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Cultural Festivals as Drivers of Cultural Tourism Development in South Africa: Stakeholder Perspectives From the Royal Reed Dance

ABSTRACT

Cultural festivals have emerged as celebrations and showcases of cultural and social values, as well as important instruments for promoting tourism development, extending seasonality, enhancing destination image, fostering community pride, and supporting regional economic growth. This study examines stakeholder views on the role of cultural festivals as drivers of cultural tourism development in South Africa, with a specific focus on the Royal Reed Dance Ceremony. Considered an activity in which visitors are motivated to learn, discover, experience, and consume tangible and intangible cultural attractions or products at a destination, cultural tourism continues to attract significant interest in both developed and developing economies. Adopting a hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative approach based on the interpretivist paradigm, the study used semi-structured interviews to collect data from 14 key informants, including maidens, residents, organisers, and service providers; data analysis was facilitated using ATLAS.ti. The results reveal that, while the Royal Reed Dance functions as a flagship cultural tourism attraction, its development potential is constrained by fragmented governance, limited infrastructure, and weak integration into formal tourism planning. The study argues that cultural festivals can play a strategic role in rural tourism development when supported by coordinated stakeholder engagement and policy alignment. Practical and managerial implications are also discussed.

Keywords: community engagement, cultural festivals, cultural tourism development, South Africa

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INTRODUCTION

Culture and tourism have always had a symbiotic relationship. Such inextricable links have emerged, as cultural sights, attractions, and events provide an important motivation for travel, while travel, in turn, generates culture (Richards, 2018). However, Richards (2018) asserts that cultural tourism has only emerged as a specific form of consumption in contemporary times. Defined by the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) as a tourism activity in which the visitor's essential motivation is to learn, discover, experience, and consume tangible and intangible cultural attractions or products at a tourism destination, cultural tourism continues to attract significant interest in both developing and developed economies (Ndita & Bama, 2024; Richards, 2021; UNWTO, 2017; 2020). Tourism attractions incorporate events as key elements in their marketing programmes, and festivals, as tourism attractions, offer the potential to foster local organisational and economic development, leadership, and networking, all of which are vital underpinnings of community-based tourism economic development (McKercher, 2020; Richards, 2018; Syafrini et al., 2026). The consequence of this process is that tourism development aligns more closely with community preferences, is more authentic, and is therefore more satisfying to both residents and visitors, while also being more sustainable over the long term (Du Cros & McKercher, 2020; Getz, 1997; Getz & Page, 2019).

Cultural festivals have, in contemporary times, increasingly been recognised as strategic instruments for cultural tourism development, particularly in destinations where intangible heritage constitutes a primary tourism resource (Ndaba, 2022; Richards et al., 2025). Globally, festivals are leveraged to enhance destination visibility, diversify tourism products, and stimulate local economic activity, while simultaneously serving as platforms for cultural expression and heritage preservation (Perry et al., 2020; Snowball et al., 2025). In the Global South, especially in rural contexts, cultural festivals often represent one of the few viable mechanisms through which communities can participate meaningfully in tourism economies (Quinn, 2019; Syafrini et al., 2026). Cultural events can provide newness, freshness, and change, thereby sustaining local interest in the destination and enhancing its attractiveness for visitors (McKercher, 2020). Event organisers can create a variety of tourism attractions to animate and interpret their products, such as museums, historical districts, resorts, heritage sites, markets and shopping centres, as well as sports and convention centres (Hemmonsbey et al., 2024). Festivals have received growing attention as sources of significant revenue and as contributors to major socio-economic benefits, including the provision of employment, income, and foreign exchange, which lead to improved living standards for local communities (Ndaba, 2022; Richards & Wilson, 2004).

In South Africa, cultural festivals occupy a distinctive position within the tourism ecosystem due to the country's rich cultural tapestry, diversity, and history of marginalised heritage systems (Adinolfi et al., 2023; Nkosi, 2019; Selmi et al., 2021). Tourism policy in the country's post-apartheid dispensation has increasingly emphasised cultural tourism as a pathway for inclusive development, community participation, and spatial redress (Nkosi, 2019; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021). Within this context, indigenous festivals have been promoted as vehicles for showcasing living cultures,

strengthening destination identity, and generating livelihood opportunities for residents (Bob et al., 2019; Drummond et al., 2021; Snowball & Antrobus, 2021). However, despite their growing prominence in policy and practice, the developmental role of cultural festivals remains uneven and under-researched, particularly from the perspective of those directly involved in their organisation and consumption.

Rooted in Zulu cultural traditions, the ceremony attracts thousands of participants and observers, including domestic and international visitors, media, and cultural tourists. The Royal Reed Dance Ceremony (RRDC), hosted annually in KwaNongoma, KwaZulu-Natal, stands as one of South Africa's most prominent cultural festivals (Ndaba, 2022; Nkosi, 2019). Beyond its ceremonial significance, the festival has evolved into a major tourism attraction that temporarily transforms a rural area into a focal point of cultural tourism activity (Ndaba, 2022; Yende, 2025). This transformation creates opportunities for informal trade, accommodation provision, transport services, and destination branding, positioning the RRDC as a potentially powerful driver of cultural tourism development (Ndaba, 2022; Nkosi, 2019). Despite the scale and visibility of the RRDC, there remains limited empirical understanding of how its tourism development role is perceived by key stakeholders. Existing studies on cultural festivals in South Africa have tended to prioritise economic impact assessments, visitor motivations, or cultural significance, often treating festivals as discrete events rather than as embedded components of broader tourism development systems (Bob et al., 2019; Harrop-Allin & Salant, 2022; Scholtz et al., 2019; Yende, 2025). As a result, the voices of local stakeholders, such as community members, organisers, and service providers, are frequently underrepresented in debates on how cultural festivals contribute to sustainable tourism development and local economic participation.

