

Game Lodges and Leisure Colonialists

caught in the process of becoming

1999

In July of 1997, while holidaying on the north coast of KwaZulu-Natal, I struck up a friendship with a family of American tourists. As we exchanged experiences of life in a game lodge, one of my new friends commented, 'Now I understand what it meant to be a colonialist'. I was intrigued by this comment because it seemed to ring true of my own experience of game-lodge living. Does the game lodge not represent the ultimate 'leisuring' of colonial history that has remained relatively untouched in the discourse of freedom. In essence, the game lodge impedes the emergence of an image of Africa and its diverse cultures as transforming historical phenomena.

But how did it feel to be a colonialist? There I was, having secured my own space through an advance booking in a game lodge that promised relief from the accumulated stresses of professional life. It promised isolation, unobtrusive personalised care, campfire camaraderie and pre-dinner drinks with a small number of fellow guests in the evenings, a dinner presided over by the managers, and late-night or early-morning game drives. Much of the lodge was built on stilts so that it would be environmentally friendly. This, I thought, was a slight departure from the usual style where you felt that you were entering a precious cleared space in the middle of a frightening, threatening forest. To make up for the loss of that sensation, this particular lodge, raised up on its wooden posts, allowed you to enjoy the illusion of being lifted protectively above all the 'creeping things' of the earth. But wouldn't those things still come creeping up the stilts? Soon I learned to put this niggling anxiety aside and got down to enjoying myself.

There are some interesting features common to game lodges. There is the clearing in the middle of the bush, signifying civilisation. This clearing will have neat green lawns, which contrast with the dense, chaotic bush just beyond their trimmed edges. That clean-cut edge is crucial. It indicates the perimeter of civilisation. In the precious clearing you 'unexpectedly' yet gratefully find all the modern conveniences. Although they were promised in the promotional brochure, it is most reassuring to confirm the presence of comfortable, elegantly decorated bedrooms, each with its own bathroom containing toilet, shower and bathtub, hot and cold water. The towels and toilet paper, the rugs, the bedside reading lamps never fail to convey a sense of hospitality warmly offered, 'far from home'. Thank God there is no television set! Its pervasive absence enhances the general silence. This occurs especially at night when you finally lock the door and turn off the light to sleep, vaguely grateful that there is a key.

The pleasure of the game lodge lies in its ability to provide personal conveniences and luxuries far from home. These conveniences are an essential link to the home base. Signifying the success of conquest, they are the concrete manifestation of the movement of the dominant culture across time and space, and its ability to replicate itself far away. Of course, in the case of the contemporary game lodge, the violent bitter history of conquest is long over. So you visit the lodge, the secured space in the bush, not to administer the threatening wilderness that presses in on all sides, but to participate in the continuing enjoyment of the fruits of conquest. There is nothing 'out there' to subdue and control. Whatever it is out there, it is guaranteed to stay at bay.

The contemporary tour of duty in a game lodge is of a special kind. It is to reaffirm and celebrate a particular kind of cultural power: the enjoyment of colonial leisure. For is it not true that relaxation comes from the uncontested simulation of hardship in the bush, enduring the chill and the bumpy tracks on night drives, sweating through walking trails, living by the light of the campfire rather than the television screen? The sense of stimulation is enhanced by the ease with which escape is possible. In case of trouble, or in a bout of weakness, the telephone at the bedside is within arm's reach. Keeping the hand away from the phone is the measure of the leisure colonialist's discipline and determination to be isolated successfully. After all, you could simply drive away. Moreover, finding in the morning that your car had been miraculously cleaned, and every trace of the bush removed, you could drive away feeling overwhelmed by the greatness of small gestures, thinking: how thoughtful they can be! So, whether you succeed or fail in your simulated enterprise, you will be rewarded with care. Colonial leisure is the pleasure of risk without danger, or risk with the guarantee of safety.

