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The Melting Glaciers of Kilimanjaro. On the Touristic Appropriation of African Nature in Aesthetic Modernity

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The snow-covered peaks of Kilimanjaro soar above the surrounding lowlands of Tanzania, just three degrees below the equator. Ever since the first recorded mention by Ptolemy (ca. 90 to 160 A.D.), Kilimanjaro has enchanted not only scientists, adventurers and tourists, but also Africans themselves: along with the wildlife that live at its foot, it has become the very symbol of Africa. Consisting of the three volcanoes Kibo, Mawenzi and Shira, it is not only the highest peak in Africa: at 5895 meters, it is also the tallest free-standing mountain in the world. But what is so special about this extinct volcano in the heart of Africa, bringing it such international fame? The most striking characteristics of Kilimanjaro are its snowcapped summit in the middle of the equatorial latitudes and its completely free-standing position in an otherwise relatively flat landscape. Alexander Honold spoke of the “aesthetic improbability” of Kilimanjaro:

Looking at the surrounding steppes, this giant rock is neither climatologically nor morphologically “deducible”. The mountain’s visual effects are almost mystifying to the eyes of the European observer, even today; this is primarily due to the ineffable influence of atmospheric phenomena. In particular, the upper regions are frequently veiled in a thick layer of clouds, out of which first the snow-capped summit most commonly emerges. In the right weather, this snowy peak has the optical effect of an ethereal apparition, floating high above the ground, making it obvious why the local inhabitants have traditionally considered this the seat of holiness (Honold 2000: 527).

Another aesthetic and physical aspect of Kilimanjaro, which is being radically challenged by the melting of its glaciers, is its permanence, its indestructible mass. The concept of “the permanence of things” – such as the solid ground, the mountains, the Egyptian pyramids, the human spirit, and God – is in competition with the Heraclitean concept of “the flow of all things”, according to Whitehead (1987: 386), although most philosophers are likely to assume an “oscillating balance” (ibid.) between permanence and flow.

Kilimanjaro possesses yet another geographical peculiarity, which Rousseau once noted for the Alps: altitude and verticality

allow for a wide variety of settlement and vegetation types to gather closely together. The normally horizontal worldview, based on wide landscapes and flat surfaces, is surprisingly interrupted by the aesthetic view of the mountain as a vertical panorama, bringing together diverse topographies which contrast in both space and time. In the space of four or five days, it is possible to hike from high summer at the foot of Kilimanjaro, through autumn in the middle forests and spring in the lobelia zone, to deepest winter on the summit, thereby experiencing each of the European seasons.

In the imagination of most mountain climbers, the view from the summit is probably the highest point of aesthetic wonder, even when sometimes marked by major disappointments. Petrarch's "stupefying" mountaintop experience was widely seen as a turning point, away from a religious and towards an aesthetic engagement with the world (cf. Groh and Groh 1996: 38).¹ In the case of the mountain tourist Kurt Benzer, the view from the summit was a secularized, but sensually overwhelming experience of triumph and sublimity:

Conquered the peak. The sun rises, blood-red over Africa. It is overwhelming (Kurt Benzer 9.03.2002)².

However, Kilimanjaro's various aesthetic charms fascinated not only Europeans, but also Africans themselves. Inferences about the local aesthetic perceptions of the mountain can be derived from the indigenous mythology³ and associated practices of the small-scale Chagga societies settling on the slopes of Kilimanjaro. The following describes how, as a result of colonization and Christian missionary activity, the formerly religious regard for nature among the local people survives only in secret sacrificial rituals.

The national and international marketing of Kilimanjaro began with the ascent of Hans Meyer, who took up the development of

¹ "At first I stood there as if stunned, moved by an unfamiliar gust of air and by a more liberated view", (*Primum omnium spiritu quodam aeris insolito et spectaculo liberiore permotus, stupenti similis steti*), quoted in Groh und Groh (1996: 38). Petrarch's letters appear in Thompson 1971.

² <http://www.Mount-Kilimanjaro.de>, Gipfelbuch section, accessed 15.12.2003.

