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**Wijngaarden, Vanessa. 2016. Dynamics behind Persistent Images of “the Other” – The Interplay between Imaginations and Interactions in Maasai Cultural Tourism. Münster: LIT Verlag. 576 pp.**

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**Wijngaarden, Vanessa. 2016. *Dynamics behind Persistent Images of “the Other” - The Interplay between Imaginations and Interactions in Maasai Cultural Tourism*. Münster: LIT Verlag. 576 pp.**

This book is a veritable “tour de force” through accumulated anthropological wisdom. After reading this ambitious monograph it is hard to distinguish anthropology as a way of seeing and rendering phenomena intelligible from the anthropological objects themselves, i.e., that what is rendered visible and what is cast as knowledge. The book invites us to think about how to address this complex relationship between the anthropological gaze and the anthropological objects which this gaze yields and to make a convincing case for their distinct nature. It is fitting that the topic bears precisely on that particular moment which both calls for anthropological wisdom as well as for constituting its gaze as a problematisation of difference and similarity.

The book tells of an encounter between “tourists” and “locals,” more specifically between Dutch “tourists” and Maasai “locals.” I place inverted commas on these proper terms because they are interchangeable in some way. There is a sense in which the Maasai are the tourists paying a visit to the strange world built by the Europeans represented by the Dutch and to see the latter, consequently, as the locals, those who take the world for granted as a familiar place. The book seeks to understand the role that images which tourists and locals have of each other play in the constitution of the encounter, how these images change over the course of the interaction and their implication for how strangers perceive one another. In this sense, the book takes issue with a long-established anthropological tradition that has sought to understand this encounter against the background of the idea of “staged authenticity,” for example, and places the views and logic of action of the actors themselves at the centre of the constitution of the encounter. It is an ambitious research agenda both because it sets out to challenge an established research tradition, but also because it uses a combination of methods that has never been tried before, either in anthropology in general or in the particular field of tourism studies. This refers mainly to grounded theory, the Q method, and narratives. In addition, the author takes the reflexive injunction seriously and places herself and her own intellectual and personal engagement

with the subject (and the subjects) at the centre of the analysis in order to demonstrate how the personal and the factual conspire to frame the questions, the interpretations, and the conclusions. This is a commendable exercise that shows the author's commitment to anthropology as a reflexive discipline.

The book claims that in host-guest relationships both the images that interactants have of each other and the experience of that interaction are constitutive of cultural tourism encounters, while at the same time raising questions about the foundations of this encounter. In other words, actors go into this encounter already equipped with views of self and other and draw on "myths" to sustain these views and thereby help reproduce the encounter as such. It is a complex claim that becomes intelligible when one looks at the material used by the author. Drawing mainly on images of the "other" as captured through the mind maps produced in the context of the Q method, Vanessa Wijngaarden is able to show, first, that both groups have a view of the other group; second, that this view is pretty consistent across the diverse social profiles of the members of the group; and third, that these views can be related to "myths" which both groups deploy in order to make sense of their own representations. These are compelling findings, which the author discusses in a pretty thorough manner. In this connection, the author is able to show that while the "host" group draws on local myths about an earlier blood relationship to the "guest" group in order to tame its own "feelings of reverence and connectedness towards 'the other,' as well as insecurities and dreams of 'the self,'" the "guest" group structures its interaction with the hosts by reference to deeply ingrained ideas about the "noble savage" that fire the European imagination in its own relationship to others.

While the claim is compelling, it raises tricky issues deserving further attention in African studies. The first concerns the decision to view the groups as self-contained categories, which are internally coherent in ways that might even preclude the possibility that the views they purportedly represent could overlap with those of the other group. In other words, it would be interesting to inquire into the possibility that the internal coherence of the account that the imagery of self-contained categories produces is a function of the researcher's decision to view the groups as groups. To put it differently, the "host" and the

“guest” groups exist because Wijngaarden created them. In principle, it is not clear why logically speaking we only have these two groups.

This ties in with the second issue. The author establishes the astounding internal coherence of the images, which she attributes to underlying worldviews, but could have taken the trouble, for instance, to check the distribution of these views within the wider community, the extent to which they are a function of internal tensions and processes of differentiation, and how dissenting views may represent autonomous viewpoints that can hardly be subsumed under an overarching framework. To put it simply, while the author is correct to assume that “host” and “guest” groups represent homogenous entities for the purpose of her study, it might nonetheless be interesting to explore the resources of ethnography (understood in the broader sense of drawing on a comprehensive understanding of the texture of local social relationships) to gain a deeper appreciation of local diversity. This is especially important since there is still a strong tendency in African studies to mistake the properties of a conceptual category developed elsewhere for an accurate description of the individuals the category purports to account for.

The final issue bears on the articulation of these coherent images with background myths. The claim is plausible but is merely inferred, not demonstrated. It is still not clear to the current reviewer why images derived from conversational encounters and systematically brought together with the use of a particular methodology should necessarily document underlying myths. What governed the choice of the myth about blood ties with the “whites” or that about the “noble savage” as the underlying narratives behind the coherent images? What methodological operation was carried out by the author in order to arrive at such a conclusion? Here again we are faced with the challenge of justifying our faith in the eloquence of our conceptual categories.

Methodologically, this is a thought-provoking book. It brings out the tension between the anthropological gaze and the object this gaze produces. The issue is what constitutes what. To the extent that the book draws our attention to an encounter constituted by relations of difference and similarity, we would be justified in claiming that the object exists prior to the gaze. However, this raises a major problem concerning the status of anthropology as a discipline engaging with

the “other.” Are these properties really prior to the interest or were they constituted by the interest in the first place? Are there ways of casting these issues that do not presuppose difference and similarity? And if these ways existed, how much strength would the claim have that images and experience are constitutive of the encounter? It remains the major merit of this book to create the conditions for such issues to be raised and seen with such clarity.

In the preface to the book, Walter E. A. van Beek writes that:

“Understanding ‘the other’, the hoped-for outcome of the tourist encounter, is the ultimate value in anthropology, the *raison d’être* for the whole discipline. It is also a core notion of cultural tourism as a world project: if enough people meet enough other people face-to-face, in a situation without threat or coercion, such as in a tourist encounter, relations will improve. That may prove to be a naïve assumption, but understanding ‘the other’ is a value we all easily underwrite” (p. XVI).

One could not agree more. Vanessa Wijngaarden seems to suggest, in fact, that understanding “the other” consists in the ability of people who are different to manage encounters. One hears echoes of Ruth Benedict’s description of social anthropology’s purpose as that of making the world safe for human differences.

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