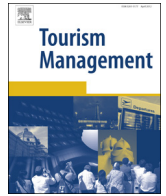




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## Sex tourism: Romantic safaris, prayers and witchcraft at the Kenyan coast

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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Examines relationship between elderly clients and Mombasa sex workers.
- Uses ethnographic methods with secondary documentation.
- Indicates wider working context of sex workers.
- Indicates methods used by sex workers to attract and retain clients.

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the nature of sex tourism on the Kenyan coast. Based on a study of women offering 'romantic' experiences to international tourists in the beach towns of Mombasa and Malindi, the research suggests that these women are motivated by the desire to have a better life that only a mzungu (white foreigner) can provide. The study further indicates that, such is the number of local women competing to engage tourists on 'romantic safaris'; they have to employ different skills and at times seek the help of witchcraft and their supernatural powers to succeed. In the end, the women run a number of risks that include becoming addicted to the 'easy life' that in turn compromises their ability to do something else for a living. The research presents a case study and contributes to the literature by its cultural context and description of strategies employed by the 'romantic entertainers'.

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### 1. Introduction

The primary purpose of this paper is to establish a holistic picture of the nature of the sex industry on the Mombasa-Malindi coastline by describing the motives and techniques of the women involved in the industry. A case study approach is adopted based on ethnographic research. The data are derived from a 12 month field study undertaken by the first author. The term 'romantic safaris' is adopted in this paper (although it is interchanged with the more common label 'sex tourism') and is defined as travel whereby male tourists are seen to be 'romantically' involved with local persons in relationships that are generally serial and where there is exchange of money and/or gifts for shared intimacies (Cohen, 1982; Oppermann, 1998; Pruitt & LaFont, 1995; Ryan &

Hall, 2001). It is therefore differentiated from 'romance tourism' which, according to Bauer (2014) and Hope (2013) has come to be more associated with females who are seeking commercial sexual liaisons (Bauer, 2014) or otherwise have casual sexual relationships while on holiday (Hope, 2013). Sex tourism has also become a significant segment of international travel (Clift & Carter, 2000; Kempadoo, 2004; Ryan & Hall, 2001). In the past, research has concentrated on popular destinations for sex tourism in South East Asia (Bishop & Robinson, 1998; Clift & Carter, 2000; Cohen, 1996; Hall, 1994; Lim, 1998; Lines, 2015; Odzer, 1994; Truong, 1983, 1990) but sex tourism has spread to other regions of the world, including parts of the Caribbean, South America, Eastern Europe and African countries including Kenya, The Gambia, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Swaziland and South Africa (Carrier-Moisan, 2015; Harrison, 1994; Herald, Garcia & DeMoya, 2001; Kempadoo, 2004; Kibicho, 2005, 2009; Meisch, 1995; Nyanzi, Nyanzi, Rosenberg-Jallow, & Bah, 2005; Pruitt & LaFont, 1995; Ryan & Hall, 2001; Sindiga, 1999).

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## 2. Literature review

In terms of research on sex tourism, there has been a dominant perspective within feminist studies that sees sex tourism as a global phenomenon in which socially and economically marginalized women, often from third world countries, are sexually exploited and their bodies turned into objects and commodities to be bought and sold (Barry, 1984; Enloe, 2000, 2002; Jeffreys, 1997, 2009). However, there is also a countervailing approach that sees sex work as a form of work freely chosen by thousands of women and as such, it is not seen as entirely exploitative but as a legitimate form of work (Chapkis, 1997; Herald et al., 2001; Kempadoo, 1998; Nagle, 1997). Additionally, there is also some emerging literature that sees sex (tourism) work as an activity that can both empower as well as enable women to gain sexual pleasure and economic independence (Nagle, 1997; Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Hall, 2001). Some authors have, to some degree, sought to disentangle themselves from normative judgments to try to offer a more non-judgmental assessment, in part by trying to better establish a contextual framework of wider social, political and economic realities (e.g. Brennan, 2004; Hope, 2013), while others have taken the contexts to either substantiate theories of inequitable power structures (Jeffreys, 2009) or as leading to rational economic decisions on the part of sex workers who do not necessarily feel 'dis-powered' by their choice (Kempadoo, 2004).

It has also been observed that sex tourism takes place in both third world countries and wealthy nations (Ryan, 2000; Wonders & Michalowski, 2001). It might be said that the above differing views permit a continuum whereby sex work is a constrained choice that represents a logical response to economic deprivation to generate income that both permits sex workers to gain economic independence and in turn enables them to fulfil other functions as parents, citizens, nodes in local economic structures and as people able to make different choices. Yet it is also necessary to recognize that prostitution has connections with pimping, trafficking, organized crime and drug abuse. Ironically, such linkages are arguably most prevalent when society makes prostitution illegal or generally is intolerant of it, thereby forcing sex workers into marginalized positions (Kempadoo, 2014). Alternatively at the other end of the continuum there exists a view that prostitution is wholly exploitative and a denial of freedom, dignity and recognition as a human being on the part of those who exploit (Jeffreys, 1997, 2009). A third perspective is that both situations can simultaneously exist albeit separated by different spaces, legal systems and degrees of government concern.

