Images of Africa: Agency and nature conservation in South Africa

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Despite the dramatic political and economic changes in Southern Africa over the last ten years, European primitivist and colonial images of ‘wild’ Africa(ns) have shown great resilience. This is particularly evident in nature conservation. Although the new (black) political and economic elites entered this domain in the 1990s, and in spite of an internationally endorsed narrative of the need for community participation, representations of Africa(ns) remain firmly based in essentialist notions of the African wilderness. This chapter shows how the new elite has bonded with the old (white) elite, which formerly controlled nature conservation. These representations seriously limit options for local communities to benefit from nature conservation. There is a need to situate and distinguish agency at various levels in society and to take into account its development over time. Despite a growing body of literature on the strategic use of claims of indigeneity by communities, their agency is, in the long term, seriously hindered by the persistent stereotypes that are associated with this concept, as they often do not do justice to the economic and development aspirations of these communities.

Introduction

Images of ‘wild’ African landscapes have been in the European psyche ever since the intensification of European interaction with the African continent in the colonial era (Jahoda 1999). And nowhere is this probably more so than in the field of nature conservation and nature tourism (Neuman 1998, Wels 2003). International tourists are often lured to visit countries in Southern Africa on the
basis of an essentialist representation of Africa. These images have shown a particular resilience and persistence over time, despite the many political and ideological changes that have taken place in the field of nature conservation itself, and in the wider socio-political and socioeconomic context. The changes have been dramatic, especially in South Africa with its iconic first democratic elections in 1994.

Until apartheid officially ended, nature conservation in South Africa was dominated by white interests (see, for example, Ellis 1994) but, after 1994, attempts were made to transform the sector, not only through changes in personnel at the Ministry of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, and in departments concerned with conservation, but also in terms of the distribution of benefits from nature conservation. The dominant narrative on conservation became one in which local communities living adjacent to conservation areas were to be considered as stakeholders and should benefit economically from conservation. This is in line with global changes in thinking about conservation since the mid-1980s (Adams & Hulme 2001). At the same time, prominent members of the new political elite entered into business partnerships with members of the old elite and became active in the ‘business of nature conservation’ (see Draper et al. 2004). In this chapter we will argue that in their attempts to obtain a share in lucrative tourism enterprises and other conservation-related economic activities, members of the new elite have bonded with members of the old elite on the basis of rather essentialist representations of African wilderness. These representations seriously limit options for local communities to benefit from nature conservation (Draper et al. 2004, Spierenburg et al. 2006). Based on these observations, we would like to explore two issues here: the need to situate and distinguish the agency at various levels in society of (formerly) oppressed groups, and the agency of one such group at one level – at the level of the new post-apartheid political elite – and how it can hinder and obstruct agency at another level, i.e. the level of local communities. We also discuss how the agency of the new political elite engaging in nature conservation is constructed around persisting stereotypical images of ‘wild Africa(ns)’, around static and frozen caricatures of Africa’s landscapes and people.

Images of African landscapes and Africans

William Burchell, one of the early explorers in South Africa, was a botanist, ornithologist, anthropologist and natural historian. In addition, he was also an amateur landscape painter, and looked upon every landscape as a potential subject from an aesthetic point of view. He travelled some 4500 miles across Southern Africa and painted landscapes not only on canvas but even more so in words in his two volumes of Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa (1822,