Fort Jesus: Guiding the Past and Contesting the Present in Kenya

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Fort Jesus: Guiding the Past and Contesting the Present in Kenya

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Abstract
This paper focuses on the interpretation of Fort Jesus, Kenya, a late sixteenth century Portuguese-built fort, and attempts to discuss its significance in the region and in the country, and its role within the context of recent tourism development in Kenya. By exploring the ways in which a sample of local tourist guides engage with tourists and with the heritage and memory that Fort Jesus represents in this coastal region, some of the challenges facing tourism development in post-colonial Kenya are analysed. While the study reveals that the guides are not a homogeneous group, one of the shared positions is their resentfulness towards the inability of the coastal region to control and benefit from tourism. At the same time, despite some of the guides revealing to be skilful cultural mediators, the vast majority construct their mediation upon a predominantly colonial knowledge of the Fort.

Key Words: Tourism, Kenya, guides, Fort Jesus, contested heritage, post-colonial Africa

Résumé: Fort Jésus: interprétation du passé et contestation du présent au Kenya
Cet article se concentre sur l’interprétation de Fort Jésus, au Kenya, un fort construit par les portugais au seizième siècle, pour discuter de sa signification dans la région et dans le pays, ainsi que de son rôle dans le contexte du développement récent du tourisme au Kenya. En explorant la façon dont un échantillon de guides touristiques locaux se conduit vis-à-vis des touristes et par rapport au patrimoine et la mémoire que Fort Jésus représente pour cette zone côtière, j’analyse les problèmes auxquels le développement du tourisme dans un Kenya post colonial doit faire face. Bien que l’étude révèle que les guides ne sont pas un groupe homogène, l’incapacité de la région côtière de contrôler et de bénéficier du tourisme les contrarie tous. En même temps, bien que les guides se soient révélés des interprètes culturels habiles, la majorité construit ses interprétations d’après une connaissance du fort essentiellement coloniale.

Mots-clés: Tourisme, Kenya, Fort Jésus, patrimoine contesté, Afrique post-coloniale

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Zusammenfassung: Fort Jesus: Die Vergangenheit leiten und die Gegenwart bestreiten in Kenia

Diese Studie konzentriert sich auf die Interpretation von Fort Jesus in Kenia, einem portugiesischen Fort aus dem späten sechzehnten Jahrhundert, und strebt an, seine Bedeutung für die Region und das Land sowie seine Rolle im Zusammenhang mit den jüngsten Tourismusentwicklungen in Kenia zu diskutieren. Indem die Art und Weise untersucht wird, mit der eine Auswahl von lokalen Reiseführern sich mit Touristen sowie mit dem Kulturerbe und den Erinnerungen, welches Fort Jesus für diese Küstenregion darstellt, auseinandersetzt, analysiere ich einige der Herausforderungen, die der Tourismusentwicklung im postkolonialen Kenia gegenüberstehen. Während die Untersuchung zeigt, dass Reiseführer keine einheitliche Gruppe darstellen, so ist doch eine der gemeinsamen Positionen ihr Aufgebräuchsein über die Unfähigkeit der Küstenregion den Tourismus zu kontrollieren und von ihm zu profitieren. Zur gleichen Zeit, und obwohl einige der Reiseführer sich als gekonnte Kulturvermittler hervortun, basiert die Wissensvermittlung für die überwiegende Mehrheit hauptsächlich auf kolonialem Wissen über das Fort.

Stichwörter: Tourismus, Kenia, Reiseführer, umstrittenes Erbe, postkoloniales Kenia

Introduction

In the late twentieth century international tourism growth has had a strong influence on the ways the past is represented in museums and other heritage sites. As Hodgkin and Radstone (2003: 1) stress, our understandings of the past have strategic, political and ethical consequences: ‘contests over the meaning of the past are also contests over the meaning of the present and over ways of thinking the past forward’. To a large extent, the need to present neatly commodified, packaged products for an expanding tourist market has contributed to simplified, unthreatening, sanitized and superficial stories being presented as heritage (see Walsh 1992; Urry 2002). This is especially the case in the context of the construction of nation and identity. The production of smooth and hegemonic representations and narratives of the past and of public memory involves remarkable struggles (Nora 1989). At the same time, people’s capacity to formulate and represent their own memories is regularly constrained by the discursive field in which they operate and literally the space in which their statements, both figurative and literal, are made (Johnson 2003).

