



*The implications of international tourism shocks on  
an Indigenous Community in Papua New Guinea*

By  
Geno Alova Reuben  
Christian Schott

# Introduction and Research Framing

- Culturally-focused tourism has long been seen as an avenue for the sustainable development of developing nations.
- Strong evidence of this dynamic is found in countries with sizeable indigenous populations, such as the Pacific island nations of Melanesia and Polynesia.
- Research has identified tourism-triggered impacts perceived as both positive and negative by indigenous communities (Carr, Ruhanen, & Whitford, 2016; Pettersson, 2006)
- However, the diverse and often complex challenges faced by indigenous peoples in the context of tourism require further examination (Carr, 2020)

# The Research Question

The sudden absence of international tourists due to Covid-19 and the related travel restrictions caused much hardship, which was particularly acutely felt by tourism-dependent communities.

It also created a unique opportunity, uninterrupted by tourism dynamics, for reflection and discussion within communities:

- about diverse benefits tourism and tourists used to provide to the community
- crystallise the diverse negative impacts previously triggered by tourism and tourists.

Guided by the research question, *“through the lens of an indigenous community and its world view, what are the perceived positive and negative impacts of tourism during a tourism shock-induced reflective time of no tourism”*

this presentation critically examines how the Covid-19 induced absence of (international) tourists was experienced by a well-known indigenous community in Papua New Guinea, the Asaro Mudmen of the Eastern Highlands Province, in terms of the community's livelihoods, resources, and leadership and what their aspirations are for a post Covid future

# The Researcher

## Geno Alova Reuben

Aotearoa New Zealand Government Manaaki  
Scholarship holder conducting research on indigenous  
communities and tourism in pursuit of a Masters of  
Tourism Management.

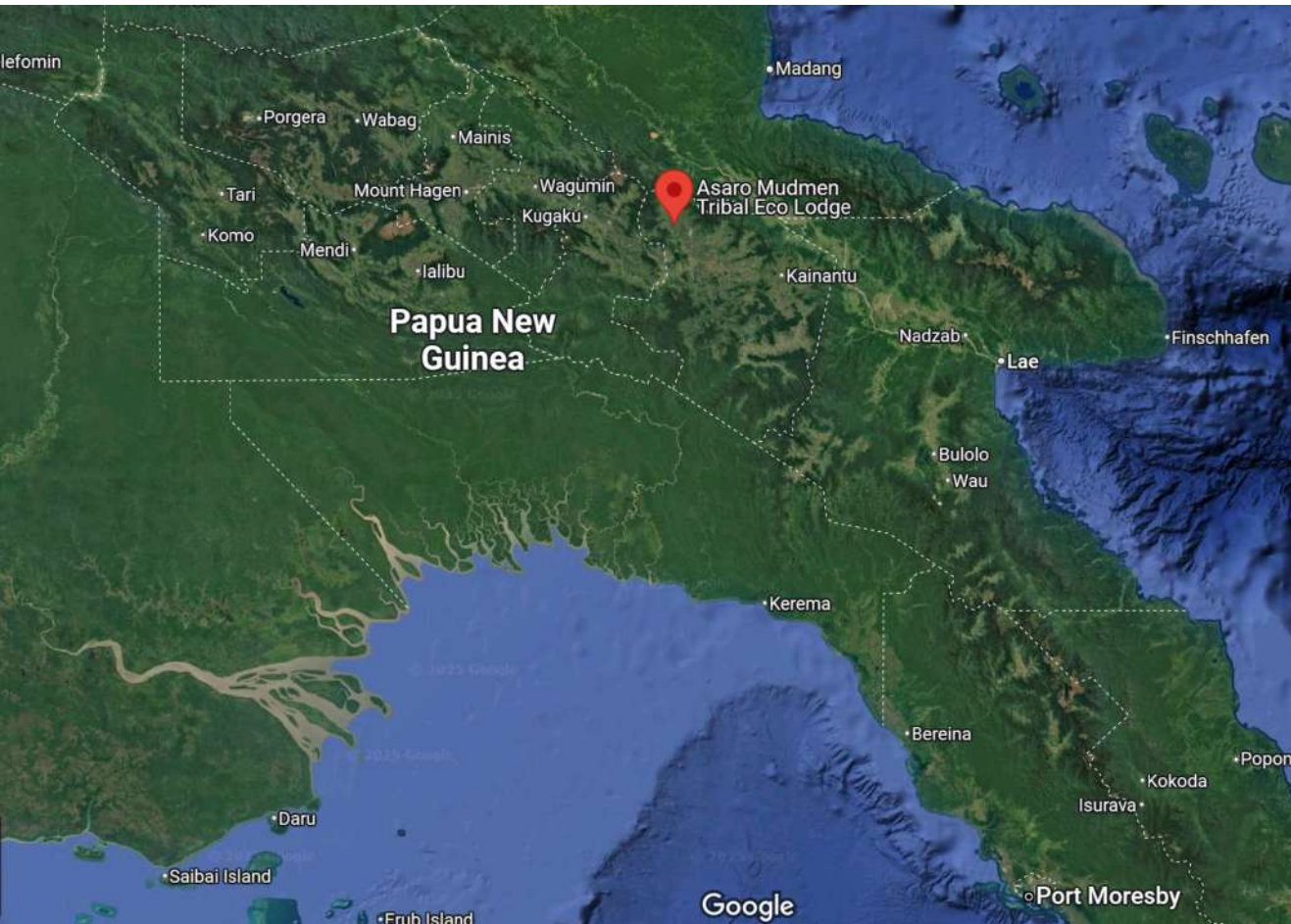
Geno's positionality statement from her thesis:

*The researcher is a Papua New Guinean and is proud of her cultural heritage. She has lived in PNG for her entire life and understands the participant's cultural lens. However, she also acknowledges that the Komunive community has its distinctive beliefs and characteristics. The researcher is aware of appropriate protocols in place when approaching community members to avoid conflicts because similar protocols are followed in her village. The researcher understands the hierarchy that exists in Komunive village. The decisions made on data collection, sampling, and analysis are influenced by the current axiological stance of the researcher.*



Geno is now  
Manager Festival and Events,  
National Capital District,  
National Cultural  
Commission,  
Papua New Guinea

# Some context to Komunive community & Asaro Mudmen



Asaro mudmen in the Komunive community are an indigenous community that is well-known and among the early cultural tourism promoters of PNG tourism sector; tours started in 1964.

The cultural tourism activities promoted by the community have a strong link to the community's culture and resources.



Source:  
Aponaga Piksa (2021)



# Literature Review

Indigenous Tourism includes experiences that feature articulated and/or practiced cultures provided by people recognized as native to a region and promotes tourist understanding and mutuality, with aims to generate outcomes that contribute to the well-being of these people, their prosperity, cultures, and territories. (Jacobsen, 2024)

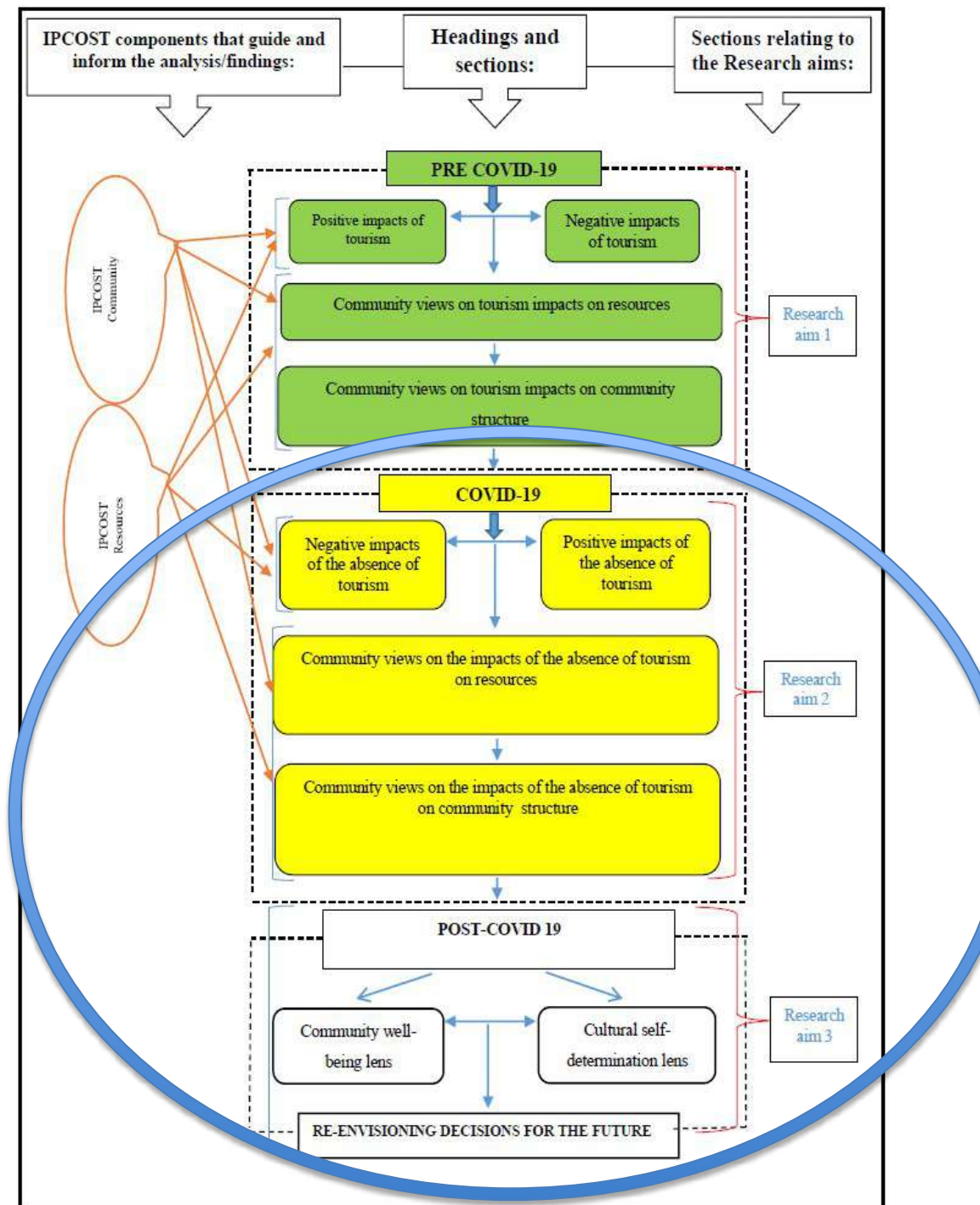
Positive impacts of indigenous tourism have been identified to include revitalization of indigenous cultures and cultural sustainability, while negative impacts have been noted to include declining cultural identity and heritage, commodification of cultures to meet tourists' expectations, power imbalances, and problematic treatment by tourists (Carr et al., 2019; Ruhanen and Whitford, 2019)