Against this background, this study explores stakeholder perspectives on the Royal Reed Dance Ceremony as a driver of cultural tourism development in South Africa. Using a qualitative, stakeholder-based approach, the study examines how the festival contributes to destination visibility, cultural preservation, and local economic opportunities, while also identifying constraints that limit its developmental potential. This study therefore seeks to (1) examine stakeholder perceptions of the RRDC as a cultural tourism attraction, (2) analyse the role of the festival in facilitating local economic participation within a rural tourism context, (3) identify structural constraints—particularly infrastructural and governance-related—that limit the developmental potential of the festival, and (4) propose contextually grounded strategies for integrating the RRDC into broader tourism development frameworks. By foregrounding stakeholder experiences from a rural South African context, the study contributes to cultural tourism scholarship by advancing a grounded understanding of how cultural festivals can be strategically integrated into tourism development planning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the World Tourism and Travel Council (WTTC), tourism is among the three largest industries globally; it has been a primary source of foreign exchange earnings in 46 countries of the

Global South and is rated as the fastest-growing industry, accounting for 10.4% of GDP and employing over 319 million people, or 10% of the labour force (WTTC, 2019). Figures for 2024 highlight notable growth, with travel and tourism's contribution to global GDP totalling US$10.9 trillion and employing more than 357 million people, representing 10% of the global economy (WTTC, 2024). For South Africa, 2025 figures project the sector to support 1.9 million jobs, accounting for 11.3% of all jobs in the country (8.9% of national GDP), suggesting a robust rebound in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period (WTTC, 2025). One of the sectors contributing to this growth is cultural tourism, within which cultural festivals constitute a distinct niche (Ndaba, 2022).

Cultural festivals are widely recognised within tourism scholarship as important mechanisms for cultural tourism development, particularly in destinations where intangible heritage constitutes a primary attraction (Sibiya et al., 2023). Perry et al. (2020) contend that festivals convert cultural practices, rituals, and traditions into experiential tourism products that enhance destination visibility and differentiation. Within cultural tourism development theory, festivals are understood as catalysts that stimulate visitor flows, diversify tourism offerings, and extend the appeal of destinations beyond conventional attractions (Chu, 2025; Kiss et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2024; Scholtz et al., 2019). According to Sibiya et al. (2023), in rural and peripheral contexts, cultural festivals are often positioned as strategic development tools due to their relatively low capital requirements and strong community anchoring. Moreover, scholars have argued that festivals can generate place-specific tourism demand by offering authentic cultural experiences that cannot be replicated elsewhere (Finkel & Platt, 2020; Perry et al., 2020; Scholtz et al., 2019). This aligns with broader cultural tourism frameworks that emphasise the role of living heritage in attracting culturally motivated visitors and supporting destination competitiveness. However, the literature also cautions that the developmental benefits of festivals are neither automatic nor evenly distributed, particularly in contexts characterised by weak infrastructure and limited planning capacity (Bob et al., 2019; Sibiya et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2020).

Authenticity remains a central concept in cultural tourism development literature, shaping both visitor motivations and destination positioning. Cultural festivals are often perceived by tourists as sites of authentic cultural encounters, particularly when they are rooted in indigenous traditions and community practices (Judah & Bui, 2025; Saarinen & Rogerson, 2015; Snowball et al., 2025). Studies suggest that festivals grounded in living heritage offer higher perceived authenticity than commodified or staged cultural performances, thereby enhancing their appeal to cultural tourists (Liu et al., 2024; Perry et al., 2020; Scholtz et al., 2019).

At the same time, the literature highlights ongoing tensions between cultural preservation and tourism commodification. As festivals become increasingly embedded within tourism markets, there is a risk that cultural practices may be adapted to meet visitor expectations, potentially undermining cultural integrity (Bob et al., 2019; Perry et al., 2020; Sibiya et al., 2023). Cultural tourism development theory therefore emphasises the importance of governance mechanisms that protect cultural meaning while enabling controlled tourism engagement. This balance is particularly critical in indigenous and rural festival contexts such as the RRDC, where cultural authority and tourism interests may intersect unevenly (Mxunyelwa & Tshetu, 2018; Ndaba, 2022; Snowball et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2020).

Stakeholder theory has become a dominant analytical lens for understanding festival tourism systems, recognising that festivals involve multiple actors with differing interests, power relations, and expectations. In the context of cultural tourism development, stakeholders typically include cultural custodians, residents, informal traders, service providers, tourism authorities, and visitors (Nkosi, 2019; Scholtz et al., 2019; Sibiya et al., 2023). The sustainability of festival-led tourism development depends on how these stakeholder interests are negotiated and aligned. Studies have demonstrated that festivals create meaningful economic opportunities for local communities, particularly through informal trading and service provision (Cele & Hoque, 2025; Mxunyelwa & Tshetu, 2018; Nkosi, 2019). However, stakeholder-based research also reveals recurring challenges, including uneven benefit distribution, limited local participation in decision-making, and weak integration of festivals into formal tourism planning frameworks (Bob et al., 2019; Perry et al., 2020; Sibiya et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2020). These challenges are especially pronounced in rural settings, where institutional capacity and infrastructure investment are often constrained.

Cultural tourism development literature increasingly recognises that the success of festival-led tourism initiatives depends on enabling structural conditions. Infrastructure provision, including accommodation, transport, and visitor services, is widely identified as a prerequisite for converting festival attendance into sustained tourism development outcomes (Cele & Hoque, 2025; Richards, 2021; Rogerson, 2024). Without adequate infrastructure, festivals may attract visitors without generating meaningful local economic spillovers (Bob et al., 2019). Governance and institutional coordination are similarly critical. Scholars argue that cultural festivals require multi-level governance arrangements that integrate cultural authorities with tourism and local government structures (Ndaba, 2022; Noonan & Rizzo, 2017). Fragmented governance has been shown to limit strategic planning, destination branding, and product development, thereby reducing the long-term developmental impact of festivals (Perry et al., 2020; Saarinen & Rogerson, 2015; Sibiya et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2020).

