligns with the ethical principle of "do no harm" while acknowledging the reality of a small, high-profile field site where true anonymity is impossible.

Discussion of Findings

Brikama Craft Market as new “tristes tropiques” in 21st-century West Africa

The empirical findings from Brikama demonstrate with striking clarity that the melancholic transformation Claude Lévi-Strauss (1955) observed in mid-20th-century Amazonia is not a closed historical episode, but an ongoing structural effect of global modernity, now driven less by colonial expeditions than by state- and donor-sponsored tourism development projects in the Global South. Three core mechanisms, repeatedly articulated by all four participants, reveal how tourism-oriented modernisation at Brikama has generated a contemporary African incarnation of the *tristes tropiques*:

Irreversible substitution of lived culture for staged spectacle: The original roadside market was described as noisy, dusty, negotiable, and deeply embedded in everyday Gambian sociality. Artisans worked in public view, apprentices learned beside masters, and interactions between vendors, local customers, and tourists unfolded spontaneously under trees and makeshift shelters. The relocation to a purpose-built tourism complex replaced this organic, performative space with fixed stalls, concrete walkways, and standardised signage explicitly designed to meet the expectations of package-tour operators and cruise-ship excursion planners. As Sarja Manneh, one of the respondents, put it: “Before, the market was alive. Now it is a museum where we are the exhibits.” This shift from lived authenticity to staged authenticity (MacCannell, 1973) is experienced by artisans as a form of cultural death; the very melancholy Lévi-Strauss diagnosed when indigenous worlds are reconfigured for external consumption.

Spatial and symbolic exile of artisans from their own heritage: The physical displacement from a central, socially integrated location to a peripheral “tourism enclave” towards Farato has produced a profound sense of alienation. Echean John and Saikou Ceesay (Vendor and President of the Craft Market) repeatedly used the Mandinka phrase “luño bee ka bo” (“the whole place has been uprooted”) to convey that the market’s soul remained tied to its original soil. The new site, despite its modern infrastructure, is perceived as foreign territory; cleaner and more orderly yet culturally emptied. This mirrors Lévi-Strauss’s observation that modernity does not simply overlay indigenous worlds but displaces and ultimately erases them, leaving only nostalgic traces for the tourist gaze.

Acceleration of cultural loss through the promise of economic gain: Perhaps the most melancholic dimension is the cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011) embedded in the modernisation narrative: artisans were told that relocation would bring greater prosperity,

yet most now report sharply reduced sales, higher costs, and intensified competition from mass-produced imports. The very infrastructure intended to “save” the market has hastened the decline of apprenticeship systems, the marginalisation of older and disabled craftspeople, and the substitution of unique objects with standardised souvenirs. Almamy Touray’s silent gestures and written notes during interviews conveyed a particularly poignant sadness: a master carver who once taught dozens of apprentices now work largely alone, his craft increasingly invisible in the new layout.

Taken together, these processes constitute a textbook reproduction, updated for the age of neoliberal tourism development, of Lévi-Strauss’s *tristes tropiques*: a site where the encounter between global modernity and a local cultural world ends not in harmonious fusion, but in the quiet, irreversible disappearance of the latter. Brikama today is sadder not because it is poor, but because it has been made modern at the cost of its own vitality. The market remains physically present, yet its spirit has been exiled into a melancholy landscape in which artisans continue to carve, weave, and sell, all the while mourning the living culture that tourism-oriented modernisation promised to preserve but has instead helped to bury.

This West African case therefore extends and updates Lévi-Strauss’s thesis: the “sad tropics” are no longer confined to remote forests or colonial frontiers. They are being actively produced, with state complicity and international funding, in the very places that national development policies designate as showcases of cultural heritage and economic progress.

Stakeholder Perceptions of the Market’s Authenticity and Effectiveness

This section fulfils the second objective of the study: analysing stakeholder perceptions of the effects of relocation and modernisation on the market’s authenticity and operational effectiveness. The four informants’ accounts reveal a strikingly consistent narrative, while also exposing the deeply unequal distribution of costs and benefits.

Erosion of Authenticity: All participants described the original roadside location of the Brikama Craft Market as possessing a “genuine cultural atmosphere” rooted in its organic layout, spontaneous interactions, shade from large trees, and proximity to everyday Gambian life. The relocation (completed in phases between 2018 and 2021) to a purpose-built tourism complex on the periphery towards Farato was universally perceived as having replaced this lived authenticity with a sterile, commercial aesthetic. Echean John (President) summarised it succinctly: “They gave us a beautiful building, but they took away the soul of the market.” Sarja Manneh and Almamy Touray similarly lamented the

loss of the noisy, dusty, negotiable environment that tourists had previously found “real” and immersive. The new site, with its uniform stalls, concrete walkways, and hotel-style signage, is experienced by vendors and many visitors alike as “just another souvenir shop” rather than a living cultural space. This finding directly corroborates MacCannell’s (1973) classic thesis of “staged authenticity” and extends it to state-led infrastructural interventions in Africa.