Additionally sex tourism shares many of the same attributes as tourism, and it is easy to take the characteristics of tourism identified by Darbellay and Stock (2012) and apply them to sex tourism. They suggest that tourism is an 'inter-disciplinary research object' (p.441), being 'a specific complexity' (p.443) because it is global, possessing multi-local and trans-local relationships, having a diversity of practices, and it comprises a series of relationships that "... articulates recreation and alterity/otherness is a specific mode of self-directed and other-directed control of individuals" (p.445). Like much of tourism, sex tourism is holistic and splintered by disjunctures of place, time and displacement over time.

This paper seeks to contribute to these debates and is based on research undertaken on the Mombasa coastline of Kenya. There were different motives for undertaking the research, but one was to give a voice to the female sex workers engaged in prostitution – to indicate what motivated them, how they went about their business, and to assess to what extent there were advantages and disadvantages for them in an industry generally not well regarded. In terms of a research paradigm the work is premised within grounded research and ethnographic studies. This paper reports findings

as a case study, and Yin (1994) suggests that case studies are an appropriate form of research when 'a how or why question is being asked about a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little or no control' (p.9). Ryan (2012, p.550) notes that "The case study may therefore be oriented in two ways – the first being a search for that intrinsic to a given situation and the second being an orientation to the comparative", and goes on to state that in the former there is often no specific research problem defined. This is the stance adopted here as the research was oriented toward understanding a phenomenon through the words of key actors rather than to seek for evidence to disprove a hypothesis (Popper, 1963). As Amoana (2012, p.419) when citing Svasek (2010, p.90) noted in her case study of the Pitcairn Islands "I would contend that doing fieldwork is not only an outwardly oriented social activity, but also a psychological space in which memories and imaginations shape interactions with informants, their lives, their histories, and their futures."

In consequence this paper provides an overview of the complexities of sex tourism on the Mombasa coastline as revealed through an immersive research process of 12 months on the part of the first author. It indicates complex patterns of deceit, of human frailties, of affection and performances that take advantages of both the main actors involved in the performance of sex work, and where both win and lose. In doing so, it does not reduce these complexities to sets of abstracted causal relationships, but reports phenomena as existing side by side, sometimes separately, and sometimes entwined, based on a mixture of psychological, social and economic needs and/or aspirations.

History indicates that in Kenya 'romantic safaris' have been a feature in its travel and tourism industry for at least a century (Bujra, 1982) and it has grown to almost the same magnitude as sex tourism in South East Asia during the last four decades (Chissim, 1996; Kenya Times, 1996; UNICEF Kenya, 2006; The Vatican representative to WTO, 2003). In spite of this, little academic work has been done on sex tourism in Kenya to understand its nature, magnitude and the factors promoting it, albeit some studies do exist such as those of Migot-Adhola (1982), Sindiga (1999), Kibicho (2005, 2009), Česnulytė (2015) and Meiu (2015). Information available indicates that sex tourism has been on the rise in Kenya, but that it cannot be blamed entirely on the desperation and/or poverty of the female participants since there are a number of women who get into 'sex tourism work', not because they are poor, but with the hope of a 'better life' that only a *mzungu* can provide even while other alternatives for income exist (Kisia-Omondi, 2004; Česnulytė, 2015).

Of the above the work of Česnulytė (2015) is perhaps the most relevant in terms of the timing of this research and its findings, although her work concentrates primarily on the role of NGOs working in the field of sex work in Mombasa. She initially reiterates one of the findings of this study by her first case study, namely that the women involved, although not rich, are not entirely poor as understood in other situations, but find sex work more remunerating than the other options open to them. Equally, as detailed below, the dream of the 'good life' remains a powerful incentive for their continued participation in the industry, and the ultimate goal is a 'good husband' who will provide materially for them. What Česnulytė does not reveal are the different facades and deceits that the women adopt to achieve such ends.

Generally romantic relationships between local women and tourists have been positioned as 'having sex while on holidays' in the main stream sex tourism literature (Graburn, 1983; Hall, 1994). However, some scholars have questioned this conceptualization and indicated that this is a partial truth (Oppermann, 1998; Ryan, 2000). In the case of Kenya there is evidence that both the tourists and local women do not generally seek solely sexual liaisons

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