

Stuck in the Colonial Past? Perpetuating Racist, Environmental Myths of Kenya in a Swiss Zoo

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ABSTRACT

This contribution challenges representations of landscapes and communities within zoos in Europe that may amplify colonial narratives of local people through a racialised and often static lens. Instead of a holistic portrayal of the relationship between humans and nature that the EAZA (European Association of Zoos and Aquaria) stipulates within its guidelines, some European zoos continue to perpetuate a narrow view of foreign landscapes within their exhibits. Utilising the concept of representation, this short article argues that Zoo Zürich reinforces colonial narratives through its new Lewa exhibit, an exhibit based on a Kenyan conservancy. This piece is based on an improvised visit to the zoo to see the new African exhibit. It highlights discrepancies between the Lewa exhibit, guidelines of the EAZA and the Lewa Conservancy in Kenya. In this light, we propose recommendations for European zoos to decolonise their institutions and exhibits based on an understanding that is not only scientific, but also historical, critically reflective, and inclusive of non-Western perspectives.

KEYWORDS

Decolonisation, (mis)representation, pseudoscience, zoos, Africa

Various approaches have been used to study zoos, including historical and social dimensions of inclusion and representation of people and their culture. These studies have included the history and legacy of human zoos (Bancel 2010), and a racialised, and colonial representation of cultures through their exhibits (Matos 2014; Purtschert and Fischer-Tiné 2015).¹

Zoos are defined by the European Association of Zoos and Aquaria (EAZA) as permanent centres ‘where animals of wild species are kept for exhibition to the public for seven or more days a year and required to promote and participate in the sustainable relationship between humans and nature by explaining, through education and experiences,



the values of ecosystems and importance of conserving biological diversity' (EAZA Council Directive 2015). It recognises the social responsibility of zoos to educate and inform visitors because 'zoos become a social reference of the relationship between humans and animals and our attitude towards nature' (EU Zoos Directive 2015: 29). It outlines that zoos should aim to connect people to nature and communicate effectively conservation and human–animal relationships, while inspiring behavioural change (EU Zoos Directive 2015: 29).

Zoos are often linked to conservation-area research.² These engagements, often with foreign countries, can lead to zoo-led conservation projects that are situated in and around protected areas where local people have been dispossessed of their land (Keller 2015), and these exhibits may in fact promote racialised views of local people (Purtschert and Fischer-Tiné 2015). These exhibits may also perpetuate narratives of untouched wilderness, a concept still current in conservation circles (Fernández-Llamazares et al. 2020; Hymas et al. 2021).

Although there were anti-racist movements in Europe prior to Black Lives Matter (e.g. those related to migrants), this movement has made racism more visible, and shown the importance of confronting colonial pasts and present in the region (De Genova 2018). Zoos are an important point of departure to do so. Using the case of Zürich zoo's recently opened African exhibit, this article argues that the zoo exemplifies what Kapoor (2004) terms as the 'other', where subjects of exhibitions are represented within the us/them dichotomy. This results in firstly, misrepresentation of people and the conservation landscape, and secondly, it perpetuates colonial and racial histories of zoos and conservation. Therefore, zoos should carefully assess how they engage with the African landscape and its people (Brennard et al. 2020). Using the concept of representation and a decolonial lens, this contribution problematizes and analyses the African exhibit in Zoo Zürich. It argues that the zoo perpetuates environmental racialisation of the African landscape (Kepe 2009), and is laced with colonial and racial stereotypes of wilderness and conservation communities. Thereafter, it proposes recommendations for European zoos.

Background

Fraser et al. (2009) argue that zoos were historically seen as scientific institutions of learning that primarily engaged in the research of biological landscapes and species. Recently, zoos have also begun to

advance a conservation agenda to transform social norms and behaviours towards protecting the environment (WAZA 2006). Unfortunately, this transformational process is sometimes carried out by continuing a colonial narrative of representing Indigenous peoples and local communities as regressive, uncivilized and unable to protect their environment without Western interventions.

