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Maasai on the phone: materiality, tourism, and the extraordinary in Zanzibar

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Thousands of Maasai men have been flocking in recent years to the island of Zanzibar to take part in the burgeoning tourism industry. Many are employed as guards and security personnel. Others roam the beaches, selling souvenirs and touting tourist services, while some are involved in sex-tourism. In this article, we show how these men skillfully employ their traditional materiality: red robes, swords, daggers, clubs, beaded sandals and jewelry, as well as their own muscular bodies, so as to construct an extraordinary image, which they use to attract the attention of tourists and promote their businesses. Concomitantly, their use of modern material objects, such as mobile phones and stylish sunglasses, undermines their extraordinary image, making their presence mundane and even disturbing, to the extent of being accused by some Tanzanians and tourists of faking Maasai identity. We conclude by arguing that material objects and the ways in which they are used may define people as ordinary *and* extraordinary at the same time. Materiality therefore underlies a complex, dynamic, and ambiguous perception of the extraordinary in contemporary tourism.

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Tourism and the quest for the extraordinary

There is a common sense understanding that tourism is “a time of escape from the ‘stresses and strains’ of mundane, everyday life” (Edensor, 2007, p. 199). In other words, tourists are after the *extraordinary*. John Urry, in his seminal “The Tourist Gaze”, wrote: “(t)he tourist gaze is directed to features of landscape and townscape, which separate them off from everyday experience. Such aspects are viewed because they are taken to be in some sense *out of the ordinary*” (2002, p. 3, our emphasis). The extraordinary may be conceptualized as “authentic”, when juxtaposed to the inauthenticity of modern life (MacCannell, 1989), as “existential” (Wang, 1999), when compared to the flat experiences of everyday life, or as a “pseudo-event” (Boorstin, 1992) constructed and staged so as to offer an experience that seems radically different from the tourists’ routine life back home. While the nature and qualities of the extraordinary and authentic were repeatedly questioned, challenged, and redefined (Cohen, 1979, 2007; Wang, 1999; Shepherd, 2015), the quest for “the extraordinary” remains a central motivation in Western tourists’ experience and an important feature of the tourism industry. Tourist spaces are, therefore, privileged arenas for exploring the complicated nature of the extraordinary.

One way of confirming the extraordinary nature of a given tourist destination is its materiality (Navarro, 2015; Rickly and Vidon, 2018). The houses in which the people at the tourist destination live, the tools they use, the clothes they wear, or the food they eat, serve as tangible testimonials to their uniqueness. Material objects actually make for a stronger case than verbal declarations: tourists are well aware that tour guides and other tourism agents may claim anything, especially in contexts unfamiliar to the visitors (MacCannell, 1989), but concrete material objects are usually perceived as objective evidence (and see Holtorf’s, 2013 discussion of old buildings in archeology). The tourism industry, therefore, directs the tourists’ gaze and attention towards extraordinary material objects, such as the Eifel Tower (MacCannell, 1989), the Iban “long houses” (Yea, 2002) or “classics” such as the Great Wall or the Pyramids, while actively camouflaging material aspects that are mundane and normal as far as the tourists are concerned, making sure that tribal dancers performing for tourists would remove their wristwatches, or coating the concrete slabs and iron bars in hotel constructions at exotic destinations with wood, tree-palms, straw mats and other “natural” materials.

In this article, we address the materiality of one of the most salient tourist icons/attractions in Africa: Maasai warriors. Tall and slender, their extraordinariness is essentially constructed through their traditional materiality: their red robes (*shuka*)¹, swords, clubs, daggers, and spears, their cattle and huts, the meat, milk and blood they consume, and their dark, muscular bodies (Hodgson, 2001; Salazar, 2010).

Gardner (2016) points out that the Maasai, “due to their distinct appearance and dress, and resistance to many modern values are one of the most recognizable, but also most discriminated ethnic groups in Tanzania”. Our ethnographic data, however, depicts a more complex picture of the ways in which material objects are used by the Maasai and understood by other Tanzanians and by foreign tourists in Zanzibar. While Bruner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, in their seminal “Maasai on the Lawn” (1994), described how ethnic Maasai in Kenya take part in the representation of colonial relations in the context of modern tourism, in this article we pursue the unexpected twists in the development of these relations in Zanzibar, which rest on materiality and complicate the definitions of the extraordinary in postcolonial Africa.

The Maasai of Zanzibar

The semi-nomadic pastoral Maasai live mainly in the Kenyan and Tanzanian arid rangelands. Tall and well-built, donning red robes, swords, clubs and spears, subsisting on their cattle’s meat, milk and blood, and reputed for hunting lions as a *rite de passage*, they are respected by their fellow citizens for their prowess, for holding on to their traditional lifestyle and culture, and for resisting modernity (Presbey, 2000; Hodgson, 2001).² The perception of the Maasai as Noble Savages was common among white colonialists, and enthusiastically adopted by the modern tourism industry. Maasai men are iconic representations of “Black Africa”, epitomes of black African masculinity and a “must see” attraction for any tourist visiting sub-Saharan East Africa (Akama, 2002; Wijngaarden, 2010; Salazar, 2018).