MacCarthy (2020) argues that tourism's impact on indigenous people cannot easily be termed as positive or negative without clear contextual insights. Many authors agree that research needs to learn from and through indigenous peoples' knowledge and worldviews when seeking to understand 'the impacts of tourism on indigenous communities' (Carr, 2020; Mika & Scheyvens, 2022; Nielsen & Wilson, 2012; Scheyvens et al., 2021; Smith, 2012).

# Research Methodology

- Single case study approach adopted to allow for indepth analysis as well as mitigate the unprecedented challenges of Covid pandemic and related travel restrictions
- Lead author, an indigenous woman from Papua New Guinea, conducted semi-structured interviews using online platforms owing to travel restrictions. To follow cultural protocol, the field work was supported by local facilitator Paul Wowo who built contact with community members, set up interviews, and presented koha (gift) for participating in the research.
- The community members invited to participate in the research consisted of a diverse range of people holding a range of roles within the community's hierarchy as well as roles related to tourism: village elders, church elders, village councillors, tourism committee members, and tour guides.
- The interviews were conducted online in conversational style and primarily took place in Tok-Pisin. The interviews were transcribed and translated into English for analysis.

# Analytical Framework



# Key Findings

## Absence-of-Tourism-induced Impacts perceived as *positive*

### Relationship with land and subsistence farming

- land was discussed as being ‘overlooked’ before the pandemic, despite being viewed as an important aspect of human survival and being fought over to be owned.
- participants explained that they have re-connected with their land and shifted their focus from tourism to tending to their food crops and coffee plantations again.
- For years, they have neglected their plantations for tourism and have regained appreciation and connection to their land:

*“The relationship we have with our land will now be re-established. Many times we neglected our plantations and ran towards arriving tourists, but now we are running back to our plantations which we think our livelihood depends on.”*

- tourism was seen as a challenge to maintaining their plantations and over time led to disconnection of the community’s relationship with the land.

## Key Findings

### Absence-of-Tourism-induced Impacts perceived as *negative*

#### Lack of economic income

*“Covid-19 has affected us more because tourism supports us economically. Tourism income helps us to pay for our children’s school fees, soap and oil for our families. So most times it has been difficult to survive without the benefits we gain from tourism.”*

#### Decline in ‘kastom wok’ and traditional ceremonies

- Cultural practices called ‘kastom wok’ are vital part of this community through which family obligations and honouring of ancestors are fulfilled; many include money. Due to lack of income many traditional ceremonies involving money have been suspended, such as marriage ceremonies, bride price, reconciliation or compensation ceremonies.

*“We stopped practicing some of our traditional and ceremonial practices that we normally wanted to maintain when we had enough income. We are afraid that our culture might diminish because of no cash flow.”*

## Key Findings

### Absence-of-Tourism-induced Impacts perceived as *negative*

#### Social costs

- many respondents expressed how disconnected they were feeling from the ‘outside world’  
*“When they [international tourists] were around, we had real connection to the world outside.”*
- Respondents also lamented the lack of opportunity to showcase their culture and traditions through performances, which is a source of pride for the community
- There was a strong sense that tourists bring ‘light’ into the rural community and that tourists make the community feel seen and important which translates to pride in their culture and traditional attires.