Guaranteed safety? Not quite. If there is any guaranteed safety it is safety from the past. But if the past is gone, there can be no safety from the future. The thought occurs to me that the game lodge has become a leisure sanctuary where moneyed white South Africans can take refuge from the stresses of living in a black-run country. Once, the game lodge was an extension of their power: now it is a place where those who have lost power go to regain a sense of possession. Everything there is still in place: the measured conveniences, of course, but also the faceless black workers, behaving rather meekly, who clean the rooms, wash the dishes, make the fire, baby-sit the children, and make sure that in the morning the leisure refugees find their cars clean. Living somewhere 'out there', beyond the neatly clipped frontier, the black workers come into the clearing to serve. And then they disappear again. In their comings and goings, they are as inscrutable as the dense bush from which they emerge and to which they return. The servants, in their coming and going, trigger off among the leisure refugees a low-intensity anxiety. Who knows what the potential of these 'servants' is for turning into the unknowable nightmare, so frequently reported in the newspapers, in which a white farmer and his family are brutally murdered by killers, most probably black, who appear out of nowhere and vanish back into it again?

After all, they have political power on their side these days, they can join trade unions and come and go as they please.

Into this situation enters the black tourist. Until very recently, one of the distinguishing features of the game lodge was the marked absence of black tourists, but now they are beginning to show up in steadily increasing numbers. Being there, they experience the most damning ambiguities. They see the faceless black workers and instinctively see a reflection of themselves. They may be wealthy or politically powerful, but at that moment they are made aware of their special kind of powerlessness: they lack the backing of cultural power. They experience cultural domination in a most intimate way. This is apparent especially when it comes to the viewing of game. It is difficult not to feel that, in the total scheme of things, perhaps they should be out there with the animals, being viewed. Caught in a conversation with their white fellow refugees, brought together with them by an increasingly similar, stressful lifestyle, they can engage in discussions that bring out both the artificiality and the reality of their similarity.

The black tourist is conditioned to find the political sociology of the game lodge ontologically disturbing. It can be so offensive as to be obscene. He is a leisure colonialist torn up by excruciating ambiguities. He pays to be the viewer who has to be viewed. He is expected to engage in conversations around the campfire, about bush stories and lion kills, and hunting jokes that hold no interest for him. He is expected to be knowledgeable about 'white things' at the same time as he is transformed into an informant about 'black things', which are then analysed and interpreted by his campfire companions. Whenever he is asked his opinion about these interpretations, he is irritated by a tone of questioning that suggests that he ought to confirm their correctness. The more generous ones treat him with studious respect, wondering if they are not in the presence of a member of the new black elite, someone who may have useful connections. Desperately wanting to forget momentarily where he comes from, he is held up for display in the structure and content of the pleasure laid on for him as a paying customer. He finds no peace, and sensing that he may succeed only in adding colour to the white leisure colonialists' pleasant memories of the game lodge, he pays for being pushed into a stressful state of simmering revolt. The entire world of contemporary tourism carries no intuitive familiarity for him.

But his travail does not end there. The relationship between the black leisure colonialist and the black worker at the game lodge is full of pitfalls. For a moment, the black worker is not sure how he should respond to the black leisure colonialist who is caught up in the structure of 'white things'. Should he enter into a conspiracy of familiarity? Or should he play the game in which one of his kind is treated as if he were in fact 'the other'? If he chooses this last course, he puts the black leisure colonialist in a terribly invidious position. For the black leisure colonialist it is difficult to distinguish between being treated like a pampered guest or like a black guest who is doing 'white things'. The comfortable status of the privileged guest is possible only where there is a shared culture of leisure between the

worker and the tourist, a culture that flourishes and finds legitimacy within a hegemonic political, social and economic dispensation.

On the other hand, if the black worker enters into a 'conspiracy of familiarity' with the black leisure colonialist, familiarity may breed contempt. Given that the black worker may regard the black leisure colonialist as his admired 'representative' in the white world, if the conversation between them becomes an exchange of gossip about 'white things', as it well might, the black leisure colonialist is in danger of losing his dignity. How can he, from his position of 'power', complain with the powerless about the powerful? This ludicrous position clearly confirms him as a caricature. Surely this conspiracy is impotent! After that, the professionalism that the black leisure colonialist, as a paying customer in search of peace and relaxation, expects from the black worker is compromised. Having been exposed as lacking an integral identity, the guest is left with a terrible choice: either to treat the workers with masterful aloofness or to engage them in harmless pleasantries. Either way, he gets to keep his dignity, but he keeps it at the cost of avoidance and self-deception. Both the structure and the content of leisure offer no escape.