Human zoos were public displays of people with mutual disregard ‘for the exclusion of the other’ (Sánchez Gómez 2013: 2). In their origins in the late nineteenth century, animals were showcased with humans to ignite interest and expand the range of attractions within zoos (Malamud 2015). Recently, zoos have been criticised for their role in showcasing African and other Indigenous peoples with animals, and promoting the narrative of the ‘other’ as non-civilized or savages, as opposed to the Western ideals of culture, modernity and identity (Arnaut 2011).³ The spectacle of Indigenous people in altered and exported landscapes among animals was based on the claim of the authenticity of a visual representation of ‘real peoples in their real lives’, as in the Masoala Exhibit in Zürich Zoo⁴ (Purtschert and Fischer-Tiné 2015: 515). Switzerland’s history and identity as a non-colonist country that has not gone through a decolonisation process (Purtschert and Fischer-Tiné 2015: 515), can ‘partly explain why the attempts of the Zürich Zoo to thematically exhibit non-Western cultures in specific enclosures did not meet any resistance so far’ (Purtschert and Fischer-Tiné 2015: 515), resulting in the same failures now found in the Lewa exhibit.

To situate and analyse the Lewa exhibit in Zoo Zürich we briefly describe the concepts of decolonisation and representation. Decolonisation is a formal political process for the independence of former colonies.⁵ However, the project of colonialism is understood to not only include historical and ongoing appropriation of land and resources, but a re-writing of history, Indigenous narratives, and misrepresentation of people and the ‘other’ (Guha and Spivak 1988). It recognises the power of Eurocentric models and transforming them into ones that work across lines of difference (e.g. race, gender and/or class), promoting social change that addresses and transforms knowledge and power hierarchies (Langdon 2013). Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) speaks to the decolonisation of the mind of those in former colonies. In the work of Albert Memmi, decolonisation is argued to impact the coloniser as well as the colonised and as such should be a collective effort (Langdon 2013). Guha and Spivak (1988) state that it must also be an internal process of unlearning one’s privilege and learning to listen (cited in Kapoor 2004). The discussions surrounding this concept called for the need to contest

the Eurocentric foundations in research methodologies in which power and knowledge combine to perpetuate hegemonic ideas (Langdon 2013).

Post-colonial and feminist authors have interrogated how the ‘other’ can be presented as being marginal, primitive and exotic, as well as having a role in cultural domination, imperialism and the sciences (Barsamian and Said 2003; Guha and Spivak 1988; Kapoor 2004). These representations of the ‘other’ are important instruments of establishing meanings of progress and backwardness. They are inherently acts of power that were established in imperialism. In discussing the ‘Third World’, two meanings of representation exist, speaking *for* (political representation) and speaking *about*, or ‘re-presenting’ (Spivak in Kapoor 2004). In development studies, representation positions Western-style development as the norm. Power relations exist within this norm, which Kapoor argues is where ‘subjects are coded according to “us/them” dichotomy which “we” (Western societies) aid/develop/civilize/ empower “them”’ (2004: 629).

Similarly, environmental racialisation speaks to representation where unintentional acts highlight racial differences, for example, in the way black communities were historically represented as poor, devoid of agency and ill-equipped stewards of nature within conservation practices (Kepe 2009: 872).⁶ Questions of who is represented/ how representation is done, are also argued to be based on institutional positioning (NGOs, universities, development organisations, the World Bank) where ideas and knowledge creation establish hegemonic discourses that may, in the process, position actors who are less influential as the ‘other’ (Spivak in Kapoor 2004).

In the following sections, we argue that Zoo Zürich has placed the Lewa Conservancy and adjacent communities, as the ‘other’, through how it is displayed (infrastructure) and represented (information, context, signage) in the Lewa exhibition. Our main method of investigation was an educational visit to Zoo Zürich in October 2020. The visit was a combined effort to observe multiple exhibits within the zoo, especially the newly launched Lewa Exhibit.

The Lewa Exhibition

Opened in 1929, Zoo Zürich is one of the most visited zoos in Switzerland. With an impressive array of displays from around the world, the zoo won the World Association of Zoo and Aquariums (WAZA) Conservation Award (2019) for its longstanding commitment to

The School

The community school is dilapidated both inside and outside. To replicate a rural school, the zoo used old furniture and a dated computer (Figure 1 and Image 1) on which they show a film conveying the story of the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy in Kenya. The film emphasises an endless landscape of untouched wilderness, with little reference to the community or the school. The school conveys messages of negative and positive impacts that tourism has on the community, emphasising alcoholism through bottle displays, and humans posing the biggest threat to wildlife (e.g. poaching, competition of resources) (Figure 2). This is a linear narrative of progress established by showing a dilapidated ‘Kenyan’ school in stark comparison to the one shown on the Lewa Conservancy’s website (Figure 2). For example, in Figure 3, notice the use of modern computers in the pictures by Lewa Conservancy and the uniforms (upper left and right) in comparison to an old scratched-up photo representation of the school by the zoo (bottom).