Focusing on the RRDC cultural festival, the study area is located in Nongoma eNyokeni (KwaNongoma), in KwaZulu-Natal, one of South Africa's nine provinces. Under apartheid, KwaZulu (place of the Zulu) was granted self-government with the intention of serving as the homeland of the Zulu people, while Natal was designated as a province. In the post-apartheid period, KwaZulu and Natal merged to become KwaZulu-Natal, with Pietermaritzburg named the capital city and Durban its major economic hub (Berry, 2013). The province is home to two World Heritage Sites, uKhahlamba Drakensberg Park and the Greater St. Lucia Wetland Park (iSimangaliso), and is composed of eight distinct regions, including Zululand (Ndaba, 2022). Within Zululand lies the rural town of KwaNongoma, which, with its six royal palaces, is considered one of the busiest rural communities in KwaZulu-Natal, offering tourists the opportunity to step back in time and experience Zulu royal cultural events. As the seat of the Zulu monarch, KwaNongoma is regarded as the heart of the Zulu Kingdom (Ndaba, 2022). KwaNongoma, the host location of the RRDC, represents a culturally significant rural landscape where tourism activity is closely intertwined with indigenous heritage practices (Adinolfi et al., 2023; Nkosi, 2019; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2022; Saarinen & Rogerson, 2015).

The RRDC, or 'uMkhosi woMhlanga', is a dignified traditional ceremony representing the rich cultural heritage of the Zulu Kingdom and celebrating the proud origins of the Zulu people. Introduced in South Africa in 1991 by the former Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini, the festival was first initiated in Eswatini in the 1940s to celebrate the purity of maidens (Nkosi, 2019). The festival brings together maidens (virgins) at the eNyokeni Royal Palace in KwaNongoma (Gwebu, 2019). It celebrates and honours maidens for taking pride in their virginity while promoting sexual abstinence among young women (Duma, 2020). As part of the festival, the maidens wear traditional attire, including beadwork, 'izigege', and 'izinculubu', as they dance bare-breasted and present their reeds to the king. Each participant carefully selects the strongest and longest reed and carries it with pride in a slow procession up the hill to eNyokeni Palace (Shandu, 2017).

Over the first weekend of September each year, the RRDC transforms this locality into a temporary cultural tourism node, making it a suitable case for examining festival-led tourism development dynamics. Although existing scholarship provides valuable insights into the role of cultural festivals in tourism development, there remains a gap in understanding how stakeholders perceive the developmental function of indigenous cultural festivals in rural South African contexts. Much of the existing debate focuses on visitor motivations or economic impacts, with less attention given to stakeholder experiences and the constraints shaping festival-led development. Addressing this lacuna, the present study examines stakeholder perspectives on the RRDC as a driver of cultural tourism development, thereby contributing contextually grounded insights to cultural tourism development theory and applied tourism planning debates. These insights suggest that cultural festivals should be embedded within broader tourism development strategies rather than treated as isolated events.

Figure 1. A Maiden Presenting a Reed Plant to the King, Symbolising Maidenhood



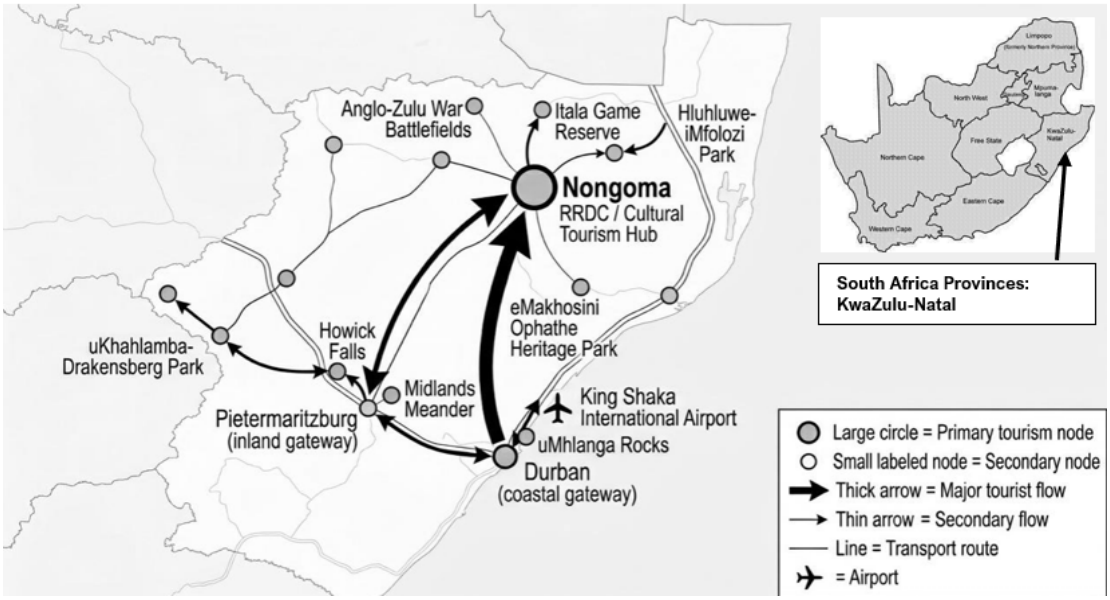
The RRDC represents one of the most prominent expressions of Zulu culture (Ndaba, 2022; Nkosi, 2019). The ceremony involves the participation of hundreds of maidens who engage in ritual performances centred on cultural values, identity, and social cohesion. Beyond its cultural significance, the festival has evolved into a major tourism attraction, drawing both domestic and international visitors to the

area and temporarily transforming KwaNongoma into a high-density tourism node (Ndaba, 2022). Celebrated for its cultural significance, the festival serves as a platform for preserving Zulu heritage and is a significant driver of tourism in the region (Ndaba, 2022; Salvador et al., 2022). Figure 1 illustrates a maiden presenting a reed to the King, symbolising her maidenhood.