³ On the significance of volcanoes in (creation) mythologies, see Frömming 2001, 2005, 2006.

a geographical department at his father's publishing house. He brought out *Globus* magazine as well as Brehm's *Illustriertes Tierleben* ("Illustrated Animal Life"), and founded the series "Allgemeine Länderkunde" and "Meyers Reisebücher" ("Universal Geography" and "Meyer's Travel Books"). In 1909, he brought out the comprehensive two-volume compendium *Das deutsche Kolonialreich* ("The German Colonial Empire"), as well as three works about the ascent of Kilimanjaro (Meyer 1888, 1900, 1928). A yearning to climb Africa's white mountain began to take hold in Europe, which continues to this day.

Missionaries and Goat Sacrifices on Kilimanjaro

The Chagga⁴ can only offer various guesses on the origin of the name Kilimanjaro. In Swahili, the word means "small mountain of *Njaro*"; *Njaro* is the resident spirit of this mountain.⁵ The Chagga, who live on the eastern slopes of the mountain, call it Kilimieiroya, which means something like "unconquered small mountain". Here, the word *kilima* has been changed to *kilimi*, replacing the Bantu *ma* ending with the Arabic-influenced *mi* ending. Therefore, these labels are more recent (cf. Simo 2001: 1). Furthermore, the Chagga word *jyaro* ("caravan") is possibly derived from the word *njaro*. During my interviews, some Chagga suggested that caravan navigators used the mountain as an orientation point. Among the coastal dwellers of Tanzania, the word *njaro* describes a demon of coldness. For the Maasai, the word *njoro* means wellspring or water, alluding to the many torrents flowing from the mountain. Most Chagga speak not of Kilimanjaro, but rather of its two highest peaks,

⁴ For ethnographical studies of the Chagga, cf. Gutmann 1932-38; Geilinger 1939; Dundas 1968; Moore and Purrit 1977; Winter 1994. The Chagga are also known as Chaga, Waschagga, Jagga and Dschagga (cf. Moore and Purrit 1977: 3).

⁵ Swahili is a noun-class language in which the class of a word and thereby its relationship to the signified can be changed by simply adding a prefix. The word *mlima* means "mountain" and becomes diminutive with the prefix *ki*. Therefore *kilima* means "small mountain". Actually the correct name of the mountain should be *kilima cha njaro*, or "the small mountain of Njaro". The European geographers who recorded the name and thereby fixed its spelling did not hear the *cha*. *Kilima cha njaro* would mean "the small mountain which *Njaro* owns" or "where *Njaro* lives" (cf. Simo 2001).

Mawenzi (“black mountain”) and Kipoo or Kibo (“white mountain”). However, the name Kilimanjaro has now become widespread through most of Tanzania, particularly due to its touristic attractions.

The various geographical regions of the mountain are named after early chiefdoms; however, these emic or native namings stand in stark contrast to others on the latest Tanzanian maps. Although Kilimanjaro’s highest peak may no longer be called Kaiser Wilhelm Peak, the glaciers and other peaks are still named after European mountain climbers and missionaries (such as Hans Meyer Peak and Purtscheller Peak on Mawenzi, and Rebmann Glacier and Furtwangler Glacier on Kibo).

According to an 80-year-old man from Marangu, a small village at the foot of Kilimanjaro, traditional sacrificial rituals for the mountain are still performed today; these are known as *tambiko*, and must now be performed in secret. In particular, the pastor and the deeply religious Christians of the village should not hear about them. According to another informant, it could lead to expulsion from the Christian community, “because Christians don’t like to mix spirit (*mizimu*) and Jesus Christ. If church leader know this, they don’t like you anymore in Christian group.”⁶ Therefore, when I was invited to participate in a family *tambiko* ⁷, it was scheduled at the same time as a Sunday church service.

My informant explained: “We do it now, because everybody who would not like it is at church on Sunday morning.” If the business or problem involves just one family, then the ritual sacrifice is conducted behind that family’s house; but if a drastic event occurs, involving the entire Chagga people – according to Paulo M. Mlaj, these would be drought, epidemics, intractable group conflicts and war – then the ceremony is conducted on the peak known as *fumuu la mkuu* (“skull of the ancestors”) or Kifunika Hill, with an altitude of ca. 2900 m, northwest of the Mandara Hut. The Chagga have never conducted a ceremony on Kibo itself – not only because of the difficulties of the ascent, but also as a sign of respect for Njaro, the spirit who dwells in Kiliman-

⁶ Interview with Anonymous on 12.08.2001, Marangu.