Image 1: Lewa Community School, Switzerland, 2020. Photo by Samantha Sithole.

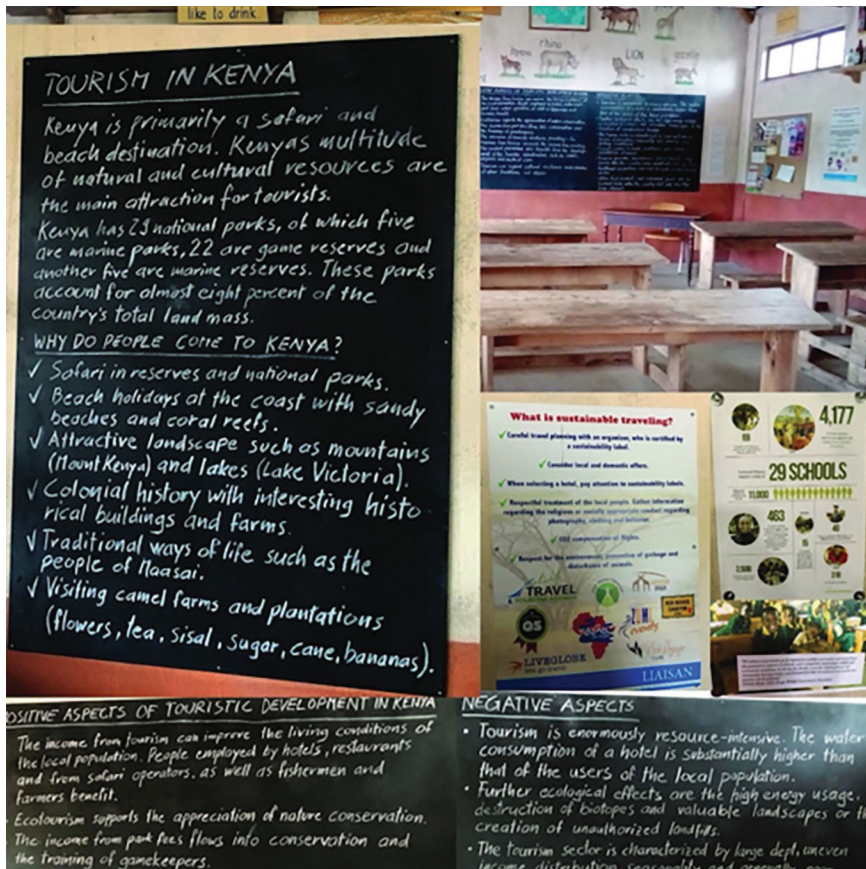


Figure 2: Inside Lewa Community School, Switzerland, 2020. Photos by Marianna Fernandes, Olivier Hymas, Gretchen Walters and Samantha Sithole.

Schools are institutions that simultaneously represent modernity and progress. The zoo's image of an underdeveloped school is a misrepresentation when compared to the image portrayed by the Lewa Conservancy. Depicting the school, without providing information on the context of its students, background and relation with the zoo leaves room for misconceptions and reinforces colonial stereotypes of 'lack' of development and 'absence' of progress. This represents Kenyan and African communities as disadvantaged to visitors who have had no previous exposure to these places. In this way, the zoo has reinforced the 'other' by portraying an underdeveloped Kenyan school versus the modern Swiss schools that mostly Swiss visitors



Figure 3: Upper right and left: school as depicted by the Lewa Conservancy website.⁸ Below: school as depicted by the zoo, Switzerland. Photo by Samantha Sithole.

experience, as demonstrated by fellow visitors who whispered to their children, ‘this is a school in Africa’.

The Barbershop/Salon

The presence of an everyday space, the barbershop (Image 2), within the Lewa exhibit, is perplexing. Similar to the school, the barbershop was furnished with old, run-down chairs, radio, television and equipment (Image 2). It contained popular hair extensions sold in African retail shops within Switzerland and in most African countries;



Image 2: The barbershop/salon, Switzerland, 2020. Photo by Samantha Sithole.

caricatures of African men with different haircuts were hung on the wall. The depiction of African people in the zoo through the barbershop arguably reflects the colonial history of human zoos discussed earlier. The zoo does not provide any information or social/geographical context that locates the barbershop within the Lewa exhibit, how it relates to the school and the airstrip, and why it is in the zoo. Black African people have been historically exhibited in zoos where they have been spectacles with the 'sole purpose of showing their peculiar morphological or ethnic condition' (Sánchez Gómez 2013: 2). This is highly problematic as it perpetuates racist images of the 'other', rooted in misrepresentation, through its presence in the zoo and the lack of information about the people or structure.