METHODS

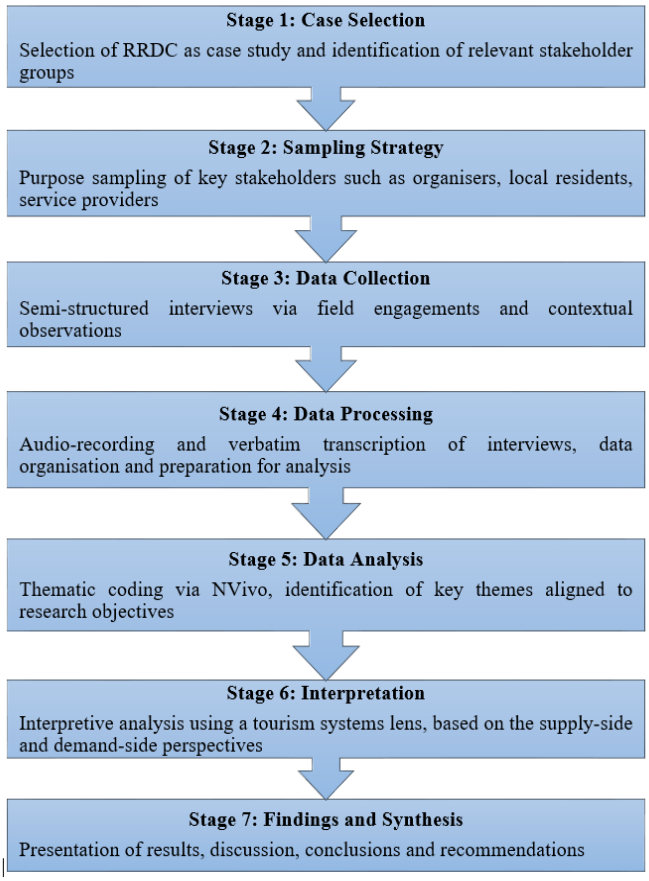
The study adopts a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, grounded in a qualitative, interpretivist paradigm, to explore stakeholder perspectives on the role of cultural festivals in driving cultural tourism development (Fuster Guillen, 2019; Husein, 2018). The interpretivist stance enables an in-depth examination of how different stakeholder groups understand and experience the festival's tourism development function within a rural South African context (Richards, 2021; Sibiya et al., 2023). Pernecky and Jamal (2010) contend that phenomenological research, although complex and time-consuming, depends upon active researcher involvement, attentiveness, and a sound understanding of its philosophical foundations. According to Crowther and Thomson (2020), hermeneutic phenomenology seeks to understand the lived experiences of individuals within specific contexts. Extant scholarship suggests that this approach emphasises interpretation and meaning-making, making it particularly suitable for exploring the subjective experiences of stakeholders in cultural festival contexts such as the RRDC (Drummond, 2024; Fuster Guillen, 2019; Ndaba, 2022; Takeda, 2022). The case study approach allows for a contextualised analysis of the festival as an embedded component of the local tourism system rather than as an isolated event. The map in Figure 2 illustrates the distinct regions of KwaZulu-Natal province, depicting Nongoma Local Municipality.

Figure 2. Tourism and mobility corridors of the RRDC within the KwaZulu-Natal tourism system



Qualitative research methods were employed in the collection and analysis of data, as this approach was considered most appropriate for meeting the study's objectives and for uncovering the perspectives of key stakeholders on the meanings, experiences, and perceptions associated with the RRDC's cultural tourism development potential, rather than quantifying impacts or testing predetermined relationships (Guest et al., 2006; Maree, 2016). Participant selection was guided by a purposive sampling approach, premised on the researchers' intention to ensure sustained engagement with participants and a deep understanding of their interpretations of the lived experiences, impacts, and implications of the RRDC (Ndaba, 2022). This sampling strategy ensured the inclusion of diverse perspectives across the festival tourism value chain and facilitated a nuanced understanding of both perceived benefits and constraints (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2022). Figure 1 presents a flowchart illustrating the sequential steps of the methodology.

Figure 3. Research Design and Methodological process



Over a three-month period (April–July 2021), data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 14 stakeholders, including event organisers, residents, and event participants, in order to capture respondents' experiences. The interviews focused on perceptions of the festival's cultural significance, its contribution to tourism development, local economic opportunities, and challenges related to infrastructure and governance. Due to contextual and logistical considerations, the interviews were conducted using virtual platforms (Iirmdu & Donaldson, 2024). Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and addressed various aspects of the RRDC. Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) highlight

the importance of data saturation in qualitative studies. While a total of 20 stakeholders had initially been targeted based on the study objectives, saturation was reached at the 14th interview, at which point it was determined that most of the codes had been established.

All interviews were electronically audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure analytical accuracy. Researcher notes were also taken during each interview. Following transcription, the data were uploaded into NVivo for thematic analysis (Iwu et al., 2023). Data analysis followed a phenomenological thematic approach. The interviews were analysed iteratively, after which the data were organised into major themes and supported by relevant excerpts from interviewees. Transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve familiarisation, after which initial codes were generated and clustered into broader themes reflecting shared patterns across stakeholder accounts. The analytical process emphasised the identification of meanings related to cultural tourism development rather than individual narratives. These findings are presented in the following section.