Whereas it is long recognized that historical sites as public monuments are critical places that capture and help to constitute individual and collective meaning (Barthes 1972), increasing attention is being paid to the spatiality of public monuments, where the sites are not merely the material backdrop from which a story is told, but the spaces themselves constitute the meaning by becoming both a physical location and a sight-line of interpretation (Johnson 2002). In post-colonial contexts, heritage sites and public museums face a set of conflicting demands. On the one hand they are urged to brand themselves in order to be included in a tourist package that frequently invokes a colonial journey; on the other hand they are required to discard colonial histories and reflect new national pasts and their policies, exhibitions and collections.
Fort Jesus, a sixteenth century Portuguese-built fort in Mombasa, is one of the principal tourist attractions in East Africa (Sindiga 1996; Irandu 2004; Farah 2006), and encapsulates and resonates many of the memory-making struggles of contemporary Kenya. It is a good starting point to discuss the spatial and cultural dichotomy of coastal and safari tourism, as the site contains many conflicting aspects of heritage and interpretation connected to political, ethnic and religious tension in the country. It is a place that directs us to the social and economic challenges of developing countries, and Kenya in particular. The principal aim of this article is to examine how a group of local tourist guides at Fort Jesus deal with the dilemma of presenting and interpreting a colonial building for an international tourist audience, under the pressures of daily life and the complex contemporary situation in Kenya. The article is constructed on the basis of on-site experience in July and August 2007, partly undertaken as a tourist and partly as a researcher. The primary source of material relates to semi-structured interviews conducted at the Fort’s entrance with ten tourist guides. Formal and informal interviews were also made with some of Fort Jesus administrators. Finally, informal talks with tourists helped to construct this analysis. The archive of the Fort Jesus Library was visited on several occasions and various other coastal resorts, from Malindi to Diani Beach, were also visited.

Tourism in Kenya

During the 1970s, political and socio-economic stability allowed the relatively young multi-ethnic state of Kenya to become a leading tourist destination in Africa (Irandu 2004). Nowadays, Kenya is one of the most important tourism centres in Africa, with over 1.6 million international tourist arrivals in 2006 (Kenya Government 2007). Tourism is the largest single export earner in the country – it generated US$803 million in 2006 (Library of Congress 2007), contributing 10 percent to the GDP, and employing 400,000 people in the formal sector and an estimated 600,000 informally. In their official website, named ‘Magical Kenya’, the Kenya Tourism Board (2008) divides the country’s tourism activities in five safaris: ‘Cultural Safari’, ‘Beach Safari’, ‘Sports Safari’, ‘Scenic Safari’ and ‘Specialist Safari’. Absent from this ‘magical’ country, as well as from the overall marketing images of Kenya and, to a certain extent, of Africa as tourist destinations and ‘pristine wildernesses’, are images of modern, urbanized and industrialized landscapes. In a crude way, tourism in Kenya can be divided in two broad themes and spatial areas, although they often overlap, as discussed further in this article. On the one hand there is an older tourism development related to safari tourism, in the savannas of the Great Rift in Kenya. Beginning with big game hunting in the early twentieth century, the 1920s and 1930s made Kenya ‘the best example of empire as a vast system of outdoor recreation for the upper classes of Europe and America’ (Steinhart 2006: 3). The hunting safari for wealthy ‘tourists’ was gradually developed into an East Africa camera safari package, which has a wide range of comforts, luxuries and prices. The dominant narrative of safari
tourism relates to ‘primeval, untamed landscape dominated by wild animals, played out in the broad savannas of the Great Rift in Kenya and Tanzania’, coupled with a nostalgia of the Masai and Samburu, the warrior-herdsmen (Kasfir 2004). Western travellers on East African safaris are often whisked away from the airport on private buses and taken directly to maintained environments (game reserves) where they can consume African ‘nature’ without exposure to certain elements (such as urban life in Nairobi or Dar Es Salaam) that might disrupt or undermine this constructed narrative.

On the other hand, there is a more recent coastal tourism development which started to develop in the 1960s. This type of tourism is spatially and functionally similar to the Caribbean tourism model, in which tourists spend very little time away from the beach and hotel environments. While the dominant image of Kenya is related to the savannas and the wildlife, and the national parks form the pillar of the country’s tourism industry (Akama and Kieti 2003), international tourism is overwhelmingly concentrated in the coastal province of Kenya. In 2006 the total number of hotel bed-nights in the ‘Coastal-Beach Zone’ was higher than all other regions of the country combined (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2007). The country has a coastline of 536 km on the Indian Ocean (stretching from the border with Somalia in the north to the ‘quieter’ division with Tanzania in the south), and tourists are predominantly attracted by natural attributes: white sandy beaches, blue skies, warm water and coral reefs. Despite a recent tendency to diversify the country’s tourism product (Ondimu 2002), foreign tour operators have tended to emphasize the country’s wildlife and beach settings at the expense of cultural tourism, such as the Swahili urban and historical environments – stone towns, archaeological sites and material culture (Irandu 2004; Kasfir 2004). Thus, the dominant travel narratives and discourses are still of a presentation of an exoticized Africa where people travel to see and consume both ‘nature’ and the ‘native’ (Dunn 2004). Coastal tourism registered a boom in the 1980s, and the coastline north and south of Mombasa saw many resorts being built. By and large, tourism development did not occur in the city, which is characterized by a low standard modern urban growth. Tourism declined in the 1990s, in association with political violence during election periods. In 1997, severe conflicts emerged between the Mijikenda ethnic group and upcountry migrants who were attempting to gain a living from tourism in the coastal province. Conflicts were serious in Mombasa and Malindi (see Jamison 1999) and, coupled with the terrorist attacks in Nairobi (August 1998 bombing of the US Embassy) and near Mombasa (November 2002 bombing of the Paradise Hotel at Kikambala), eroded the country’s image as a safe travel destination. Insecurity, crime, a deteriorating infrastructure, inadequate promotion and marketing also led to a serious decline in the tourism industry (Rakodi et al. 2000).