Image 3: Inside the airport in the Lewa exhibit, Switzerland, 2020. Photo by Olivier Hymas.

The Airstrip and Campsite

Similar to the school and barbershop/salon, the airstrip and campsite (Image 3) are decorated with outdated furnishings and equipment that are in stark contrast to the five-star lodge and safari accommodation displayed on the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy website.⁹ The depiction of a landline phone in the airport is particularly misleading as these systems have long disappeared from most of Africa because of mobile phones (Otiso and Mosely 2009). Kenya is far more advanced in technology such as mobile payment systems than Switzerland. The M-pesa (mobile phone money) system was introduced in Kenya in 2007, reaching sixty per cent of Kenyans (Nofie 2018). By contrast,

in 2009, mobile banking was thought of as a failure in Switzerland (Ondrus et al. 2009).

The Role of Communities

Lewa in Kenya is not a community at all, but a conservation conservancy held on private land with a colonial history (Breed 2011; Weissman 2019). Today, it fosters award-winning conservation recognised by the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Green List,¹⁰ which 'puts people at the centre of conservation'. By contrast, in the exhibit, the communities around the conservancy remain nameless, and interpretive signage wrongly attributes degradation solely to their grazing (Leach and Mearns 1996). Rather, it should be placed into the wider historical context of colonial-era disease that emptied areas, creating the illusion of a pristine landscape that was later brought under protected areas through land dispossession (Brockington 2002; Hymas et al. 2021).

It is in this context that zoos must interrogate what Cindi Katz refers to as a 'space of betweenness'. This notion encourages us to not only critically confront ways in which our positionality shapes the objects of our inquiry, but also contextualise them within larger historical, political-economic systems (Katz 1992). In the context of the zoo, this means paying attention to both the power that the zoo has in being able to represent (and continue to shape) Lewa, but also how the Lewa community is part of the wider political-economic context of tourism, development, and politics of conservation (Weissman 2019). Lewa is not a place on the map in the Cartesian sense, represented by objects suspended in time and without context (e.g. a dilapidated school building, a barbershop, and an air-strip), but has a history and an ongoing relationship to the conservation movement. Representing Lewa as being a distant 'out there', corruptible by tourists, effaces the exchange between Lewa, Switzerland, and Zoo Zürich. The continued relationship between the conservancy, local communities, and Swiss visitors – for better or for worse – is erased in the process.

Recommendations

This final section suggests ways forward for Zoo Zürich as well as other zoos in Europe. We contacted them as well as WAZA about our concerns, and stand ready to engage with them when they are ready.

Decolonising the Institution

In order to decolonise the institution, it is important to firstly examine the history of zoos in Switzerland and Europe. Corine Mauch, the mayor of Zürich says, ‘We mustn’t close our eyes to the city of Zürich’s colonial past. The city will now assess how to publicly commemorate this topic in a contemporary way’. This is especially important due to the involvement of Zürich in colonial endeavours, which spans military engagement, research, and business (e.g. banking and textiles). The city of Zürich funded the University of Zürich to examine the links between its monuments and slavery (Bregard et al. 2020). Further studies should examine Zoo Zürich and other institutions, adding to the growing decolonisation of the mind and its institutions (e.g. films of René Gardi, the Rietberg Museum) (Perrenoud 2010).

Secondly, the zoo could learn from other European institutions on decolonising processes. Zoos must go beyond simplified Black Lives Matter statements about diversifying their hiring policies, as seen in media statements by some zoos. They need strategies on how to decolonise their exhibits and minds. For example, the Museum of Ethnography of Geneva has a new strategy that includes the co-development of exhibits with the people that are being represented (Ville de Genève 2020). This is accompanied by a conference series and a library on decolonisation literature.

Thirdly, Zürich Zoo could incorporate social scientists in leadership roles. Conservation is not an ecological issue, but rather a social one (Adams and Hutton 2007; Lowe et al. 2013: 207) with biologists playing a supporting role while social scientists take a leading role (Mascia et al. 2003). The clear lack of integrating the social dimensions by the zoo in their exhibition is not only spreading myths but is actively harming conservation around the world. This could be mitigated by employing social scientists alongside natural scientists (Ben-net et al. 2016), preferably at the highest level of the zoo organisation.