Trustworthiness was enhanced through reflexive analysis, careful documentation of analytical decisions, and consistency checks across transcripts. Throughout this process, attention was given to ethical considerations, including ensuring confidentiality, informed consent, and participant autonomy (Fuster Guillen, 2019; Muresherwa & Bama, 2024). Pseudonyms, ranging from Respondent 1 (R001) to Respondent 14 (R014), were used to protect participant identities. Moreover, direct quotations or excerpts are provided (from as many respondents as possible); however, in many instances, the most representative responses that capture the sentiments of those interviewed are presented. Table 1 provides the demographic details of the 14 participants, including their education level, occupation, role in the RRDC, previous participation in the RRDC, and birth year, thereby illustrating the purposive selection of participants and their relevance in providing in-depth insights within the study context.

Table 1. Descriptive Results – Participants' Demographic Profiles (in%, *n*=14)

Respondent	Level of education	Occupation	Role in RRDC	Previous participation in the RRDC	Birth year
R001	Diploma	Speaker of the local municipality	Local organiser	3	1976
R002	Grade 12	University student	Maiden	3	1997
R003	Grade 12	University student	Maiden	4	2002
R004	PhD	Senior Lecturer	Department of Arts & Culture	2	1969
R005	Diploma	Self-employed	Performer	15	1988
R006	Bachelors	Independent contractor	Journalist	3	1985
R007	Grade 12	Senior Ops. Manager	TV producer	5	1980
R008	PhD	Project manager	Leader of maidens	5	1956
R009	Master's	Manager	Maiden	5	1993
R010	BTech	Supervisor	Local Resident	1	1980
R011	Diploma	Tourism Officer	Local Organiser	4	1968
R012	Master's	Social Worker	Maiden	5	1989
R013	Grade 12	Undergraduate student	Maiden	5	1997
R014	Bachelors	Self-employed	Service provider	5	1982

RESULTS

The findings are organised into four interrelated themes that reflect stakeholder perspectives on the role of the RRDC in cultural tourism development. These themes (Table 2) capture how the festival functions as a tourism attraction, its contribution to local socio-economic participation, the infrastructural constraints limiting its developmental impact, and governance-related challenges affecting strategic integration.

Additionally, the findings of this study are analysed through a tourism systems perspective, which distinguishes between the supply-side and demand-side dynamics of the RRDC. While the festival activates a temporary tourism system comprising accommodation providers, transport services, informal traders, and cultural performers from a supply-side perspective, this system remains episodic and is not firmly integrated into the tourism planning structures of the area. Conversely, stakeholder accounts reveal that tourism visits are largely driven by perceived authenticity and the cultural significance of the RRDC, rather than by conventional leisure motivations. Nonetheless, limitations in infrastructure—particularly accommodation and visitor facilities—constrain the extension of visitor stays and expenditure patterns, consequently restricting the conversion of event attendance into sustained tourism development outcomes. Importantly, claims regarding local economic contribution are grounded in stakeholder-reported experiences of seasonal income generation and participation in informal economic activities, reflecting patterns of short-term economic activation rather than long-term structural transformation.

Table 2. Stakeholder Categories and Roles in the Royal Reed Dance Ceremony

Stakeholder category	Role in the festival	Perceived tourism contribution
Cultural participants (maidens)	Perform and sustain ceremonial practices	Enhance cultural authenticity and visitor experience
Local residents	Host community and cultural custodians	Provide place-based legitimacy and social environment
Informal traders	Sale of food, crafts, and services	Generate local economic activity and visitor spending
Service providers	Accommodation, transport, logistics	Enable visitor access and temporary tourism infrastructure
Event organisers	Planning and coordination of the ceremony	Maintain cultural protocols and event continuity
Public sector actors	Regulatory oversight and support	Potential integration into formal tourism planning

Furthermore, Table 3 summarises the empirical basis of the major findings by indicating the stakeholder categories emerging from the themes, while highlighting the evidentiary basis derived from the analysis. This table demonstrates the breadth of convergence across the sample and illustrates that the core findings emerged from multiple stakeholder groups within the RRDC tourism system. As such, the empirical findings are reinforced by the identification and strengthening of the evidentiary basis, showing that interpretations relating to attraction value, local economic participation, infrastructural constraints, and governance challenges emerged consistently across stakeholder categories such as organisers, residents, service providers, and other tourism-facing actors.

Table 3. Empirical Basis of Major Findings Across Stakeholder Categories

Theme	Stakeholder categories supporting the finding	Nature of evidence
RRDC as cultural tourism attraction	Organisers, residents, service providers, media-linked participants	Repeated references to visibility, authenticity, destination profiling
Local economic participation	Organisers, municipal actors, service providers, residents	Employment opportunities, SMME activity, craft sales, accommodation demand
Infrastructure and service constraints	Service providers, organisers, tourism-facing respondents	Accommodation shortages, transport demand, limited visitor facilities
Governance and coordination challenges	Organisers, municipal actors, local stakeholders	Weak contingency planning, fragmented coordination, over-reliance on event

Stakeholder Views: The RRDC as a Cultural Tourism Attraction

Stakeholders consistently identified the RRDC as a flagship cultural tourism attraction, expressed in terms of its potential to enhance the visibility of KwaNongoma at national and international levels. Participants described the ceremony as a unique cultural experience that draws visitors interested in authentic expressions of Zulu heritage. Participants further described the RRDC as a vital platform for fostering Zulu unity and purity, as well as a platform for the generational transmission of cultural values and opportunities for cultural expression. Consequently, the festival was viewed as a key mechanism through which the area becomes visible on the cultural tourism map, even if only temporarily. One of the participants (R006) responded:

> Many people only know about this place because of the Reed Dance [RRDC]. When it is happening, you see visitors coming from different parts of the country and even outside South Africa. We go to the Reed Dance year-in-year-out to report on different stories [that are] happening in and around uMkhosi woMhlanga and to showcase the whole tradition. So, uMkhosi woMhlanga is all about that live experience, where we go to get pictures of the maidens singing, pictures of 'uMama' and of Amabhuto (regiment)… and that was all there. I can safely say that we have a beautiful story to tell about the event.