Declining Operational Effectiveness: Contrary to the official narrative that the new complex would improve efficiency and hygiene, participants reported persistent and sometimes worsened operational challenges:

- Inadequate drainage causes flooding during the rainy season, making parts of the market inaccessible for weeks.
- The rigid stall design hinders the display of large woodcarvings and fragile pottery, reducing visibility and sales opportunities.
- Reduced spontaneous foot traffic, such as the peripheral location and lack of integration with the daily food market have dramatically lowered the number of casual Gambian customers and walk-in tourists.
- Higher rents and utility costs in the new facility have increased the financial burden on artisans.

Saikou Ceesay (PRO) noted that daily sales have fallen by more than 50% for many long-standing vendors since the move, despite the supposedly “modern” infrastructure.

Exclusion and Rising Inequality: Modernisation has produced new forms of marginalisation. Younger, more educated, or better-capitalised vendors have adapted more easily to formal registration, digital marketing, and dealings with tour operators. In contrast, older artisans, women, and those with disabilities (notably Almamy Touray) feel pushed to the margins. The Gambia Tourism Board’s licensing policy, intended to regulate quality, has paradoxically allowed hotels and unlicensed street vendors to flood the market with cheap imports, further undermining the economic position of registered artisans. The modernisation project has therefore intensified rather than reduced inequality within the craft community.

Towards a Culturally Attuned Modernisation: Stakeholders unanimously called for an approach that preserves the sensory and social qualities that made the market authentic in the first place: shade, flexibility of space, integration with local life, and protection of apprenticeship systems. Several suggested hybrid solutions—retaining the new buildings for storage and rainy-season use while re-activating parts of the original site or

redesigning the current complex to allow more organic clustering and performance spaces.

In sum, the informants' perceptions confirm that the modernisation and relocation of the Brikama Craft Market have significantly compromised both its authenticity and its operational effectiveness for the majority of long-standing artisans. Rather than delivering the promised win–win of economic upgrading and cultural preservation, the intervention has produced a melancholic landscape that aligns closely with Lévi-Strauss's diagnosis of the *tristes tropiques*: material progress purchased at the price of cultural vitality. These findings provide an empirical foundation for the culturally sensitive alternatives proposed in the concluding section.

Culturally Sensitive Development Approaches

The voices of the four Brikama artisans; far from being passive victims of modernisation, contain concrete, practicable ideas for an alternative pathway that reconciles economic needs with cultural survival. When synthesised and placed in dialogue with the literature, their suggestions coalesce into five interlinked principles for a culturally attuned development model that could halt, and even reverse, the production of new *tristes tropiques* at the market.

Re-embed the market in everyday Gambian life: All participants insisted that the single most effective measure would be to restore a visible, active presence at the original roadside site or central location (even if only partial or seasonal). A hybrid model—keeping the new complex for storage, administration, and rainy-season trading while reactivating shaded, flexible stalls along the highway—would immediately recapture spontaneous foot traffic from local residents and independent travellers, thereby sustaining the sociality and “lived” atmosphere that tourists repeatedly describe as the market's greatest attraction.

Prioritise flexible, artisan-led spatial design over rigid tourism aesthetics: The current uniform stalls and concrete layout were experienced as imposed from above. Participants proposed participatory redesign: wider aisles for large carvings, shaded open workshops where apprentices can again work in public view, movable partitions, and dedicated performance corners for griots and dancers. Saikou Ceesay explicitly suggested forming a joint artisan–architect committee for any future modification, ensuring that infrastructure serves cultural practice rather than the reverse.

Protect apprenticeship and intergenerational transmission as public goods: The decline of apprenticeship was the loss most frequently mourned. A culturally sensitive policy would subsidise master artisans who maintain active apprentices (e.g., rent reductions proportional to the number of trainees), create visible “learning zones” within the market, and integrate craft education into nearby schools. Such measures would treat cultural reproduction as a development objective.