## Key Findings

### Absence-of-Tourism-induced Impacts perceived as *negative*

#### Cultural costs

- Strong belief that the clay used to make the mudmen masks is unique to Komunive community and that it has a special connection to their land.
- Belief goes on to explain that the clay was given to their ancestors so that they will gain income from it by moulding the mudmen mask and performing the mudmen dance.
- Respondents noted that the place where the clay is located was covered by weeds and grass during the absence of tourism and that it is a superstition that if the clay source remains untouched, it can no longer be useful to them in the future.

*“The clay from its source is running out now. So now, our focus is on protecting the source of the clay, if the source of the clay runs out, our culture will end. The clay was gifted to us by our ancestors to produce the mudmen mask, if we do not use it, it will be taken away from our hands. We want our clay to be preserved through tourism”*

## Key Findings

### Absence-of-Tourism-induced Impacts perceived as *negative*

#### Leadership challenges

- A feeling amongst respondents emerged that leaders were not working together because they were engaged in fights with other tribes.
- Some were unhappy about leaders sharing the mudmen performances with other tribes as it was perceived as breaking of culture and trust between the people of Komunive and their leaders.

*“Since tourism began, our leaders were good leaders. They managed our tourism activities well. Now, the leaders are not working together. They have torn the mudmen into separate tribes, thus it is not only performed by us in Komunive, but in other nearby tribes too. I feel like this behaviour has to stop so that we can stay peacefully.”*

# Aspirations for post Covid future of community

- Vast majority of respondents wanted the community to reengage in tourism while three felt that focussing on the renewed livelihood focus on plantation agriculture and coffee growing was a better approach.
- The reengagement aspirations were strongly informed by the experiences discussed above and the opportunity to reflect on their implications. Four themes emerged for the community's renewed engagement with tourism and international tourists:

## Tourism income diversification

- Diversification through cash crops and coffee plantations along side tourism income to increase families' living standards and resilience to future tourism shocks
- Alternative ways to earn income by performing mudmen dances during graduations and other important occasions in the Asaro area where cultural groups are always invited to perform and are generally paid

## Establishment of eco-tourism project by community

- Informed by oral histories of the Mudmen winning many tribal fights, a strong sense of environmental and cultural self-determination, and desire to be recognised as owners, guardians, protectors and proud inheritors of their cultural heritage, a strong desire was observed to establish an eco-tourism project to educate tourists about the close interrelationship between the natural environment and the community's culture by sharing indigenous knowledge of traditional materials, medicinal plants, as well as animals that have strong symbolic significance for the tribe
- an eco-tourism project was thought to also serve to teach tourists, who are perceived as being disrespectful with the natural environment, by transferring the value of environmental and cultural preservation, protection and guardianship to tourists as well as the community's future generations
- Additionally, some respondents identified the eco-tourism project as an avenue to also attract tourists that are thought to be more interested in the natural environment than in the local culture to increase the overall number of visitors to the community

*“if we start this project, more tourists interested in eco-tourism will also visit us. In this way, we will attract many more tourists.”*

## **Establishment of community owned and operated tour operation business**

- Community is seen as lacking employment opportunities due to its remoteness
- Feeling that community was lacking proper management and control of tourist income before Covid
- Belief that with advice and support from government, community could establish its own tour operation business to have stronger control over the tourism income and the tourist experiences.
- A community owned tour operation was conceptualised as (another) expression of the community's desire for self-determination because it was thought to give the community:
  - full control over the ownership and management of resources and income
  - ability to carry out their tourism activities in a culturally appropriate way that respects their values.
  - opportunity for community-focused development through community-driven broadening of employment opportunities

## Regain ownership rights of mudmen culture

- In the Highlands region, the concept of ownership relates to power and status.
- The mudmen were known as '*holosa*' (ghosts), they used the mudmen masks and bow and arrows to scare of their enemies, and mudmen practice and tradition represents the essence of community's identity and pride
- however other tribes have copied the mud masks and practices to attract tourists.
- In the eyes of the community, the mudmen culture represents the identity of the past, present, and future generation of the Komunive tribe.
- Concerns over unfair distribution of tourism income and control over the performances encouraged participants to want to (re)claim the mudmen culture supported by a strong sense that the period without tourists and tourism is the appropriate time to make the case to authorities responsible for giving the licence to solely manage the mudmen culture.

# Draft Implications

- In the eyes of respondents the negative impacts of not having tourists clearly outweighed the positive impacts, although being forced to reconnect with the land and traditional livelihood practices was considered a valuable outcome of the no tourism period
- tourism is seen and consciously deployed as a powerful tool for the ongoing development of the community and its overall wellbeing, with the benefits of tourism recognised as extending beyond economic benefits
- Strong evidence of community adopting longer term well-being perspective and strengthening community's resilience to future shocks.
- Overarching dynamic is strong desire to fully (re)establish community's selfdetermination in context of income and income distribution, cultural protocols, traditional practices and performances, resilience building, business structures and relationships

# Thank you

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