Even though ‘safari tourism’ and ‘coastal tourism’ are based on different kinds of tourism product, motivation and geographical space, they are increasingly associated. On the one hand, there are plenty of Masai and Samburu rambling along the beaches attempting to sell souvenirs, to get a picture taken or to engage in a brief affair.
As Kasfir (2004) argues, the warrior becomes a representation, a simulacrum of the pastoralism life that is not readily visible to the tourist at the coast, and the boundaries between ‘performance’ and ‘material culture’ become vague. Similar encounters take place between female tourists and ‘beach boys’, as well as between male tourists and local women. Sexuality and sex tourism is, in fact, a prominent part of the Swahili coast tourism equation (see also Jamison 1999). On the other hand, as tourists and tourism packages integrate coastal and safari experiences on a single trip, the coast becomes the basis for exploring the ‘the big five’, and the importance of material culture and its interpretation and representation increases (see also Ondimu 2002).

**Fort Jesus, Mombasa**

Fort Jesus is located on Mombasa Island, a low-lying island of approximately 14.1 km², with low coral cliffs, up to 20 m in height, serrated by small inlets, bays and promontories. Currently, the island is connected to the mainland by several bridges and is part of Mombasa City, the second largest after Nairobi, with well over 600,000 inhabitants. The city is one of the commercial hubs of Kenya, being the most important port in East Africa. The history of the Fort itself starts over 500 years ago, when the Portuguese navigator Vasco da Gama sailed up the east coast of Africa at the end of the fifteenth century. As he faced strong resistance in Mombasa in 1498, he established a commercial base in Malindi, some 70 km north. Years later, it was decided that the importance of trade justified the building of a fort and, according to strategic and defensive principles (see Brandão 1989), Mombasa was chosen as the best location. Fort Jesus was built by the Portuguese in 1593 (completed in 1596), in the wider context of the control of expansion of commercial routes in the Indian Ocean and, in particular, to protect the Old Port of Mombasa. Mombasa Island was already a maritime trading post over a thousand years ago, and its urban tradition started around the time when Shirazi arrived in the thirteenth century. When built, the Fort became part of an imperial and global network of forts (Sarmento 2009a).

The simple fact that the island or city of Mombasa was historically known as ‘mvita’ or ‘island of war’ (Wazwa 2006), indicates the central role of Fort Jesus in this convoluted arena. Between the years of 1631 and 1875, Omani and Portuguese exchanged control over the Fort nine times. From 1837 to 1885 the Fort housed soldiers’ barracks and, when the British colonized Kenya (British East Africa became a protectorate in 1885), the Fort became a prison: huts were removed and cells were built. Both men and women were kept here. There was also a section for mad detainees (Abungu 1996). Fort Jesus also played an important role in maintaining the security and judicial control of the coastal region during the Mau Mau uprising in the 1950s. These roles are rarely mentioned in the literature and are significantly absent from tourist information materials. The fort remained a prison until 1958, when a subsidy from the Portuguese Gulbenkian Foundation allowed for the restoration of the Fort as a historical monument and the building of a museum (see Linehan and Sarmento 2009 on the complex nature and history of the birth of the museum). In 1960, as
part of the Kenya National Parks under the Museum Trustees of Kenya, Fort Jesus was opened to the public (see Boxer and Azevedo (1960) and Kirkman (1964; 1974; 1981) for the history and archaeology of the fort and region).

Following independence, Fort Jesus and Mount Kenya were selected as national icons to be published in school children’s textbooks. Declared a National Monument under the Archaeological and Paleontological Interest Act in 1970 (later renamed the Antiquities and Monuments Act 1983), Fort Jesus is the principal historical monument – not only of Mombasa but of Kenya (Irandu 2004). It is one of the crown jewels of the National Museums of Kenya on the coast together with Lamu (Farah 2006), and the most outstanding historical monument in East Africa (Hoyle 2001). Since 1997 the Fort is on UNESCO’s tentative list for World Heritage Sites (in Kenya, the only cultural site inscribed on the World Heritage List is Lamu Old Town, since 2001). In 2001, the Gulbenkian Foundation funded a smaller restoration, which focused on improving the exterior lighting, the surrounding environment and plastering the outer walls.