⁷ On 12.08.2001 in Marangu, I participated in a sacrificial ceremony addressing family problems. The ceremony was documented on video.

jaro. After the sacrifice of the animal (usually a goat), its parts are divided with extreme care, since each body part has a particular significance, corresponding to a particular clan member who has a right to that meat.⁸ The head of the animal is then wrapped in its skin, tied together, and left on the peak for the *mizimu* ("nature spirits").

Extreme Mountain Climbing: Between Mountain High and Altitude Sickness

In 1972, the Tanzanian government founded the Kilimanjaro National Park, in which certain zones were forbidden to local people, but paths were legally opened for tourists (cf. Hamilton and Worboys 2003: 1). In 1989, the Kilimanjaro region was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and in 1993, the Kilimanjaro NP General Management Plan⁹ took effect, providing a comprehensive legal framework for the protection of the mountain. However, it hardly changed the fact that Kilimanjaro's snowcap had lost 82 percent of its volume since 1912. Although the snowmelt's hydrological influence has not yet been fully researched, one can assume that it has wide-reaching regional effects, since Kilimanjaro supplies water to a large part of Tanzania and East Africa. Further reductions in the snowcap could have devastating consequences. The city of Moshi, at the foot of the mountain, has already suffered water shortages.¹⁰ The problem is certainly exacerbated by the many hotel complexes, with their intensive water consumption. Various sources have

⁸ *Womoo mkaa* (upper ribs) go to the mother of the wife; *kidari kya auyo* (chest) goes to the father of the husband or the clan eldest; *mario waka* (neck) goes to women; *kurende ko monawamae* (front feet) go to distant relatives; *wanakye* (legs) go to boys; testicles go to all male participants of the *tambiko*. (Ceremony observations and interview on 12.08.2001 in Marangu, Tanzania).

⁹ Tanzania National Parks (TANAPA) forbids not only wood collection and other harvesting of grass and plants, but also all types of recreational sports that undermine the appreciation of nature, such as skiing, motorsports (cars and motorcycles), hang gliding, and hot-air ballooning: only hiking and mountain climbing are permitted, under the guidance of a local agency at Kilimanjaro National Park.

¹⁰ Further Literature on Climate induced Glacier change and water shortage: Hare 2006; Hall, Fagre 2003; Meier et. al 2003, Thompson et al. 2002.

lamented the disempowerment of local peoples¹¹ in managing Kilimanjaro's ecosystem. These once possessed an efficient system for the management of water resources, for example in planning irrigation:

The Chaggas demonstrated a strong attachment to their environment and they made concessions in order to ensure the sustainability of their natural system. These findings go against the "tragedy of the commons" type of models. For example, concerning the management of irrigation furrows, the local rules are issued from an ancestral system, which is still efficient today. These long lasting collective systems of water management were analyzed using eight concepts of design principles. The organization of the Chagga society is based on cooperation and participation principles in order to reach equilibrium between human needs and nature preservation. Mount Kilimanjaro, which has belonged to the Chagga for centuries, is slipping little by little out of their hands (Hamilton 2003: 1).

With the demarcation of a boundary around the national park, ritual sites such as the aforementioned Kifunika Hill, which is one of the most important sacrificial grounds for the local inhabitants, are now deep within the park borders, and can no longer be reached by the Chagga unless they pay an entry fee.¹² More than 20000 tourists climb Kilimanjaro each year. At the turn of the millennium, nearly 3000 tourists reached the mountain peak, despite a doubling of the entry and overnight fees.¹³ Ever since coffee prices tumbled on world markets, Kilimanjaro tourism has become one of the most important sources of income for Tanzania. Luig gives an apt description of the connection between nature conservation and international tourism:

¹¹ Luig has analyzed trends in tourism research which have partly revised the negative assessments of the 1980s, recognizing tourism as "a cultural resource for the preservation or strengthening of local identities" while problematizing it "in regards to nature conservation" (cf. Luig 2001: 256).

¹² At 1500 Tanzanian Shillings (ca. 2 Euro), the entry fee is well below the tourist rate, but still unaffordable for most Chagga.

¹³ http://www.marcinkowski.org/bergsport/touren/kibo/kibo_info2.htm, accessed 25.11.2003.