In recent years, thousands of Maasai men flock during the tourism season to the island of Zanzibar to participate in the burgeoning tourism Industry. Donning the material objects that identify them as Maasai: robes and weapons, some are employed as guards and security personnel in hotels and tourist-oriented shops, while others roam the island’s beaches, selling yet another material representation of Maasai culture: “Maasai souvenirs” (Salazar, 2018). Some are engaged in the sex-tourism (Rotarou, 2014), trading their slender, muscular, dark bodies.

In their economic and social endeavors, the Maasai rely heavily on mobile phones (Fig. 1). Another striking material feature are their ultramodern sunglasses. While phones and sunglasses are routinely used by tourists and other Tanzanians on Zanzibari beaches, their use by the Maasai is often commented upon by tourists and non-Maasai Tanzanians as unexpected and/or extraordinary.

In this article, we explore the ways in which these young men maneuver the notion of the extraordinary through their materiality in different touristic spaces and contexts. We show that this



Fig. 1 Maasai on the Phone. Maasai man with his phone next to a souvenir shop, Stone Town 27.7.19.

combination of traditional and modern materiality induces unease and discomfort among tourists and non-Maasai Tanzanian, which may lead some of them to argue that the men roaming the Zanzibari beach donning Maasai robes and weapons are “fake Maasai”. In the discussion we question the interface of materiality and extraordinariness in contemporary tourism, highlighting ambiguities rather than dichotomies, and suggesting that it is often hard to decide whether a “local” event or behavior is special or normal, extraordinary or mundane. We, therefore, argue that in tourism, and especially when it comes to material objects, the ordinary and unique are not merely interchangeable or negotiable, but may be mundane *and* extraordinary concurrently.

Fieldwork in Zanzibar

The first author arrived in Tanzania in September of 2018. Throughout his stay in Tanzania he met Maasai men, and what was first an excited and naïve gaze over these “noble savages”, gradually became complex and intriguing. Engaged at the time in an ethnographic research of the African Hebrew Israelite Community in Israel, and co-writing an article on their “Black Male Bodies” (Markowitz and Avieli, 2020), he realized that the ideas developed for the research of African American men in Israel were relevant in some ways to the Maasai in Zanzibar. He, therefore, started taking notes, turning from observations and conversations into fieldnotes and open-ended interviews with Maasai men, other Tanzanians, and tourists.

The second author set for fieldwork in Zanzibar in September of 2019. This was a carefully planned and intensive fieldtrip that included stays in the Island’s capital Stone Town and in the popular beach resorts of Nungwi, Kendwa, and Paje. Twenty-four interviews and dozens of conversations were conducted with Maasai men, policemen, business operators, “beach boys”, and tourists. The interviews were conducted in English and included questions regarding the diverse motivations for coming to Zanzibar, the social relations with peers and members of other social/ethnic groups, their thoughts and feelings regarding Zanzibar and tourism in Zanzibar, the learning processes embedded in host-guest relations, culture, tradition and their future plans. The ethnographic data was later organized into themes that relate to the material presence of the Maasai in formal and informal tourist spaces and the reactions of tourists and other Tanzanians to Maasai materiality.

This article is not a comprehensive or authoritative ethnography of the Maasai in Zanzibar. Rather, it is a focused analysis of their use of different kinds of material objects as means for enhancing their success in tourism businesses, of the ambivalence stimulated by these material objects and practices, and of the tourists and locals’ reactions to the Maasai presence, materiality and behavior in the island.

First encounters

It was my first day in Africa, and I (the first author) took the front seat of the van, trying to take it all in. Suddenly, in a cloud of dust raised by a herd of cows just next to the road, I saw two slender figures, wearing red robes and holding spears, walking among the cattle. They were Maasai, just as I remembered them from the blurry slides in my Introduction to Anthropology class many years ago. Or perhaps not exactly as I imagined them: as our car slowed down by the herd, I could see that they were scruffy, their hair and robes dusty, and their noses running. Still, they were *Maasai*, the real thing, and they looked rough and wild. The driver-guide, realizing my excitement, explained how everyone in Tanzania admires the Maasai: “they refuse to give up their

tradition and culture” he explained, “and everyone in Tanzania respects them for that”.

Driving on, I noticed what the driver-guide explained were “Maasai Barbeques”: just off the road, Maasai men were roasting large chunks of beef over open fire. Vehicles passing by, mostly trucks, stopped by these makeshift barbeque pits, and their male drivers purchased roasted meat, sliced by the Maasai with their large knives. I realized that I was observing anthropological theory in action: these hyper masculine men were roasting meat, the stuff that is deemed in many cultures as the essence of masculinity (Adams, 2015; Avieli, 2018), and selling it to other men, less masculine than the Maasai perhaps, but still truck drivers, another epitome of masculinity.