Presently, the Fort is open to the public daily (from 9:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.) and is administered by the National Museums of Kenya. To a certain extent, it can be understood as a multifunctional space (see Wazwa 2006). Due to its location, not far from the business and commercial centre of Mombasa and on the edge of the old town, many local and regional functions take place there (roughly 120 in 2006). There are corporate functions (cost of hire about 50,000 shillings), wedding functions (10,000–20,000 shillings), concerts, art exhibitions and social meetings at no cost: the elders of the community meet here monthly, as well as other community-based organizations (M. Abdulqadir, Education Officer of Fort Jesus, interviewed 9 August 2007). At the time of the fieldwork, there was an exhibition on HIV-AIDS and drug abuse, geared towards the local community – at the end of 2005, over 1.2 million Kenyans between the ages of 15 and 49 lived with HIV-AIDS (UNAIDS 2006). Like many other castles and forts around the world, Fort Jesus is a major local, regional and international attraction. School children from all over the country and even as far as Uganda visit the Fort on educational fieldtrips, participating in a critical tour of their learning process. In Africa, a comparable site to Fort Jesus is St George D’ Elmina Castle, in Ghana. In 1993 this West African monument received 17,091 visitors (Bruner 2005: 102), registering an exponential growth since 1998. In 2000 and 2001 more than 100,000 people visited Elmina, of whom 50,000 were foreign (KEEA 2003; see also MacGonagle 2006). These numbers are very similar to those registered in Fort Jesus (Table 1).

The fort museum consists mainly of a static exhibition of objects which are the result of archaeological excavations at Fort Jesus (essentially those conducted by Kirkman in the 1950s and 1960s), Gede, Manda and Ungwana; items donated by individuals from colonial collections; and shipwreck artefacts from the 1977 excavation of the San Antonio de Tana, a frigate which sank off the coast of Mombasa in 1697 (Figure 1; see also Piercy 1983). Despite its international visibility (often promoted as a UNESCO World Heritage Site), Fort Jesus is somehow caught between different tourism experiences and various tourism movements. Owing more to tour
Table 1. Number of visitors to Fort Jesus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Non-residents</th>
<th>Residents</th>
<th>Educational groups</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>91,932</td>
<td>67,183</td>
<td>13,148</td>
<td>168,263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>66,585</td>
<td>48,774</td>
<td>13,717</td>
<td>129,076</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>36,964</td>
<td>46,206</td>
<td>13,971</td>
<td>97,141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>45,055</td>
<td>49,280</td>
<td>15,912</td>
<td>110,247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>50,439</td>
<td>48,747</td>
<td>16,637</td>
<td>115,823</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>52,220</td>
<td>61,787</td>
<td>24,157</td>
<td>138,164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>35,957</td>
<td>69,144</td>
<td>27,866</td>
<td>132,967</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>47,195</td>
<td>73,197</td>
<td>28,203</td>
<td>149,595</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>55,394</td>
<td>71,553</td>
<td>39,259</td>
<td>167,303</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>39,875</td>
<td>58,794</td>
<td>40,241</td>
<td>139,974</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

aElection year and tsunami.
bTickets increased from 200 to 800 shillings (Price for non-resident adults outside East Africa). In January 2008, Fort Jesus registered a decline of 75 percent in visitor arrivals. School trips from ‘upcountry’ were cancelled and tourist numbers decreased substantially (Auwor and Mwakio 2008).

Source: National Museums of Kenya, various years.

Figure 1. Aspect of the interior of Fort Jesus Museum. Source: author, August 2007.
operators’ awareness of the need to diversify the tourism product from safari and beach environments (Ondimu 2002), than to a planned effort in the development of cultural tourism, a visit to Fort Jesus is a standard item on the itinerary of many tourists that visit Mombasa (Hoyle 2001), who are usually ending or starting a safari, or ending or starting a beach holiday.

After several visits to the Fort, and through informal conversations with locals, it became apparent that the site is also a meeting place for young couples. In a conservative society where public space is particularly visible and streets are extremely hectic, the Fort is appropriated as a sheltered place, where the design and architecture of war and defence, the Oreilles and bastions, are re-interpreted to create secluded and intimate environments. As part of the diversification of activities within the Fort, and its multi-functionality, Fort Jesus organizes a light and sound show three to four times a week, depending on season ($US20). Through an agreement with a local travel agency, there is also a combined package including a boat trip along the harbour, a luxury dinner in the Fort patio and the light and sound show ($US75–85), where history is packaged and commodified for tourism consumption.