Global strategies around nature conservation have been defined by western concepts and practices since the beginning of the conservation movement in the nineteenth century. These include not only the dispossession and expulsion of local peoples, but also the governmental implementation of western ideas of nature conservation. Nature is conceptualized as the other, standing in opposition to culture instead of being a part of it, thus fulfilling the need for primevalness, timelessness and eternalness. However, the realization of this experience requires the tools of increasingly resource-intensive civilization – cars, airplanes, hotels and infrastructure – which destroy precisely that idyll which one seeks to protect (Luig 2002: 271).

The cities of Moshi and Arusha are the main hubs for Kilimanjaro mountain climbers, offering numerous hotels and lodges with names like “Kibo Lodge” and “Kilimanjaro Hotel”, where visitors can prepare themselves before the climb and then recuperate afterwards. Most mountain tourists plan their travel far in advance, booking a tour company long before leaving home. Many combine the mountain ascent with a safari in Serengeti National Park or in the Ngorongoro Conservation Area¹⁴. Since it is well-known that even the inexperienced can climb Kilimanjaro, tours are also booked spontaneously at numerous local agencies, which often advertise the mountain-climbing adventure with a stereotypical image of an acacia tree standing below the snowcapped Kibo. There are four different routes to the summit, which are each named after a locality or former chiefdom: Machame Route, Mweka Route, Umbwe Route, and the most commonly used Marangu Route. Among the locals, this last route is also called the “Coca-Cola Route”, underlining their shifting perspective on what was once a ritual path to the sacrificial grounds reserved for the elders of the Marangu chiefdom, but which is now a thruway for global tourism.

A six-day trekking tour costs between 650 and 750 US dollars, and is generally organized in groups of between five and twelve tourists, to make it worthwhile for the organizer too. The trek leader is usually European, while the mountain guide is usually Tanzanian; these are accompanied by an African cook and his assistant, plus around fifteen porters. The luggage, tents, food,

¹⁴ The Ngorongoro Conservation Area is a wildlife protection area with National Park status, home to about 23000 Maasai.

cooking pots and even folding stools are all carried by the porters: each porter carries around 15 kg, while each tourist carries only a personal daypack. As can be expected, the mountain tourists come away with diverse experiences. Joy and pride predominate among those who achieve Uhuru Peak, the summit of Kilimanjaro. A great sense of personal satisfaction comes from conquering nature, and especially from overcoming one's own physical weaknesses. Others may adopt the stance of treating the mountain as an imaginary enemy:

It was once the most beautiful and the most awful experience of my life. Up on the summit there was a nighttime snowstorm with minus 25 degrees Celsius. My hands and feet froze during the climb to Gilman's Point, and even today they're not completely thawed out. Due to the weather, and/or my mental and physical condition, when we got to Gilman's, we couldn't continue to Uhuru Peak. Unfortunately, my best friend Thomas had to descend before the end... but we're going to come back, we have unfinished business here... (Jörg Rosenheim, 24.04.2001).¹⁵

I interviewed several Chagga on the question of why they thought tourists would undertake the stresses of climbing Kilimanjaro, and they cited reasons of physical fitness, financial motivations, and an interest in geography and culture. The local people saw tourism on Kilimanjaro not only as an intellectual exchange, but also an exchange in physical fitness ("we learn some good things from them: physical fitness, changing mind")¹⁶; it is also seen as an economic benefit. However, I also interviewed mountain guides who made the justified criticism that a tourist may pay around 450 US dollars for a six-day park permit, which benefits the national park administration, but pays only around 200 US dollars for transportation, guides, porters and food. Furthermore, the Chagga are especially hard-hit by the prohibitions on collecting wood and harvesting grass. Some of those who live right next to the park's borders sometimes violate these prohibitions. Critical opinions were expressed in regards to environmental pollution and destruction, as well as the associated costs of treating altitude sickness. In addition,

¹⁵ <http://www.Mount-Kilimanjaro.de>, Gipfelbuch section, accessed 15.12.2003.