Decolonising the Exhibits

In order to decolonise exhibits, the zoo must rethink and reorganise displays to avoid reproducing preconceived ideas and myths about places and people. Exhibits of conservation landscapes should make the history of people and conservation visible. This includes making the role of communities clear, and potentially co-designing exhibits

with them (e.g. Museum of Ethnography of Geneva, see above). Communities should not just be perceived through a lens of degradation, but also for their roles (historically and currently) in conservation. How the conservation landscape acquired land, and if it involved dispossessing people, should be made clear. Finally, exhibits must avoid promoting wilderness myths. Most ecosystems in the world were influenced by people and are cultural landscapes (Ellis 2021).

By doing all of the above, Zoo Zürich will be complying with guidelines and laws that it signed when becoming a member of WAZA, EAZA and VDZ. Article 3 of the EU¹¹ directive on zoos states that they are required to promote ‘ . . . public education and awareness about the conservation of biodiversity . . . ’. It will also be complying with the EU Zoos Directive Good Practices Document that states zoos are required to promote ‘the environmental, economic, cultural and intrinsic values of biodiversity’.¹²

Lastly, for zoos globally, guidelines could be very useful to address many of the preceding points. Such guidelines could be developed by an interdisciplinary team of researchers and practitioners with WAZA and EAZA. The human dimension of these zoos needs to go beyond diversity hiring policies and diverse access to the zoos themselves. For instance, the multitude of guidelines that WAZA has created on the different aspects of running a zoo, which includes education and animal–visitor guidelines, needs to also include guidelines on how to integrate humans into a conservation discourse that is accurate, ethical and decolonised.

Conclusion

This contribution illustrates how Zoo Zürich’s representation of the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy (through the Lewa exhibit) is problematic as it reinforces racial and colonial stereotypes, following on from a history of human zoos. We’ve made a series of recommendations to decolonise the institution by examining the history of zoos, learning from other institutions and involving social scientists in leadership. We also recommend that Zoo Zürich decolonise its exhibits through complying with the guidelines of EAZA and VDZ and establishing a set of precepts to address the social/human dimension of zoos. Further research is needed on how cultural institutions in Switzerland reproduce problematic myths, not only about other countries but about their own nation as well. This is important in the project of

decolonising culture in Europe and also in deconstructing the erroneous perception that, due to the absence of formal colonisation in Switzerland, there is no coloniality or racism in the country.

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Notes

1. This occurred in zoos in Western countries as well as zoos in former colonies. For example, in 2007 hunter-gatherers (Baka from Likaoula) were invited to play at the Fespam music festival in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo, where they were housed in the zoo by the zookeeper of the Brazzaville Zoological Park (Diarra 2013); <https://worldmusiccentral.org/2007/08/10/>

- big-ideals-and-puny-brains/, accessed June 2021; <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/6898241.stm>, accessed June 2021.
2. For example, the London Zoo Gorilla exhibit is linked to state funding based on the work they conduct with gorillas in Gabon – www.zsl.org/zsl-london-zoo/exhibits/gorilla-kingdom/gorilla-conservation, accessed April 2021.
 3. For example, the Augsburg Zoo in Germany in 2015 (Arnaut 2011: 346).
 4. The exhibit perpetuated stereotypes through images and narratives of black bodies of the community in the signage used (Purtschert and Fischer-Tiné 2015).
 5. The United Nations and Decolonisation – www.un.org/dppa/decolonisation/en/about, accessed April 2021.
 6. Kepe (2019) highlights the discussions of communities being excluded from protected areas because of the untouched wilderness narrative that was perpetuated during colonialism.
 7. Zoo Zürich website: Lewa Conservancy (2015), accessed April 2021.
 8. Screen capture by authors. Public domain: www.lewa.org/impact/education-2/school-programs-2/, accessed May 2021.
 9. www.lewa.org/, accessed May 2021.
 10. <https://iucngreenlist.org/sites/lewa-wildlife-conservancy/>, accessed April 2021.
 11. COUNCIL DIRECTIVE 1999/22/EC of 29 March 1999 relating to the keeping of wild animals in zoos 9.4.1999 L94/24.
 12. The European Union Zoos Directive (together with EAZA) stipulates the role of zoos in ‘undertaking social education’ (EU Zoos Directive Good Practices Document, 2015: 29).

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