A couple of days later, back in Dar a Salam, I saw a Maasai standing at the door of a bank, firmly holding a shotgun. I thought that the red robe, sword and club were a bit strange for a bank security personnel, but his impressive figure radiated confidence and signaled that the bank was well protected. Walking on, I saw a couple of Maasai men, recognizable by their robes, squatting on the sidewalk. They were not armed, and were offering cheap looking sandals and flipflops laid on a rag. This was not exactly the practice or posture I have been expecting from the fierce noble lion hunters celebrated by National Geographic and by the driver-guide a couple of days earlier, so when I returned to my hotel, I had a chat with the receptionist, who was almost dismissive of my questions: “They come to the city to look for work. Some get a job in security, but others take any job they can find. They must earn money to send to their families back home”.

A week later, on the ferry to Zanzibar, there were a couple of Maasai on the deck among the western backpackers, once again identified by their material paraphernalia. Many of the foreign tourists were attempting, more or less discretely, to take their pictures, or to capture their own selfies with the Maasai at the background, red robes shining over the turquoise water.

Once in Stone Town, the island’s capital, I saw “Maasai souvenirs” sold everywhere. There were two kinds of merchandise: objects used by the Maasai for their daily affairs such as red robes, swords, daggers, spears, beaded jewelry and sandals; and different objects depicting Maasai worries: wood carvings, paintings, posters, t-shirts, music instruments, postcards etc. In one of these souvenir shops, labeled “The Maasai Shop”, the sales person was a Maasai, dressed and armed accordingly. Every now and again I saw Maasai men, alone or in couples, walking the narrow lanes. Boswell (2011, p. 74) notes regarding the Maasai presence in Stone Town: “their physical esthetic presence, particularly Maasai distinctive dress, jewelry and physiology, produce a counterpoint to the Middle-Eastern inspired architecture, products and presence”. The Maasai were clearly an extraordinary sight, adding to the exotic aura of Stone Town, and their “Maasainess” was defined by their materiality.

However, it was on the beach that I first realized the overwhelming magnitude of the Maasai presence in the Zanzibari tourism scene. After a long ride in an overcrowded minibus during an afternoon-thunderstorm, my spouse and I made it to our hotel in Kiwengwa beach. The sky was clearing up and we walked out of the hotel yard to have a look at the beach during sunset. At first, I could not figure what was going on. It took me a couple of minutes to realize that the dark figures roaming the beach were hundreds, perhaps a thousand, Maasai men, their robes turning purple in the deeming light.

There were very few tourists on the beach, probably due to the heavy rain that had just receded, and within seconds we were surrounded by dozens of Maasai men, who were trying to strike a conversation, first in Italian, then in English, and finally with some Hebrew slang. We were taken aback by this aggressive



Fig. 2 Maasai Market. Maasai men selling souvenirs Ningwi Beach 31.7.19.

approach, and our counterparts swiftly reacted by deserting the pleasantries and sociability, and directly offering different kinds of souvenirs and trying to engage us in bargaining. We somehow managed to get away from these very decisive salesmen, and as we were returning to the “safety” of the hotel yard (from which the Maasai were held back by a guard), I began telling my spouse about these fierce masculine lion hunters. My spouse listened for a while and then commented impatiently: “What is so masculine about these guys? They are sly commission touts just like the ones in Vietnam³...”.

I reluctantly admitted that she had a point: there was nothing particularly masculine or imposing about the Maasai behavior on the beach. They did look impressive, but there was a confusing contradiction between their appearance and their actual practices, which made us feel quite uncomfortable. Their materiality clearly marked them as masculine icons: muscular, fierce, heavily armed, ready and able to protect their herds and kin from lions and other aggressors. Their behavior however, was that of nifty salesmen using emotional extortion and other old-fashioned selling techniques to impose their cheap merchandize on uninterested and reluctant customers. In what follows, we elaborate on this ambivalence in different contexts and vis-a-vis different forms of materiality (Fig. 2).

Maasai in the Lobby

Many of the hotels and beach resorts in Zanzibar boast a Maasai warrior at their reception area, clearly identified by his robe and weapons. Zanzibar is hardly an exception: in many tourist destinations the gate keeper or doorman, the first person to greet the guests as they descend from their vehicle, is a masculine figure, at times armed with traditional weapons and donning distinctive local ethnic outfit, at others clad in police-like uniform, radio and even club and chain-cuffs. A common example would be the Sikh or Rajasthani front-door keepers in many Indian and/or British colonial style hotels, distinguished by their turbans, beards, moustaches, and daggers. Considering their fierce looks, it is hardly surprising that Maasai warriors serve as gate keepers or guards in many East African resorts.

The perception of the Maasai as fierce warriors was not based merely on their looks. Several interlocutors, foreign and Tanzanian, told us that the Maasai first arrived in Zanzibar as guards. The foreign manager of a large tourism business elaborated: “the first Maasai were invited by a foreigner that was building a beach resort and suffered from constant pillaging. The Maasai are well known for their courage and loyalty, so he felt that they would be efficient guards”. The arrival of the first Maasai to the island as guards is described similarly by Hooli (2017).