But there is a possible escape route. It is to engage the white leisure colonialist and the owners of the game lodge in a cultural contest, in which the cultural history of the game lodge is deconstructed and a new structure and content of leisure are brought into being as expressions of a new society. The liberation of leisure is an essential aspect of the new experience of freedom. To begin that liberation we need to pose some questions: How can the game lodge evolve forms of leisure that are rooted in contemporary South African experience, catering for a new leisure clientele and guaranteeing profitability? How can the game lodge participate in the general liberation of leisure? How can the game lodge become more than an antiquated colonial outpost routinely (yet probably unintentionally) tolerated by black governments? A new black government will surely be concerned about being seen to guarantee the survival of negative, outmoded anthropologies by allowing culturally entrenched forms of white privilege to continue to exist unchallenged!

This leads me to what is perhaps the most frightening aspect of culture in post-apartheid South Africa, something that speaks to the nature of evolving forms of national consciousness. Is it possible that South Africa is one big game lodge where all its black citizens are struggling to make sense of their lives, like people who awake in an enormous vacation house which is now supposed to be theirs but which they do not quite recognise? Do they strive to be just like their fellow citizens who have mastered the economics of the game lodge, and who may seek to consolidate a cultural condition in keeping with their strategies of survival by marketing an image of South Africa as a haven of safety and success in a dark, violent and threatening continent? Does it not pay to belong to South Africa to be free from the 'chaos of the north,' to keep the north at bay at all costs? Does it not pay to be the onlooker, gazing out at 'the rest of the continent' from the window of a vacation house that offers comfort and security? What does it take to keep things this way?

Are we evolving a split personality which may generate its own forms of creativity? What does it mean to use the vacation house as a vantage point from which to look down on others when we have yet to prove that the house belongs to us and that we are its rightful owners, when we still live in an environment in which we are the ones being viewed? As I write, the landscape of apartheid is reproducing itself with a vengeance. Townships are bursting with informal settlements, reinforcing old dichotomies in the landscape. The psychology of apartheid, the culture of the game lodge, would teach us to regard informal settlements as a potential threat to civilisation, menacing the Europe in our midst. While defending this European residue may allow us to keep the vacation house intact, it may also prevent the emergence of the recognition that what is going on in the townships carries the defining characteristics of our new society. The informal settlements and all the problems they present – are they not a vital context in which we can define plan and build for ourselves, not merely maintaining the vacation house but constructing a new home? Could the game lodge itself be transformed in the service of rural development?

The ambiguities and choices are difficult, even painful. Now we want to throw off the psychological burden of our painful past; now we want to hold on to it. We know that death may be a very real consequence of throwing off the burden altogether in one big heave. Surely who we are and who we finally become is bound up with all these questions and contradictions! Surely we are an inseparable part of Africa, our home! Yet our history intricately binds us to the rest of the world, and such ties cannot be broken without a serious threat to our survival. And again: we are very much ourselves, we have many demons to exorcise, and yet much has been achieved that we can build on. We remain complex and we have a responsibility to confront that fact. Our survival will depend on our ability to develop successful skills in carving coherent and sustainable meanings out of this definitive field of complexity.

And so, as we leave the game lodge, we notice the electrified fence that surrounds the whole reserve (we remember the electrified fences on our northern borders). The fence reminds us that the game lodge, that inner core of cleared space, is not carved out of an unbroken wilderness but out of another contained space, sealed off from the country at large. It is a world of make-believe whose charm depends on the brief enjoyment it gives us to be a colonialist. On the edge of the real world we stop the car, as the black gatekeeper opens the gate with an expectant smile. If we are white leisure colonialists, we will wave with a smile or give a generous tip. Either gesture will be appreciated. If we are black, we wonder if we should tip at all. How will it be interpreted? If it is too little, the gatekeeper will think we are insulting him. If we don't give anything, we will fit the stereotype of the stingy rich blacks. If we give too much, perhaps he will think we are ostentatiously displaying our wealth. In the end, we rationalise. We give what we think is generous under the guise of 'spreading wealth'. It seems to be appreciated. Then we drive away, a bundle of mixed emotions and troubled thoughts. How is it that a simple quest for peace and restoration

turned into an unexpectedly painful journey into the self? We think: there is no peace for those caught in the process of becoming.

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