When arriving at Fort Jesus, either walking, by auto rickshaw (tuk-tuk), taxi, jeep or on a tourism van or bus, we are confronted with a massive solid building slightly yellow-greyish. For those who stop to visit or just to admire the exterior of the Fort (many tourists allow themselves simply to photograph the building from a vehicle, rushing to the next tourist site after collecting another memory and ‘presence certificate’: tourists are generally in a rush), the roundabout in front of the Fort’s main (and now only public) entrance is the first thing to gaze at. This public space outside the Fort is busy at most times of the day. There are some very basic local shops that serve drinks and ‘snacks’; there are also a few sellers of ‘local handicrafts’, foodstuff such as potato chips, peanuts and ice creams. Apart from the guides who invariably approach everyone who is there for the first time, the wide range of paintings, portraying zebras, lions, elephants, savannas and Masai against the backdrop of the Fort, is the most noticeable sight (Figure 2). There are very few paintings or representations of coastal environments, coastal architecture or Swahili culture. This colourful scene is continuously accompanied by the ubiquitous music (the national anthem for many tour agents) of ‘Jambo Bwana’, written in the mid-1980s by the group ‘Them Mushrooms’, which includes the ever-present expression of hakuna-matata (see Bruner 2005). From this roundabout, there is also access to the Mombasa Club, a private club established at the end of Queen Victoria’s reign in 1885, which includes a hotel, a swimming pool and a restaurant for members only. One of the most vibrant places outside the Fort is the ground squashed between the ocean and the Forts’ walls, where there are two soccer goals. Here youth gather daily and somehow oblivious to the historical significance of the site engage in formal and informal matches. This is also a popular spot for many other locals and tourists, who come here to relax, chat, date and take photographs. After dusk (the Fort closes at six in the evening), the whole area quickly empties and the site has a reputation of being unsafe.
Can the ‘Tourist Guides’ Speak?

There is a relatively long track and variety of studies focusing on tourist guides. Holloway (1981) approached guides as knowledge providers, while Cohen (1985) has shown how guides are key elements in the translation of a strange foreign culture into a discernible and familiar cultural language, being cultural mediators and functioning as ‘pathfinders’ or as ‘mentors’. These categories were also explored in relation to the role of the counsellor-guides of the ‘Israel Experience Program’ educational tours that bring Diaspora youth to the country (Cohen et al. 2002). Pizam and Jeong (1996) analysed Korean tour-guides’ perceptions between tourists of different nationalities and Dahles (2002) discussed the impact of state propaganda on the narratives of tourist guides in Indonesia. Also conducting fieldwork in Indonesia, Salazar (2005) pointed out how local tour guides are important actors in the process of ‘localizing’, ethnicizing and exoticizing a destination in interpreting tourism places. He further developed this idea of globalized discourses being locally reproduced by guides in a study in Tanzania, where he concluded that guides do not merely reproduce the narratives and practices they were taught at school, but they became creative storytellers on their own (Salazar 2006).

As mentioned, the purpose of listening to tourist guides aims at engaging with the different ways in which they negotiate the dialogue between the heritage and memory they are presenting and their own values and identity. According to Abdulqadir, the
Education Officer at Fort Jesus (interviewed 9 August 2007), there are roughly 180 official local tourist guides in the city of Mombasa, that is, guides registered at the Mombasa tourist office, a number which is possibly well underestimated. According to local information, in the 1970s and 1980s there were only four or five tourist guides in the Old Town. This number has increased to 25 tourist guides registered in the Old Town Tourist Guides’ Association, plus an undetermined number of unofficial guides. This study focuses on the 25 official tourist guides, of whom, ten were interviewed. They are all men, all Swahili and all born in the coastal region (most in Mombasa, but some in Malindi, Pate Island and other coastal villages). Due to the complexity of the Swahili identity, which is beyond the scope of this paper, I use Swahili to refer to any Muslim native of Kenya’s coastal region who speaks some variation of Swahili as first language (see Caplan (2007) for a discussion of the Swahili identity). The strategy of the present research involved semi-structured interviews, engaging in a partly formal discussion of pre-defined topics, while allowing for a certain elasticity and freedom to debate other issues. All interviews with the guides were conducted outside the Fort, under the tree shade by the cannons, where they normally wait for tourists. All interviews were paid, especially to compensate guides for the time spent with the researcher. Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. In the days following the interview with one guide, several short interactions took place, while a more close proximate relationship between researcher and researched evolved. Only two out of twelve guides refused to participate in the research, arguing that they had tours already arranged. Under the circumstances of the research (no control of local languages and with insufficient time to slowly get acquainted with local guides), it was decided to ask the guide being interviewed to indicate the next guide to participate in the study. This strategy carries a certain degree of subjectivity and distortion, creating a non-representative sample. Still, ten out of the 25 official guides were interviewed. All names are fictitious to preserve the guides’ confidentiality.