Later in the conversation our interlocutor elaborated why he hired Maasai as security personnel: “The Maasai have a strong network in between them and if anything happens, they call their Maasai friends, so within minutes you’ll have twenty or thirty Maasai warriors coming to assist your guard. No one dares messing with them”. A Maasai interlocutor confirmed this attitude: “Part of Maasai culture is helping each other. One Maasai have problem—every Masai have problem...”. Hooli (2017) mentions yet another advantage of the Maasai guards: they lack local networks, so they can’t cut deals with local criminals or competitors, ensuring their loyalty to their employers.

These explanations also reflect on the Maasai social organization. At home they are intensely connected in a dense social network. When migrating to work, they form similar Maasai-only networks at their destination. However, when it comes to their perception by others, they are looked down upon as primitive savages hardly appropriate as partners in the social network of other Tanzanians or of foreign entrepreneurs.

A local businessman explained: “Some of the people don’t like them because they act like animals. They don’t have social minds because they live only with Maasai. They lose the ability to be in society and they don’t have boundaries. For example, if someone on the beach is reading a book, everyone understands [that they should] not to talk him... But they don’t, they go and talk and bother him...”. This man was actually suggesting that the Maasai lack the cultural knowledge and tools necessary to engage with foreign, that is European, tourists (“the ability to be in society”), which he himself possessed, thus implying that the Maasai should be excluded from the lucrative realm of tourism and from all modern social contexts.

While foreign businessmen and other Tanzanians were looking down on the Maasai due to their alleged savageness, they also expressed a combination of awe, admiration, respect and fear when it came to their attachment to their culture and their prowess. A local entrepreneur thus commented: “The Maasai tradition is strong tradition in Tanzania and Africa. The other traditions mix with white people and wear European clothes. But Maasai people are proud and stay with their cloths—they don’t want change”. A female Tanzanian bartender responded to a query we made about a couple of Maasai who were having a drink at the bar, regarding their guarding skills: “If you try to steal from their boss- they will kill you!”, stressing how the same qualities that define them as savages are assets when it comes to their modern position as guards.

Yet the Maasai warriors in the lobby were not merely guards. There was a clear performative aspect to their presence at the hotel, which the first author witnessed upon the arrival of tourists, and specifically of large groups, to the resort (cf. Salazar, 2018). Much of the tourism to Zanzibar is based on package deals: tourists who individually purchase their flight, transfers, accommodation and sightseeing, but are handled as ad hoc groups rather than as separate travelers. Zanzibari Hotels are oriented towards this kind of clients, who are essentially after the “four S’s of tourism”: sun, sea, sand, and sex (Crick, 1989).

Upon the arrival of such group to the hotel, the first author noticed how the receptionist (a westerner or a Tanzanian wearing western outfit), would call the Italian entertainment manager, who would gather some members of the (mostly Italian) entertainment team, as well as some of the “local staff” (cleaners, waiters, and housekeepers), who would form up to welcome the guests singing and dancing the popular Swahili song *Jambo Bwana* (“Welcome sir”). The Maasai warrior on duty at the reception, would join the singing and dancing, standing out in his robe and weapons (cf. Bruner, 2001, pp. 892–3).

It should be noted that the performative aspects of the Maasai presence at the lobby were as important as their guarding and security roles, and perhaps even surpassed them. Thus, a hotel owner told us: “I don’t employ any Maasai. I don’t think they are particularly good guards. But tourists expect to see Maasai in the hotel...”. In similar vein, Hooli (2017, p. 261) writes: “For the resorts, the Maasai are more than security guards, and due to their distinctive appearance and dress they have become tourist attractions themselves. Their presence is important in the creation of an exotic ‘African atmosphere’.”

The Maasai at the reception, however, were not merely security guards or representations of authentic Africa. When checking in, we were given a password for the hotel Wi-Fi, but could not log in. I asked the receptionist for help, and after a couple of failed attempts she said: “the Maasai will help you”, and waved him over. Confidently and swiftly, the Maasai guard manipulated our phones’ settings and connected us to the world. This was a revealing moment: while we and the educated Tanzanian receptionist could not handle the technology, it was the Maasai “noble savage”, the authentic African warrior, who easily managed it for us. The discrepancy between his robe and rudimentary weapons and his high-tech skills was striking.

Maasai on the Beach

Thousands of Maasai men roam the beaches of Zanzibar, their dark silhouettes and red robes protruding over the shinning white sand and turquoise water. Once closer, two other kinds of material objects routinely used by the Maasai drew our attention: their stylish sunglasses and their mobile phones. Most if not all Maasai done funky sunglasses of the surfer/cyclist/adventurer-style. Their sunglasses were similar to those most tourists had, perhaps because many of

these sunglasses were given to them as gifts from tourists. Their use of sunglasses was hardly surprising, since the blazing sun and shining white sand scorch the unprotected eyes, especially during the late morning and early afternoon, when most tourists hang out on the beach. The combination of red robes, heavy clubs, spears, swords, bead-decorated sandals and ultramodern sunglasses seemed, however, incongruent.