¹⁶ Interview with Bariki Lyimo on 12.08.2001 in Marangu.

each mountain guide is required to pass a regular test for HIV, or else lose the mandatory operating licence, which could easily lead to financial ruin.¹⁷

On many levels, the example of Kilimanjaro confirms the aforementioned idea that tourism can cause a basic shift in how Africans view their natural environment: the aesthetic of nature is now perceived and appreciated as a financial resource. I met many young Tanzanians who expressed a desire to study wild-life or tourism, in order to work in the national parks or the tourism industry. In addition, the Tanzanian Minister for Natural Resources and Tourism, Zakia Meghji, introduced a program in 2001 to promote domestic tourism, hoping to encourage the touristic impulse among Tanzanians, so that they become more interested in their own national tourist attractions.¹⁸

Conclusion

The history of Kilimanjaro is also a history of sensory perception in modernity. Above all, it is a history of power, and of colonial as well as postcolonial conquest. When Seel (1996: 213) described the “moment of shock”, it was within the context of modern art aesthetics, but its immense power can also be seen in the aesthetic perception of wilderness (Wozniakowski 1987, Schama 1995: 562ff.). It expresses itself as a projection of the outside world and of objectivity into the subjective consciousness, which thus experiences its own limitations and finiteness, but which is also at the same time confronted with this outer wildness, infiniteness and freedom. This is the overwhelming moment of sensory contemplation described by Baumgarten, Adorno, Seel and other philosophers in the field of modern

¹⁷ Interviews 27.07.2001-14.08.2001 with guides Morgan Minja, Bariki Lyimo und James Mongateko. Open questions were sent by email from October 2001 to October 2003, developing further responses.

¹⁸ “(...) When we talk about promoting domestic tourism we mean sensitising Tanzanians to visit tourist attraction areas or investing in the sector. We all know that Tanzania is endowed with unique tourist attractions that pull thousands of tourists from all over the world. However, most citizens of this country have not been able to sample or enjoy the same tourist attractions due to either lack of financial capabilities or lack of tourism knowledge” (Meghji 2001: 7).

aesthetics. The aesthetic perception of Kilimanjaro, with its transnational economic and political processes of appropriation, is a clear example of how aesthetics, which has been relegated for decades to the “harmless” world of art, can precipitate cataclysmic social changes. The modern Western sophisticate travels to the far reaches of Africa to experience every sensual thrill and physically extreme situation, in the search for Utopian wilderness and African paradise:

With the last drop of champagne, and the sun setting upon a herd of wildebeest flowing past the panorama of Kilimanjaro, the knowledge sank into consciousness, that this was a piece of paradise (Bisping 2003).

However, beyond such subjective experiences lies the search by entire societies for more exotic, more enchanting stimulation, to test the limits of modern technical¹⁹, financial, and intellectual achievements, while at the same time questioning them. The symbolic appropriation of nature is always closely bound to economic and political processes of appropriation. Western ideas of nature conservation are ultimately being used to legitimize the expulsion of local populations from their native lands. During colonial times, in the era of the German Emperor William II, Kilimanjaro was visited by just a few men, who symbolically possessed it by giving it place names; today, the mountain “belongs” – quite democratically – to all those who can afford it. The wish to explore faraway lands always produces those images and stories which are most marketable. The tourism on Kilimanjaro shows clearly that this wish can come true. When one critically considers Kilimanjaro climbing tours, involving up to fifteen African porters, cooks, folding stools, etc., one cannot deny the similarity to colonial expeditions. The Tanzanian guides, and particularly the porters, mostly live in poverty; however, many still earn more than Tanzanians working outside of the Kilimanjaro tourist industry. Tourists are displacing the Chagga from their territories on the slopes of Kilimanjaro, locals are employed as porters, guides and hotel pageboys on minimal wages, and most visitors live in expensive hotel complexes:

¹⁹ Technology, especially the ability of cameras and batteries to function at high altitudes, plays a major role for climbers of Kilimanjaro. Conversations with German and French Kilimanjaro tourists at Moshi on 11.08.2001.

all these recall the status quo of colonial times, which is highly marketable today as an exotic postcolonial “light” version. The international tourism industry has Kilimanjaro firmly in its grip, and is justifiably concerned about its melting snowcap, whose heavenly view could be destroyed by global warming. The ice cap is melting so fast it may disappear by 2020 (Thompson, L.G. 2002).

The question remains open to debate: in creating national parks that rob local people of their rights, to what extent has dominant western modernity simply conquered yet another foreign wilderness, or preserved it as a freeze-frame image of the Garden of Eden? A sensible and equitable transcultural cooperation can only emerge when these polarities, which have been created by modernity in its various different forms, are consciously and finally overcome.

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