Perhaps more important than characterizing guides as mediators of culture, as people who establish a bridge between tourists and tourist sites, is to underline that guides are above all concerned with their everyday life existence. In very different ways, they understand the importance and implications of dealing with history, memory, interpretation and so on, but it is the shillings that come with it that are of paramount importance. All interviewed guides had a variety of jobs previous to being tourist guides (or they still do), and are very open-minded in relation to changing job again. They are generally happy about their current profession, since their job allows them to improve language skills, to establish connections abroad that might be useful in the future. They all argue that interacting with foreign tourists is interesting. Nevertheless, they do position themselves in the African job market context and are aware of the possibility of sudden changes in such a volatile situation. A few examples of jobs that guides did or do are taxi driver, small boats captain, small businesses, welding, safari and coastal tour guiding.
It was practically impossible to obtain a precise figure on the number of guided tours that each of them makes per week, a number that obviously varies considerably with the tourism season. Most guides state taking three to four tours per week. This might be the case in the low season, but it is possibly a strong underestimation in the high season. At the same time, prices for guided tours are extremely variable. Guides may charge 200–800 shillings (roughly €2–8) for a basic one-hour tour in the Fort, and 800–2,500 shillings (approximately €8–25) for a half-day or even full-day tour of the Fort, old city and other Mombasa attractions. Prices vary according to the duration of the tour, but they also fluctuate according to tourists’ country of origin, party size, bargaining skills and the way they dress and appear. It is the guides’ perception of what the tourist can pay that is central to this issue. Guides’ common feeling is that this is a highly uncertain business. Not only do the guides have to share the tourists among them (they have established a rotation system whereby the guide that arrives puts his name down on a list and has to wait his turn to approach a tourist or group of tourists), but they also feel the negative impact of the increasing number of beach boys and other hustlers and hawkers throughout the country.

Despite being the leading tourist centre in East Africa (in number of hotel beds and other tourist facilities and in number of tourists), Mombasa is an extremely poor place with very high levels of social deprivation and poverty (Rakodi et al. 2000). It is estimated that more than a quarter of a million people live in the city with less than $US1 per day (Kenya Government 2007). Akama and Kieti (2007: 746) have produced quite an important study on the relations between the increasing figures of tourism at a macro-level and the strategies that must be put in place in order that local people effectively benefit from this situation, since ‘current forms of tourism development in Kenya have not reduced poverty or contributed to the socio-economic empowerment of local people’. This is a departure point to understand that guides, more than just ‘mediators’ must be entrepreneurs who are required to ‘turn their social relations and narratives into a profitable enterprise’ (Dahles 2002: 784).

Many of the guides are concerned that ‘[local] people don’t get anything from the Fort’. While at first this could be the direct consequence of the Fort being a National Monument of Kenya, and revenues reverting directly to Nairobi (a common financial architecture throughout the world), this discontentment has more profound routes. For most guides, the region – and Mombasa, in particular – benefits very little from the Fort development. For them, local people (and here they mean coastal people) gain almost nothing, except the number of tourists that comes to Fort Jesus, who might buy some crafts or drinks in the very short period of time they stay in this part of town. Coastal people (read Swahili) tend to see the city as their own and resent the success of migrant groups, characterizing up-country people (read Kikuyu, Luo and Kamba) as more aggressive, unscrupulous and grasping than themselves (see Rakodi et al. 2000). This is well in line with the arguments presented some time ago by Middleton (1992: 53):
The coast is the scene of intensive tourism controlled by European entrepreneurs and their African partners, who are virtually never Swahili. The profits are shared by them and the national governments, and any ‘trickle-down effect’ is slight. Tourists and their hangers-on are despised by most Swahili as non-Muslims who bring new commercial and sexual mores and have a corrupting influence. This is the final and perhaps the most degrading exploitation of the Swahili coast.

This lack of control over tourism development is also clearly present in the guides’ position towards organized tours. To a large degree they feel bitter and somehow hopeless towards globalization and information communication technologies applied to tourism, which allow a large number of tourists to arrive in Fort Jesus with an already organized tour: ‘it is foreign guides who bring foreign tourists groups to visit the Fort and the Old Town’. The guides express grief that this business takes place in a sphere that is out of their reach; by the time tourists arrive everything is planned and their local knowledge and expertise remains out of the equation. Their view on foreign guides is that they may have solid knowledge about Fort Jesus, on its history and dynamics, but have an outside vision and are unaware of local history (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Mediating Fort Jesus. Source: author, August 2007.
The principal aspect to highlight from the guides’ knowledge about Fort Jesus is its diversity. It is significant to mention that although guides’ ages are similar (the youngest was 34 and the eldest 50), their business experience varies considerably. Whereas Ahmed has been working as a guide for only four years, six of them have been guides for up to ten years, and three have even been in this business for more than 15 years. They have acquired knowledge about the history and geography of Mombasa and of Fort Jesus in very different ways. Some, like Sultan, did not attend high school and have learnt most things about the Fort through colleagues. Mohamed and others have been to one workshop organized by Fort Jesus. Others rely on the Old Town Guide-book and on another non-specified book. Most have mentioned that they would like to participate in more workshops and feel that opportunities to develop their professional skills are scarce.