Yet it was their use of mobile phones that made for the most striking and confusing image. Virtually each and every Maasai on the beach had a mobile phone, and they seemed to be on their phones almost constantly. Only when engaged in conversation with tourists, did the phones disappear for a while, but as soon as they were alone or in the company of other Maasai, they returned to their cellular phones.

During our conversations with Maasai interlocutors, we asked them who they were communicating with so intensively. The most common response was that they were calling home and talking to their relatives to check about their cattle, which, they pointed out, they missed very much. While talking about their presence and employment in Zanzibar, they tended to emphasize the poverty of their families back home, which underlined their decision to leave their beloved cattle and travel to the island (cf. Salazar, 2018). This often included a description of villages that had no electricity or running water. However, if this was the case, we wondered, how could their relatives back home operate their cellphones. While the obvious answer would have been that they find ways to charge their phones, this question seemed to have confused our interlocutors, and was often ignored, probably because their conversations with their relatives back home were not as frequent and intense as they argued.

As the second author developed closer relations with some of her Maasai interlocutors, she realized that their use of mobile phones was first and foremost social, local, and immediate, talking to other Maasai in Zanzibar, followed by business-related conversations with tourists and other Tanzanians. It turned out that the Maasai roaming the Zanzibari beaches were not applying modern technology so as to overcome the distance from their remote villages. Rather, they used cellular communication for social interaction with friends and so as to promote their business.⁴

The Maasai are not exceptional in their use of mobile phones as a subversive technology that helps subaltern classes overcome social and economic subordination and undermine power structures (and see Doron, 2012 for the use of mobile phones by the boatmen of Varanasi). Their constant use of mobile phones was also similar to that of the foreign tourists and Tanzanian entrepreneurs on the beach. Why is it, then, that their use of mobile phones and sunglasses attracted so much attention and critique?

We think that the sunglasses and mobile phones captured the duality of Maasai materiality in Zanzibar. Just like the tourists and other Tanzanians on the beach, the Maasai used these modern artifacts so as to engage with the modern conditions of mobility, migration and tourism. However, while the use of mobile phones and sunglasses by foreign tourists and local entrepreneurs was taken for granted, when it came to the Maasai, their use of these modern artifacts seemed to clash with the very artifacts that defined them as Maasai: their robes and weapons. This tension was exacerbated when it came to the Maasai entrepreneurship on the beach.

Business on the beach

Quite a few Maasai we observed on Zanzibar’s beaches were engaged in peddling “Maasai souvenirs”. A Maasai interlocutor jokingly commented: “usually the customer goes to the store, but in the case of the Maasai, things are reversed: the store goes to the customer” (Fig. 3). Others made money by luring foreign tourists



Fig. 3 Souvenirs Sellers. Maasai men selling souvenirs on Paje Beach 30.9.18.

to shops and other travel services that offered them commission. In both cases, their selling technique involved establishing some kind of friendly conversation, which sooner or later turned into various business propositions such as: “would you like to buy Maasai jewelry?”, “would you like to visit my brother’s shop?”, “are you interested in spice garden tour?” (a popular and exotic tourist attraction), “would you like to go for a sunset cruise?” (in a traditional Swahili dugout *ngalawa* canoe), or “do you need a taxi to Stone Town/airport?”.

As the number of Maasai men in Zanzibar increased, the competition became ever more aggressive. We were told that in the past, most Maasai would carry large bags full of such souvenirs, which they would tout on the beach. Owing to the complaints of tourists and resort managements, peddling on the beach was forbidden and the Maasai had to establish small shops away from the beach, or settle for “hidden corners” on the beach and the constant risk of being fined, blackmailed, or otherwise abused by the police (cf. Hooli, 2017).

Tourists were critical of the Maasai business strategy and made comments such as “they understand that they can make money here”, or “they use their looks and culture so as to attract tourists, let you take pictures with them, and then you have to pay them... they are champions of manipulation”. Foreign and Tanzanian entrepreneurs, who competed with the Maasai over business with tourists, pointed out that by engaging in business rather than herding their cattle (or, at least, occupying security jobs befit of warriors), the Maasai were betraying their tradition and culture.

Both tourists and non-Maasai Tanzanian entrepreneurs were disturbed by, and critical of, the Maasai engagement in profit-oriented modern commerce, and for not living up to the noble savage standards they expected them to withhold. Their critique was clearly related to Maasai materiality, since the traditional outfit and weapons that identified their bearers as Maasai warriors were those that elicited the tourists’ interest and willingness to interact with them and potentially, purchase the goods and services they touted.

