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“Development on the margin”

Mediated Immediacy – Safari Tourism in Kenya and the Making of an Authentic Experience of African Nature

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Abstract

Since years Kenya is a very popular tourist destination. Many European tourists spend their holidays on safari: With buses in groups of around 15 people they tour the country to visit different national parks and to observe the “big five” and the scenic nature. Even if some of the tourists arrive on the African continent for the first time, they have very clear perceptions of “Africa” in mind. One of the most common narratives is the one that Kenya – and often Africa – is closer to nature, while Europe is perceived to be more cultural. The travellers come to see and, more important, to experience the authentic, wild, wide, natural, and intact environment. These images are not new. They have a very long tradition in the European way of conceptualising Africa. Very important in the history of these images are the colonial novels, which were popular at the beginning of the 20th century and some of them are still widely read.

Travelling from one place to the next, the tourists see the whole of Kenya through the window of the bus and feel that they are experiencing the “real Africa”. Among the places they visit on their trip is also the Lake Naivasha region, although apart from the national parks, Naivasha is a place mainly occupied by the flower industry. The project zones is on tourists’ expectations and anticipations of an immediate experience of Africa’s wilderness, and explores how this direct experience always requires an intermediary agent that mediates the desired immediacy. A key metaphor for this mediation process are the buses built for tourists to traverse the landscape: Crossing the country while sitting in a bus, the windows of the bus constitute the frame for observing the beautiful nature of which the tourists like to be part, and simultaneously assures them of being protected against the dangers they associate with travelling in Africa. Based on research among tourists as well as among tourist guides, hotel managers, and others involved in Safari tourism at Lake Naivasha, the project explores the different institutions and brokers involved in the business of providing immediate access to Africa’s wilderness.

Keywords: Mediation, nature, safari, tourism