Due to the Old Town’s proximity and connection to Fort Jesus, prices for guiding tours often include both attractions. The Old Town, which for centuries was Mombasa’s gateway through its harbour and was gazetted as a National Monument in 1990, is now an almost forgotten corner of a rapidly expanding metropolis (see Hoyle (2001) for a discussion of urban renewal in Mombasa). With a complex Shirazi, Omani and Islamic urban heritage, the Old Town is a complex maze of streets, where guides, acting as pathfinders – providing privileged access to an otherwise ‘non-public territory’ (Cohen 1985) – are almost indispensable. In fact, various tourists have complained that unofficial guides can be quite intimidating when they refuse to engage in a guided tour in the Old Town.

To a large degree, the guides are also knowledgeable about other tourist attractions in Mombasa and throughout the Kenyan coast. They often take tourists to local markets, temples and along the coast to places such as Lamu, Paté or Malindi. These tours are usually arranged through an informal structure of acquaintances. In a society and economy like in Kenya, people’s success (or survival) relies to a great extent on the circle of people who can be involved in making business possible. Guides always have a cousin, a relative or a friend, who can arrange a taxi trip, make a hotel reservation, be a guide elsewhere and so on. It is this knowledge of the local culture, which, as Dahles (2002: 784) rightly argues, ‘is not limited to facts, figures, and couleur locale’, since it must include the art of building an informal network, of monopolizing contacts, a familiarity with the operations of the tipping and commission system, which converges to make the encounter with tourists as profitable as possible. This is perfectly understandable in the context of post-colonial Africa and post-colonial African cities, where urban Africans with their complex ‘informal economics’ (craft, street vending, shoe polishing, ‘smuggling’ and so on) are ‘re-villagizing’ the cities by superimposing their indigenous cultures, institutions, traditions, norms and practices and, in the process, decolonizing the city itself (Demissie 2007). It is this complexity and fluidity that characterize the nature of contemporary African cities, which is clearly present in the narratives of guides (see Ndi (2007) for an approach to the study of the post-colonial West African city). It is
also significant that their understandings of Fort Jesus' convoluted past, in the context of the extensive trading network developed in the Indian Ocean, is very limited. Their local and regional knowledge extends along the Kenya coast (sometimes as far as Tanzania and Zanzibar), but is understandably narrow outside these borders. At the same time, their ability to develop narratives and offer explanations is based on superficial knowledge. None of the guides had information on Fort Joseph, another Fort which lies at the entrance of Mombasa, or of any of the other ruins that made the complex of Forts in Mombasa. Only four out of ten guides knew where Fort Joseph is located, but only one said he had taken tourists there. No one could add any information about this structure (see McConkey and McErlean 2007). As discussed below, only some of the guides have a depth of information that enables them to subtly adapt their guided tours to the average intellectual level of a group (see Salazar 2005).

Some of the guides are profoundly aware that history and the past are not a given. The subjective character involved in telling a story allows for a dynamic which is open to interpretation. The guides' narratives are constantly negotiated according to the readings they make of tourists. This flexibility varies significantly not only in regard to the guides’ knowledge of the history of Fort Jesus, but also in relation to their own personality. Abdul told me that for him ‘locals find that there is no use’ in Fort Jesus. ‘It’s not their story. . . . history is a fabrication’. These ideas clearly illustrate his awareness of power relations and history, marginalization and dominant discourses. Also ‘Ali’ mentioned that his work is quite important, since some tourists are not simply looking for a visiting experience that highlights pain and suffering. His ideas were close to some of Caren Kaplan’s (1996) inquiries on post-colonial travel. For him (as well as for Kaplan), tourists (engaged in post-colonial travels) are embedded in ‘imperialist nostalgia’ (Ali did not actually use this term):

we must recognise what they are looking for . . . some do not want to hear so much about the past, the misery, the slavery, the battles, the blood, and so on . . . some just want to listen to a nice story, they want to feel we have simple lives . . . yet other tourists like to know about the full history of these buildings [Kaplan’s edifices, markers and altered economies of former colonies that imperialism left] . . . we just have to know which is which.

Through his speech it was possible to understand that Ali knew exactly that some of the Western modern tourists construct the non-modern Africans as pre-modern. At the same time, and in line with the arguments of Salazar (2005), some of the guides’ swift and fluid engagement with local culture, adapting their discourses to what they perceive as tourists’ desires, is a good example of glocalization.