It should be noted that quite a few Tanzanian entrepreneurs, especially those operating small businesses such as boats for hire, drink stalls and small restaurants, applied similar selling techniques: they tried to engage tourists in casual conversations intended to

create some sort of rapport that would hopefully lead to business. Despite the similar business maneuvers, they were as critical as everyone else of the Maasai for “not behaving like real Maasai”. Here again, the only thing that distinguished these beach entrepreneurs from the Maasai were the latter’s robes and weapons.

Sex on the beach

The unease and critique regarding the Maasai interaction with the tourists on the beach were intensified when it came to their sexual endeavors. In many beach destinations around the world the semi-naked bodies, exposed to the sun, water, sand, and wind, and the license for hedonistic pleasure, often enhanced by accessible alcohol and drugs, make for sexually charged settings. Many tourists in beach resorts desire and expect sexual experiences (Crick, 1989) with their partners, with other tourists, or with their hosts (Tucker, 2005).

Beach resorts therefore tend to feature different sorts of sex services and environments. A specific segment of sex related business is that of “beach boys”, who are not necessarily mercenary sex-workers who trade their bodies for money, but rather beach entrepreneurs that include sexual relations in their socioeconomic exchange with tourists, at times for payment, in others as payment, and sometimes as part of the social relationship (cf. Zinovieff, 1991; Malam, 2004). This is also the case in many beach resorts in Africa (Nyanzi et al., 2005; Venables, 2009; Kibicho, 2016), where the muscular black male bodies, and the myth of black men’s hypersexuality and large organs (Nyanzi et al., 2005; Bauer, 2014), are attractions for some sex-oriented tourists.

What is unique about Zanzibar, however, is the fact that many of the beach boys are Maasai, identified as such by their robes, weapons, and slender muscular bodies. Meiu (2011) suggests that Maasai men have been identified in the last couple of decades by western white women as attractive, exotic, and erotic partners following the publication of Corinne Hofmann’s 1998 novel “The White Masai”, where she depicts her (quite unsuccessful) relations with a Maasai man in Kenya, which was turned in 2005 into a successful film.

While on the beach, we noticed that many of the Maasai routinely mixed business propositions with sexual advances, trying to lure



Fig. 4 Tourism. Maasai with sunglasses talking to a female tourist holding a phone, Nungwi 29.7.19.

female tourists into a conversation that may lead to business transaction and/or some kind of sexual relations. The second author was constantly approached in this way, as the more explicit business propositions by Maasai men were often accompanied or replaced by more subtle advances that included invitations for drinks, parties and even direct invitations to have sex (Fig. 4). We also observed quite a few couples on the beach composed of a young(er) Maasai men and an old(er) white women.

During his stay in Kiwengwa, the first author noticed that there was only a single beach bar where Maasai men would regularly hang out as customers and order drinks and meals. The bartender explained that this was the only guesthouse on the beach owned by a Maasai, and that other Maasai felt comfortable and welcome in his place. When asked who the owner was, the bartender pointed to a man in his thirties, wearing Bermuda shorts and tank top, and boasting dreadlocks. The bartender commented that he was indeed a Maasai, but did not dress like a Maasai anymore.

While hanging out at the bar, the first author noted that a western woman in her forties, carrying a large backpack, entered the grounds. Visibly excited, she spotted the owner, ran toward him, hugged him and gave him a long kiss. She then took his hand and led him to one of the rooms. A few seconds later we saw the owner closing the curtains that covered the large window of the room. This might have been a romantic reunion between lovers who have been away for quite sometime, but the comments and motions made by the two Maasai men sitting at the next table, made it clear that as far as they were concerned, the *Mzungu* (white person) was there for sex, and for that matter, with a Maasai man.

Non-Maasai Tanzanians were critical of the Maasai rough sexual advances, and their lack of sophistication and understanding of the foreigners and their culture. What they found most disturbing, however, was what they described as deviation from a presumed Maasai masculinity: “real Maasai”, we were told time and again, “are not beach boys”, who take money and gifts from older white women in exchange for sex. Tourists were less knowledgeable about Maasai culture and did not make claims about cultural deviation, but their take on the Maasai sexual advances was as negative. Many of them, especially single women, found the Maasai constant sexual advances distressing, tedious, and at times, threatening and scary.

Here again, just like with modern business, sunglasses and mobile phones, both non-Maasai Tanzanians and tourists were critical of the Maasai for doing exactly what they were doing on the beach. Tanzanian entrepreneurs routinely made sexual advances at female tourists, while our observations supported the arguments in the literature about the erotic nature of beach resorts: it was clear that many tourists came for a romantic/erotic vacation with their partners, while others were actively searching for sex partners. In a moment of sincerity, a young male tourist told the second author: “They [the Maasai] are simply doing what everyone else is doing here: trying to get laid”.

The fake Maasai

The critique and unease regarding the Maasai commercial and sexual pursuits on the beach led quite a few of our interlocutors to argue that the men dressed in red robes and armed with clubs, swords and spears, were “fake Maasai”. Their aberration from “real Maasainess” was defined in cultural or ethnic terms.