Additionally, participant R010, born in the community of KwaNongoma and a supervisor at one of the guesthouses in the community, expressed the view on the sociocultural impact of the RRDC on the community and how the festival builds community pride in KwaNongoma, stating that:

> The RRDC promote[s] the culture of the Zulu nation as the festival is one of the oldest festivals that has been happening for years, and it attracts people from around the country and tourists from all over the world. The event allows us to come together as maidens and celebrate our purity, our ability to be able to resist temptations... It's not only about celebrating the virginity but about learn from each other.

Furthermore, another of the participants (R014) highlighted the potential of the event in promoting cultural tourism, stating that:

> The RRDC has been hosted for over three decades in the local community of KwaNongoma, and the festival has created a strong identity of the host community, who invite visitors to share the cultural experience of the Zulu nation. The Reed Dance not only brings local tourists, but it brings your international tourists, it brings delegates from other African countries, delegates from overseas, it's a national activity.

Given that the RRDC aims to promote the culture of the Zulu nation and to transmit cultural values, symbols, and practices, the authenticity of the event appeals to both local and international tourists (Cele & Hoque, 2025; Nkosi, 2019). Of particular significance is that the event offers attendees an opportunity to share a common belief, come together, and reinforce as well as transmit cultural values (Sibiya et al., 2023). Thus, the event does not merely represent a fleeting or momentary gathering but also plays a role in guiding and motivating youth in relation to certain life choices and forms of education that can sustain them throughout the year. According to extant research, such platforms provide avenues for cultural attraction, thereby promoting cultural tourism through festivals.

Stakeholders emphasised that the cultural authenticity of the ceremony, rather than conventional entertainment value, underpins its tourism appeal. The ceremonial nature of the event, traditional regalia, and adherence to cultural protocols were repeatedly cited as factors that distinguish the RRDC from other festivals and enhance its attractiveness to cultural tourists. Bob et al. (2019) contend that a major component of the cultural and creative sector comprises festivals and events, which are viewed as key activities in profiling cultural attributes and interests, as well as enhancing the marketability of destinations. According to Quinn (2019), festivals and events are a mainstay of both urban and rural landscapes, featuring prominently in urban and rural development, regeneration, and tourism policies. The stature of the RRDC positions it as one of the key events on the KwaZulu-Natal event calendar that attracts a wide audience. Participants noted its impact in attracting international students studying at universities across the province, who often use the festival as an opportunity for cultural tourism (edutourism) and social and cultural exchange.

The findings confirm that cultural festivals can function as powerful tourism attractions in rural contexts by mobilising intangible heritage into marketable cultural experiences. In line with cultural tourism development theory, the RRDC demonstrates how festivals contribute to destination visibility, experiential differentiation, and the activation of local tourism economies, particularly in areas with limited conventional tourism infrastructure.

Consistent with the cultural tourism literature, the festival's appeal is rooted primarily in its perceived authenticity and symbolic meaning rather than in entertainment-oriented programming. Stakeholder emphasis on the cultural integrity of the ceremony is central to its attractiveness, supporting arguments that cultural tourism development is most effective when grounded in living heritage practices rather than staged performances (Richards, 2018; Scholtz et al., 2019). The findings reinforce theoretical positions that view authenticity as a critical determinant of cultural tourism demand and visitor satisfaction, particularly in indigenous and community-based tourism contexts. The results support the contentions of Bob et al. (2019) and Higgins-Desbiolles (2016), highlighting

how festivals can serve as tools for cultural maintenance and revival, cultural sharing, and the creation of economic opportunities for indigenous communities.

Stakeholder Views: Local Economic Participation and Livelihood Opportunities

The results highlight the role of cultural festivals in facilitating local economic participation, especially within informal economies. From a development perspective, the Royal Reed Dance creates short-term livelihood opportunities for traders and service providers who would otherwise have limited access to tourism markets. Cultural festivals, like other forms of tourism development, play a critical role in supporting local community well-being. According to Whitford and Dunn (2014), cultural festivals are used to attract tourists who contribute to the development of local communities, and hosting such festivals has socioeconomic implications for the development of the host community. Participants highlighted that when the RRDC is hosted, numerous tourists visit KwaZulu-Natal and the community of KwaNongoma, creating opportunities for employment. One of the respondents (R001), who is an organiser of the RRDC at the local level, commented:

> While hosting uMkhosi Womhlanga, many people are visiting this province … this creates business opportunities, but the person needs to be business-minded in order to benefit, as the community has the opportunity to sell traditional attire, sell food or rent out their houses. Also, there are some job opportunities where people are becoming marshals, others are security at the event, and others are cleaners throughout the event.

Similarly, Yolal et al. (2016) illustrate the impacts of festivals and events on local economic development and residents' well-being, noting that they also highlight the community, cultural and educational benefits of hosting such festivals and events. Accordingly, participants highlighted the role of the RRDC in promoting local hospitality businesses. A tourism officer (R011) in the local Municipality of Nongoma noted the following:

> The number of SMMEs, cooperatives and tourism establishments that get established each and every year shows that the Reed Dance is growing, which means that the Reed Dance of 2018 is not like the Reed Dance in 2008 because now we see more businesses have evolved and are growing, and more people are getting employment.

Another participant (R002), in concurrence with the local economic development potential of the festival, stated:

> With Nongoma being a deep rural area, we got no mines and no other industry that is available in other areas. So, with the Reed Dance, it's time for people to be exposed to employment opportunities because they are producing a lot of traditional clothing, so this becomes a time when they can showcase and market themselves.

In terms of promoting entrepreneurial activities and job creation, participant R014 highlighted that the festival is an opportunity for showcasing indigenous designs.