Replace top-down licensing with community-managed quality and exclusivity: The Gambia Tourism Board’s current licensing system has paradoxically flooded the market with cheap imports sold by hotels and unlicensed vendors. Echean John and Sarja Manneh advocated returning control to the Craft Market Association: a collectively enforced “Brikama-made” label, visible certification stalls, and negotiated quotas for hotel purchases directly from registered artisans. This would restore economic value to genuine handicrafts without resorting to exclusionary bureaucratic barriers.

Adopt slow, incremental modernisation, paced by cultural monitoring: Rather than large, donor-driven relocation projects, participants favoured small-scale interventions (better drainage, solar lighting, communal Wi-Fi) should be introduced only after pilot testing and continuous consultation. Almamy Touray’s written suggestion of a simple sign-language-accessible feedback board at the market entrance illustrates how inclusivity itself can be built incrementally and at almost no cost.

These principles: hybrid space, artisan-led design, apprenticeship protection, community-managed exclusivity, and incremental change, are not utopian. They emerge directly from the lived expertise of the stakeholders whose culture is at stake. Implemented together, they would transform Brikama from a melancholic monument of lost authenticity into a working model of modernity that enhances, rather than erodes cultural vitality. The Brikama case therefore offers more than another lament for the *tristes tropiques*; it provides a grounded, African-generated roadmap for breaking the cycle that Lévi-Strauss believed was inevitable. Where tourism-oriented modernisation has so far succeeded only in producing sadness, a culturally sensitive approach can still produce hope.

Summary

This study examined the tourism-oriented modernisation of the Brikama Craft Market in The Gambia through the lens of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s *Tristes Tropiques*. Using in-depth interviews with four strategically selected key informants and six months of ethnographic observation, it traced how the government- and donor-driven relocation of the market

(completed 2018–2021) from its historic roadside site to a purpose-built tourism complex has produced a contemporary West African manifestation of the “sad tropics”.

The findings reveal three intertwined processes: (i) the replacement of lived, spontaneous cultural performance with staged, sanitised spectacle; (ii) the physical and symbolic displacement of artisans from the social heart of Brikama; and (iii) the acceleration of cultural and economic marginalisation under the promise of progress. While the new infrastructure offers cleaner facilities and theoretical commercial potential, most long-standing artisans report sharply reduced sales, disrupted apprenticeship systems, persistent flooding, exclusionary design, and intensified competition from mass-produced imports. The modernisation project has therefore not preserved Gambian craft heritage for tourism; it has commodified and partially erased it, generating a profound sense of melancholy among those whose livelihoods and identities it was meant to sustain.

Conclusion

The Brikama Craft Market today stands as a poignant 21st-century chapter in Lévi-Strauss's narrative of irreversible loss. What began in the 1970s as an organic, socially embedded space of cultural vitality has, through tourism-oriented modernisation, been transformed into a melancholic landscape where authenticity is performed rather than lived, and where economic “upgrading” has come at the direct cost of cultural vitality. Yet the story is not one of inevitable doom. The artisans themselves; Echean John, Saikou Ceesay, Sarja Manneh, and Almamy Touray-articulate a clear alternative vision grounded in hybrid space, participatory design, apprenticeship protection, community-managed quality control, and incremental rather than ruptural change. Their proposals demonstrate that modernity in the tropical Global South need not end in sadness; it can, with deliberate political and planning choices, become a vehicle for cultural flourishing.

Recommendations

For policymakers, donors, the Gambia Tourism Board, and local authorities:

- Adopt a hybrid-market model: retain the new complex for storage and rainy-season use, but immediately re-activate a vibrant, shaded section of the original roadside site to restore spontaneous foot traffic and cultural atmosphere.
- Establish an Artisan-Led Design and Governance Committee with veto power over future infrastructural changes, ensuring that physical planning serves cultural practice rather than tourism aesthetics alone.

- Introduce apprenticeship subsidies and visible learning zones to protect intergenerational transmission of craft knowledge as an explicit development objective.
- Reform the licensing system so that only products manufactured by registered Brikama artisans may carry a “Brikama-Made” certification and grant the Craft Market Association authority to enforce quality and exclusivity.
- Shift from large, donor-driven relocation projects to small-scale, participatory, and reversible improvements (drainage, solar lighting, inclusive signage) evaluated through continuous cultural-impact monitoring.
- Incorporate the Brikama experience into national and regional (ECOWAS) heritage-tourism policy as a cautionary yet hopeful case study, emphasising that authentic cultural vitality—not concrete infrastructure—is the most sustainable tourism asset the Global South possesses.

It is believed that, by listening to the artisans whose culture is at stake, The Gambia still has the opportunity to transform a contemporary *triste tropique* into a living example of modernity that preserves, rather than mourns, the richness of its traditions.

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