Most of those arguing that these men were not real Maasai pointed to their deviation from what they perceived as the traditional cultural attributes of the Maasai. For our non-Maasai Tanzanian interlocutors, this basically meant herding as the only possible mode of socioeconomic existence, which in turn defined proper Maasai masculinity: subsisting on meat, milk and blood, protecting their kin and cattle from predators and thieves, and adhering to the Maasai age-set system. We were also told that Maasai men never smoke or drink alcohol and, importantly, that “Maasai men would never enter the sea or eat fish” (cf. Hooli, 2017).

The Maasai in Zanzibar, though donning red robes and weapons, did not have their cattle with them, arrived to the island by boats, regularly bathed in the sea, and ate all kinds of food including fish and sea food. Some drank alcohol or smoked, and we were told that some were disobedient to their elders and even punished by other Maasai when refusing to behave properly. Except of those employed as guards, Maasai warriors engaged in petty commerce, which, according to our non-Maasai interlocutors, was a female practice among the Maasai, and while doing business, bargained and cheated, again inappropriate for Maasai warriors. We were also reminded that they were sexually



Fig. 5 Exorcism. Tourist Watching Maasai Ritual on the Beach, Nungwi 29.7.19.

promiscuous, which is not an attribute of Maasai culture. The following quote is representative of this approach: “But you have to know—they are not real Maasai, they are digital Maasai... They don’t have cows, they eat fish, they have phones...”

These rigid definitions of Maasai culture have little to do with past and present Maasai practices and values. Rather, they reflect the colonial perception of the Maasai as noble savages frozen in time, officially adopted by the modern nation state and its non-Maasai citizens. In fact, these Tanzanians were critical of the Maasai for modernizing and adjusting to changing socioeconomic circumstances, a process in which everyone else in Tanzania was taking part. We must also bear in mind that their critique had a competitive edge: they felt that by donning Maasai materiality, these men were competing unfairly, pretending to be what they were not anymore (Maasai warriors) so as to attract more business.

The tourists, who generally knew little about Maasai culture, also had a negative take on the Maasai modernization. In a classic manifestation of “the tourist angst” (the suspicion that what a tourist is shown is not authentic, and see Redfoot, 1984), a young tourist told the second author: “Because the Maasai hang out on the beach and not their reserve in Tanzania [sic], I suspect that when they return home in the evening, they change their clothes and watch Netflix... I am not sure how much of this is authentic, and how much is meant to attract tourists”. Another tourist commented on their mixing of traditional and modern material objects: “With their phones and sunglasses, it feels fake to me—show for tourists. I’m sure they have regular clothes, and they live just like me, they’re just trying to get money from the tourists”.

Some non-Maasai Tanzanians, however, made a more radical claim: the young men wearing red robes, walking around with their clubs, swords and spears, they argued, were not Maasai at all but Tanzanians of other ethnicities who done Maasai materiality for business and pleasure. “How do you know that they are real Maasai?” the first author was asked by a hotel owner who moved to Zanzibar from the mainland, “many ethnic groups speak Maa [eastern Nilotic] languages, and I can’t tell if they are really Maasai or not. For me, I look at their earlobes—if they have big holes, maybe they are real Maasai”. Another Tanzanian interlocutor pointed out: “A real Maasai lives only with cows...but in Zanzibar they are fake Maasai, they are not real Maasai.. they

[are] beach boys. Real Maasai are tall, they have long and strong legs, and long hair”.

The interesting aspect of such comments was the shift from external materiality to the body itself: “Anyone can buy Maasai robes and weapons in Stone Town”, the first author was told, implying that the materiality that defines its bearers as Maasai was hardly a reliable marker.⁵ Large earlobe holes and long hair are somewhat more reliable, but actual physical attributes such as being tall or having long strong legs, are impossible to fake, and were deemed more dependable. In fact, even the locals couldn’t really tell whether these men were Maasai or not. According to these interlocutors, material objects such as red robes, spears, swords and clubs, which were perceived by the tourists as the most direct markers of Maasai authenticity, were displayed so as to construct a fake Maasai identity intended to improve their success when engaging with tourists.

So are these men “real Maasai” or not? To our mind, this question, as intriguing as it may be, is not crucial for the arguments made in this article. What does matter is the claims made by quite a few non-Maasai Tanzanians and foreigners, that materiality in tourism, despite its image as a solid marker of authenticity, may be easily manipulated (and see Cohen, 1992 for the manipulation of such material representations in hilltribe postcards in Thailand). In fact, it is the option of manipulation and the idea that these men may or may not be “fake Maasai”, that enhance the ambivalence and unease, which we wish to highlight (Fig. 5).

The extraordinary Maasai of Zanzibar

As iconic representation of “Black Africa”, visitors to Zanzibar expect to find Maasai during their trip, even though the Maasai did not frequent the island prior to the arrival of mass tourism. The presence of Maasai warriors in Zanzibar, defined by their material objects, is both extraordinary: they represent the exotic “Real Africa” which the tourists are after, and expected: they are a routine component of the “African experience” touted by the tourism industry and the media and, therefore, an obvious component of their trip.