> When I attended the Reed Dance for the first time, I noticed that tourists were not looked after … some female tourists were turned back at the gate as they were not aware of the fact that females cannot enter the king's palace when wearing pants; they needed to wear skirts. I did my research and started a company, and the company has managed to create more sustainable business opportunities for the local residents of KwaNongoma. The company has grown and now provides traditional regalia and offers tour packages throughout the year and exclusive rights to take people to the Royal palaces, not only to the Enyokeni Palace, which is the main palace for the Reed Dance, but also to other palaces.

Festivals and events such as the RRDC are important in the South African context, where colonial and apartheid structures and systems systematically undermined and marginalised traditional cultural practices and people's ability to explore cultural expressions and genres as well as leverage economic opportunities (Agbabiaka et al., 2017; Bob et al., 2019). According to participants, preparations for the influx engendered by the festival also provide opportunities for local employment. One of the participants (R009) indicated that:

> I make sure that I employ local people as opposed to bringing people from other towns. So, I make sure that I source employment from them, and this brings money to the community, and it generates economic development because there are also accommodation facilities that get highly booked. Tour guides get booked because people have to go on tours pre- and post- the Reed Dance, so it generates an economic boost for local women who do crafts, and their crafts get sold in high numbers

Additionally, the festival is a platform for a diverse range of services required and how the RRDC, as an event, contributes to various tourism sub-sectors such as transport, accommodation and entertainment in KwaNongoma. Moreso, one of the respondents (R001) further highlights the importance of the RRDC for Nongoma, by stating that:

> With Nongoma being a deep rural area, we have no mines and no other industry that is available in other areas. So, with the Reed Dance [RRDC], it's time for people to be exposed to employment opportunities because they are producing a lot of traditional clothing, so this becomes a time when they can showcase and market themselves.

The coming together of so many people also offers entrepreneurial and business opportunities. As such, festivals have a significant role in improving the quality of life and standard of living of the residents by increasing aggregate income, providing employment opportunities, and enhancing infrastructure (Andereck et al., 2005; Cunningham & Swift, 2019; Lopes & Hiray, 2024). Events and festivals also provide the host community with a platform to showcase their capabilities and knowledge and to promote new business opportunities.

However, the highly seasonal nature of these opportunities reflects a broader challenge identified in cultural tourism development theory: the difficulty of converting event-based tourism into sustained economic benefit. Particularly in the context of the RRDC, without complementary tourism products

and longer visitor stays, festival-led development risks reinforcing episodic rather than structural economic gains.

Stakeholder Views: Infrastructure and Service Delivery Constraints

Investment in facilities and infrastructure is a significant benefit that comes from preparing and hosting festivals, and such investment leaves a legacy for the whole community. Participants acknowledged that, given the profile of the RRDC, infrastructure upgrades have happened over time aimed at improving the festival's stature and enhancing the marketability of the host community to attract more tourists and visitors. Accordingly, one of the respondents (R007) mentions the following: "We have seen that since then, the festival has improved, and there are more facilities. Security has also improved, and more people get hired during the festival."

According to participants, such upgrades to facilities and infrastructure make the RRDC an event with the ability to promote KwaNongoma as a tourism destination and to increase tourist visits. Nevertheless, infrastructure limitations emerged as constraints shaping the developmental reach of the festival. Cultural tourism theory increasingly recognises that attractions alone are insufficient to generate long-term development outcomes without enabling infrastructure and services. In the case of the RRDC, inadequate accommodation capacity and visitor facilities restrict the ability of the destination to capitalise fully on visitor interest. These findings underscore the importance of viewing cultural festivals not as isolated events but as components of integrated tourism systems requiring coordinated investment and planning.

Additionally, the results also illustrate the multi-sectoral service demands generated by the RRDC, particularly in relation to transport and accommodation. While participants frame this as an opportunity for local economic development, it simultaneously reveals the pressure placed on limited rural service systems during peak festival periods, reinforcing cultural tourism development theory that views festivals as catalysts for economic activity, while also exposing the structural weaknesses that constrain the translation of demand into sustainable development outcomes. One of the participants (R002) noted that: "The nice thing about tourism is that it's not restricted to one thing. In every event, there is transport needed, accommodation needed and everything, so it speaks volumes in terms of local economic development for Nongoma." Similarly, another participant (R005) opined that: "People come, but many cannot stay long because there are not enough places to sleep or proper facilities. They attend the ceremony and then leave."

This result highlights a critical infrastructural constraint limiting the RRDC's capacity to support sustained cultural tourism development in that, while the festival successfully attracts visitors, inadequate accommodation and basic visitor facilities restrict length of stay, thereby reducing tourism expenditure and local economic spill-over. From a cultural tourism development perspective, this finding underscores the distinction between event attendance and destination development, demonstrating that attractions alone are insufficient without enabling infrastructure to support extended

visitation. While festivals can stimulate short-term infrastructure investment, these improvements do not necessarily translate into permanent tourism assets capable of supporting year-round cultural tourism activity.

Stakeholder Views: Governance and Institutional Coordination Challenges

Governance lacunae were primarily underpinned by institutional uncertainty and weak coordination between event organisers and municipal authorities. Given the evolving COVID-19 context in South Africa at the time, participants noted the absence of clear communication and contingency planning during the festival's cancellation, which highlighted the lack of integrated governance structures to support stakeholders. In the cultural tourism development context, this finding illustrates how fragmented institutional arrangements undermine resilience and limit the ability of festivals to function as stable developmental instruments. To this end, a respondent (R012), highlighting the stressful nature of the impact of the cancellation of the festival in 2021, noted the following: "As one who is responsible for organising the event at the local level, some of the service providers were flocking into my office looking for answers to what the municipality is doing about the cancellation of the festival. "

Furthermore, some participants highlighted a high level of local economic dependence on the RRDC, reflecting the absence of diversified tourism development strategies. While the festival generates employment and accommodation demand, the concentration of opportunities within a single event period points to weak integration of the festival into broader tourism planning frameworks. Contemporary scholarship cautions that such dependency increases vulnerability and limits long-term development sustainability. One of the participants (R001) explained the over-reliance by pointing out that:

> uMkhosi Womhlanga bring many people to the area for KwaNongoma, … As the municipality, we have learned that people depend a lot on this festival to sell their craft, so we have small exhibition events where they can exhibit their work during the RRDC.