From the guides’ point of view, Bruner’s (2005) idea that tourists yearn for the story of the colonial past is not always the case. Many tourists want to see the Fort as a physical structure that echoes countless stories, silences and memories, but also want to find out about the daily life of guides. In fact, on various occasions some of the guides took tourists to their home environments and showed them some of
the ordinary routines and landscapes of Mombasa. Perhaps in these cases that were narrated to me, tourists were looking for a more ‘authentic’ travel experience, for MacCannell’s (1976) uncontaminated back region, attempting to disrupt the spatial binary connecting metaworlds of tourism or ‘tourist bubbles’ (Hottola 2005) and public spaces. But not all guides are flexible and aware of the ‘capricious’ nature of tourists’ desires. For most guides, history is perceived as a single narrative, and they understand their job and role as being precise and accurate mediators in telling the ‘truth’. Along these lines they may emphasize or downplay certain aspects according to tourists’ interests, but there is a certain rigidity in their discourse. To a large degree this is the result of a poor educational record and a very thin understanding of the cultural and spatial complexity of the east coast and of tourists’ psyche.

At the same time, and most crucially here, the story that is being told by most guides is constructed upon colonial narratives of the Fort. These reflect the remarkable Portuguese sailors and conquerors who constructed a powerful building that still exists. It is about de-contextualized and de-spatialized Omani who conquered the Fort time and time again. It is about the British who set up the museum with Portuguese funding. It is about James Kirkman and other British archaeologists who made important excavations in coastal Kenya. It is about colonial artefacts. Although the guides are creative and embed this dominant narrative with flair, individual points of view and particular tellings, to a large degree, they, as subaltern, cannot speak. They are constrained within a tight web of information and a lack of qualifications and training, and squashed between the absence of local control of tourism at the Fort and the global control of tourism development.

Conclusion

George Abungu (1996: 102), ex-curator of the Fort Jesus Museum, wrote that the Fort has an important role to play since the people of Mombasa find there a common sense for their history: ‘The Fort is no longer a symbol of oppression or a prison, but an image of unity for the various coastal people . . .’. Wazwa (2006), in a very optimistic paper, also follows this line of thought. Yet, through the guides ‘voices’ I could not detect this common sense, this stability, this meeting ground. In fact, not only guides contest what they perceive as the external (read Nairobi) control of the Fort’s history, but they argue that the Fort is only one of the pieces of the long Swahili coastal heritage, which has been neglected and downplayed by the dominant ethnic groups. This is much more in consonance with the arguments of Jamison (1999), who emphasized that ethnic tensions are latent in many of the interrelationships that have developed as a result of increased contact, which is a direct consequence of the tourism industry. It is hard to sustain that tourism is increasing the existing cleavage between coastal people and the dominant political and cultural groups from central Nairobi. Nevertheless, despite the Fort being used in community functions and events, having an increasingly active cultural and social programme, it is clearly visible that the resentment of guides towards the inability of coastal people to have a stronger say in the process of tourism
development and heritage interpretation at the Fort is very strong, and constructed upon a certain degree of cultural alienation. The studied group of guides revealed that not only were their personal characteristics very heterogeneous, but also their views on the Fort, on heritage, on tourism and culture. None the less, while some of the guides seem to be aware of the complexity of history and coastal heritage, and of the importance of politics in the national construction of history and ethnicity, the majority is unable to decolonize their own performances for tourists. On the one hand, most guides are open-minded and aware of their own subjugation and role play. Unlike many other destinations where there is an official script and a highly controlled formal speech, here guides can be sophisticated and subtle, accommodating the needs of their audience. Their agency is strong and, revealing a hybrid post-colonial condition, they are tuned into multiple and open-ended stories. Yet, on the other hand, their inability to subvert the dominant narratives and discourses that tell the story of the Fort is clearly connected to a lack of qualifications and training of some, but principally related to the pervasiveness and hegemonic nature of the Western views on African heritage and history and, to a smaller degree, to the construction of national heritage by the ethnic majorities in the country. In any way does the Fort and its museum or the materials available to guides instruct and implicate the diverse ethnic subjects and audiences, or become part of the conspicuous ongoing cultural struggles in the Swahili Coast? The economic forces of tourism, the tourists ways of consumption and the guides’ backgrounds allow for the circulation of certain forms of knowledge and presentation that embody the continuation of a colonial present in Africa and, importantly, of various domestic imbalanced power relationships. As reported by other authors (Kaplan 1996; Bruner 2005; Sarmento 2009b), the present is charged with the legacies of the colonial past, but one of the main consumers of this heritage – the Western tourist – must but be saved from feelings of guilt and offered instead an alternative and wholly stereotyped image and experience of ‘Africa’. Fort Jesus remains a keystone asset in the Kenyan heritage product, but critically, the lack of alternative narratives of the past has prevented a more inclusive political condition of public memory of the present and, to a large degree, the Fort has not escaped the orbit of colonialism.

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References


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