Their engagement with modern material objects, namely mobile phones, sunglasses and souvenirs, further adds to the



Fig. 6 The extraordinary Maasai of Zanzibar. Maasai men reading Bruner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's "Maasai on the Lawn" Nungwi beach, 31.7.19.

ambivalence: a Maasai man wearing a red robe, armed with a sword and spear, wearing stylish sunglasses and talking on his cellphone is both extraordinary, due to the combination of traditional and ultramodern, and trivial, as the Maasai are using these modern objects just like everyone else.

The tourists find the interaction with the Maasai ordinary and extraordinary, exciting and disturbing at once: they are excited by the presence of Maasai warriors at their hotel lobbies' and beaches, and love taking selfies with them, but complain about their constant attempts at selling them souvenirs and other services, their use of modern artifacts, and their sexual advances. This dynamics and ambivalence set the background for the claim made by some tourists and non-Maasai Tanzanians that many of these men are actually "fake Maasai", either because they were betraying Maasai traditional culture and values, or because they were Tanzanians of other ethnicities who done Maasai materiality for business and pleasure.

It is not too hard to accept that what is extraordinary for some in certain contexts, may be ordinary for others. Double decker busses in London, New York Skyscrapers, cows walking freely in congested Indian towns, or ultraorthodox Jews in Jerusalem, are all mundane and taken for granted components of everyday life for the dwellers of London, Manhattan, Delhi, and Jerusalem, but totally extraordinary for tourists visiting these places. In fact, tourists visit such locations precisely because they are after what they perceive as extraordinary.

The Maasai in Zanzibar make for a more complex case: they are perceived as ordinary *and* extraordinary at the same time, and this is true for both locals and tourists. This ambiguity, based on their materiality, is the source of the unease, discontent and even fear and anger felt by these locals and visitors. We, therefore, suggest that in the case of the Maasai of Zanzibar (and probably other tourist destinations), a hyphen should separate the *extra* from the *ordinary* so as to indicate their ambivalent status.

A striking moment is captured in Fig. 6, where three Maasai men, dressed, armed, and equipped with phones and sunglasses, are musing over a copy of Bruner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's "Maasai on the Lawn", which the second author was reading while on the beach. They recognized the word, *Maasai* in the text, and carefully inspected the images, but were mostly intrigued by the

fact that an Israeli was reading an English language text that depicts the Maasai of Kenya while on the beach in Zanzibar. For both the second author and these men, this was a destabilizing moment, when the boundaries between the ordinary and extraordinary collapsed, leaving everyone betwixt and between.

Our final argument is that such ambivalence and unease may damage the reputation of tourist destinations such as Zanzibar and drive visitors away. Indeed, the Tanzanian authorities, resort owners, local businessmen, and even some of the Maasai, are aware of the potential negative consequences of this ambiguity and are engaged in constant attempts at streamlining the Maasai presence in a way that will remove the hyphen, curbing the modern material components of some of the Maasai so as to retain them as "extraordinary", while making others "ordinary" by removing their traditional materiality. We therefore expect that in the near future, "traditional" Maasai, dressed and armed accordingly, will remain in hotel lobbies and in more contrived tourist attractions (such as the "Maasai village" recently built by one of the Zanzibari resorts⁶), while others will give up their Maasai materiality, at least when in Zanzibar.

Data availability

The authors did not analyze or generate any datasets.

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Notes

- 1 How traditional are "traditional Maasai red gowns" is controversial. Oyange-Ngando (2018) argues that the Maasai replaced their leather-made clothes with red cotton blankets sometime in the late nineteenth century. The cloth was imported from America or, perhaps, from Scotland (p. 879). In this sense, the invention of the Scottish Tartan, depicted by Trevor-Roper (2012) in Hobsbawm and Ranger's seminal "The Invention of Tradition", took on another twist in Kenya to become "traditional Maasai".
- 2 For a comprehensive discussion of the complex social position of the Maasai, and their perception by citizens of other ethnicities as "traditional" see Hodgson (2001). For a historical analysis of the debate in Tanzania regarding the "modernization of the Maasai see Schneider (2006). During fieldwork we witnessed time and again the

- ambivalent feelings of awe and contempt expressed by Zanzibari and non-Maasai Tanzanians towards the Maasai.
- 3 We lived in Hoi An (central Vietnam) when I was conducting ethnographic research in the early 2000s. We witnessed the touristification of Hoi An, and were very familiar with its sophisticated commission system. Hoi An's commission touts were notorious for their aggressive and cunning selling strategies.
- 4 Rutten and Mwangi (2012) describe the intensive use of mobile-money, which depends on mobile phone technology, by Maasai pastoralists in southern Kenya
- 5 Pretending to be Maasai through "Maasai materiality" was noted also by Salazar (2013, p. 686) in his study of tourism in the region of Arusha.
- 6 <https://fruitandspiceresort.travel/the-maasai-village-is-ready/>. Sampled 28 April 2020.

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Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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