This illustrates that the community of KwaNongoma was over-reliant on the festival, and with the festival being hosted over one weekend, such opportunities are not sustainable. Sharma et al. (2021) contend that for sustainable cultural tourism to thrive, the government's partnership is required for transformation.

Finally, the study draws attention to governance and institutional coordination as critical determinants of festival-led tourism development. While the RRDC is culturally well organised, weak integration into formal tourism planning structures was identified as a major barrier to maximising its developmental impact. Participants cited the collapse of local trading activity following the cancellation of the RRDC as a further reflection of the absence of policy buffers, alternative livelihood strategies, and crisis-responsive planning; reinforcing the need for governance models that embed festivals

within diversified and resilient tourism systems rather than treating them as standalone economic drivers (Ali-Knight et al., 2023). Accordingly, one of the respondents (R004) highlights:

> The cancellation of the RRDC collapsed the economy because people rely on the event to trade … Financially, the pandemic was a disaster because everything had to be put on hold. People who owned property in KwaNongoma were even prepared to sell the properties. Also, some cooperatives used to bid so that they could cook during the Reed Dance; they also did not get that opportunity.

This aligns with cultural tourism development frameworks that emphasise multi-level governance, stakeholder collaboration, and policy alignment as prerequisites for sustainable outcomes. The findings suggest that strengthening institutional coordination, without undermining cultural authority, could enable the RRDC to function effectively as a strategic cultural tourism asset within South Africa's rural tourism landscape (Table 4).

Table 4. Stakeholder-Perceived Contributions and Constraints of the RRDC to Cultural Tourism Development

Dimension	Key contributions	Key constraints
Destination visibility	National and international exposure of KwaNongoma	Visibility limited to festival period
Cultural tourism appeal	Authentic, living cultural experience	Risk of commodification if poorly managed
Local economic participation	Seasonal income for informal traders and service providers	Short duration and weak value chain integration
Tourism infrastructure	Temporary activation of rural tourism space	Insufficient accommodation and visitor facilities
Governance and planning	Strong cultural organisation of the event	Fragmented institutional coordination

Collectively, the findings demonstrate that the RRDC plays a significant role in attracting visitors and creating short-term economic opportunities, confirming its status as a cultural tourism driver. However, infrastructural deficiencies and fragmented governance structures constrain its ability to contribute to sustained tourism development. Stakeholders emphasised the need for coordinated planning and institutional support to translate the festival's cultural prominence into long-term developmental gains.

CONCLUSIONS

Cultural and community legacies have often been used to justify support for festivals, but empirical evidence has been limited. Examined as a driver of cultural tourism development in a rural South African context, this study draws on stakeholder perspectives of the RRDC to illuminate both its developmental potential and its structural limitations. Findings demonstrate that the RRDC functions as a significant cultural tourism attraction, enhancing destination visibility and creating short-term livelihood opportunities through the mobilisation of living heritage. However, the ability of the RRDC

to contribute to sustained cultural tourism development remains constrained by infrastructural deficiencies and fragmented institutional coordination.

From a policy and planning perspective, the study highlights the need to move beyond event-centred approaches towards more integrated cultural tourism development strategies (Bonet & Negrier, 2018). Cultural festivals such as the RRDC should be embedded within provincial and local tourism planning frameworks, with clear recognition of their role in activating rural tourism spaces. This requires coordinated investment in basic tourism infrastructure, including accommodation, transport access, and visitor facilities, to enable longer stays and greater economic spill-over within host communities.

Furthermore, the outcomes from this study suggest that effective cultural tourism development depends on governance arrangements that balance cultural authority with tourism planning imperatives. While the RRDC is strongly managed within cultural governance structures, closer collaboration with tourism authorities and local government could enhance strategic planning without undermining cultural integrity. Such coordination is particularly important in rural areas where institutional capacity is often limited, and tourism development requires multi-level support.

Practically, the study advances a set of actionable, stepwise recommendations aimed at enhancing the developmental impact of the RRDC. Targeted investments in tourism infrastructure, particularly accommodation and transport services, are necessary to extend visitor stays and increase local economic spill-over. Further, the integration of the RRDC into provincial and national tourism routes would support increased product visibility and product diversification, given its situation close to other notable touristic hubs in the KZN province. The establishment of a coordinated governance framework involving cultural authorities, local municipalities, and tourism stakeholders is critical to improving planning and resource alignment. Additionally, the development of complementary cultural tourism products, such as heritage tours and community-based experiences, would reduce reliance on the festival as a singular event. Moreover, capacity-building initiatives for local entrepreneurs and informal traders would enhance community participation and strengthen the local tourism value chain, providing a structured pathway for transitioning the RRDC from an event-based attraction to a strategically embedded driver of rural cultural tourism development.

Finally, this study underscores the importance of place-sensitive planning approaches that recognise cultural festivals as embedded elements of local socio-spatial systems rather than as isolated tourism events. By foregrounding stakeholder perspectives from a rural South African context, the study contributes to debates on how cultural resources can be mobilised for development in ways that are locally grounded, culturally respectful, and policy relevant. Such alignment is particularly critical in rural contexts, where cultural festivals often represent the primary mechanism through which communities engage with tourism markets. Future research could build on these insights by examining comparative festival contexts or by exploring how cultural tourism planning frameworks can be adapted to support rural development in other regions of the Global South.

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