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'Silence is the best language' –  
sound as taboo in tourism

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## 'Silence is the best language' – sound as taboo in tourism

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### 1. Introduction

Research on taboo has focused on how people censor their language in order to fulfill social expectations and to avoid rudeness, discomfort and the assumed dirtying of oneself or others (e.g. Allan 2019; Allan & Burridge 2006; Sagarin 1968). Without knowledge about which topics must not be addressed directly, the social recognition of a speaker would be a coarse and harsh one. Certain aspects of human life seem to be tabooed in many societies: e.g. the body and its liquids, sexuality, death, family relations or religious objects and places. Nonetheless, the exact extent of a ban of words and the correct way to elaborately maneuver around or through it is to

be learned and differs within each culture and language. The phenomenon of capitalism has ascribed itself to connecting people around the world through its biggest economy: tourism. "[A]s such a huge global industry, there is surely no one whose life remains unaffected by tourism, be it those people privileged enough to tour or people who are 'toured' " (Thurlow & Jaworski 2010a: 6).

Some decades ago, it was only the super-elite being able to travel for leisure, using expensive means of transport like airplanes or luxurious cruise ships. By now, more and more people from different cultures are offered tours around the world by cheap flight tickets, while masses of hotels are competing for their

guests by special discounts and packages. The traditional international traveler profile is slowly changing from the North American and European middle aged to a multi-national and multi-aged consumer group. The destination should be more exotic and different from the everyday life. Many countries like Kenya are famous for their tourism industries, offering beaches and safari to their visitors. The data samples presented here have been collected during a research trip to Tanzania and Kenya in August and September 2017 that was generously made possible by Anne Storch and Angelika Mietzner, to whom I remain deeply grateful. Its aim was to research the language, semiotics and entanglements within the tourism context of the beach and its outcome is enhanced by further examples of other tourism settings here. Within the theoretical framework of Thurlow & Jaworski's (2010a & 2010b) conceptualizations of silence in tourism, as well as Francesconi's (2014) multimodal analysis of tourism soundscapes this paper examines how the boundaries of taboos are defined within the multicultural setting of tourism and guest/ host relations, naming the contradictory perspectives of visitors and the visited and silencing as a strategy of avoiding defacement.

## 2. Diani Beach & the aural desire in commercials

At the East African coast in southern Kenya, Diani Beach is one of the most visited destinations for international as well as national tourists. Along the shore, large-area hotel palaces were built (see image 1) which are in most cases owned by international investors and stand in stark contrast to the living experiences of the



Figure 1: Newly renovated five-star hotel in Diani Beach  
(photo JT 2017)

population just a few streets further away from the sea. Although many of the villagers find jobs in the hotel establishments, it can be assumed that the largest share of the tourist economy's profit does not remain in the nearby settlements. However, the buildings of the hotel compounds are designed in a Swahili-style architecture, including wide open areas and Arabian and Indian ornament decoration, trimming the line of vision to the center of attraction, the sea.

Lovell & Bull (2018) describe sea side resorts as historically nostalgic places, especially in regard to childhood memories of spending time at the beach with the family. Especially within the British culture, enjoying the sea breeze and the view upon the waves from a beach hut has become an established tradition in the wake of the industrial revolution and its economic and ecologic effects (ibid. pp. 89–104). As a marker of increased wealth, being seen spending leisure time and escaping the increasingly polluted cities yielded prestige. I argue that whether

or not the architecture garnishing the holiday experience is an original fishermen hut or the respective geographical equivalent is not important for the classification of a setting as authentic. Much more, it is the revival of family holiday memories the visitor has, or the emulation of a social ideal about them. Therefore, even if the hotel compounds are in no way authentic replicas of the everyday experience of the local population, the tourist might still consider the offered principles of the resort (sea gaze, exotic style elements, wide spaces...) as creating authenticity for their own enterprise.

The reasons for the visitors to travel besides the taking a time-out from one's job are relaxation, wellness, self-optimizing (bronzing), self-representation on social media and, of course, curiosity for the new. This

becomes clear by looking at holiday commercials of travel agencies and their promises to the tourists. The most common advertising photographs for Kenya present wide grasslands, wildlife and calm beaches. The tourist is constructed as adventurer who steps out to conquer the world. Some are even portrayed in a safari costume, gazing at nature (image 2). If local people are visible, they are always dressed in colorful traditional dresses or as servants around the hotels or lodges. Although celebrities like Melania Trump are harshly criticized by the media for wearing a pith helmet while being on a safari in Kenya, beige pants with many pockets and other tropical clothing are quite popular amongst tourists<sup>1</sup>.

Figure 2: The safari gaze in an online advertisement<sup>2</sup>

## KENIA ENTDECKEN

4 Tage, Nairobi → Nairobi

ab € 919 / CHF 1'063



*Small Group Adventure*

Masai Mara Wildreservat, Kenia

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Zwei Tage in der Masai Mara
- Unzählige wilde Tiere
- Spannender Lake Nakuru NP
- Nashörner im Nairobi Nationalpark
- Fahrt durch das Great Rift Valley
- Flamingos, Nashörner & Flusspferde

Auf dieser tollen Kurzreise, die nur vier Tage dauert, sieht man trotzdem alle Highlights Kenias! Sie beginnt und endet in der Hauptstadt Nairobi und bietet viele Safariabenteuer mit Besuchen im Nairobi Nationalpark, dem Lake Nakuru Nationalpark und dem Masai Mara Wildreservat. An Tag eins wird das Great Rift Valley durchfahren und die weiten Ebenen der Mara erreicht, wo zwei Tage verbracht werden – hoffentlich mit den Big 5 sowie Tüpfelhyänen, Straußen, Zebras, Giraffen und vielen mehr! Wer zwischen Juli und Oktober reist, hat gute Chancen, die Gnu-Migration zu erleben, wenn über eine Million Gnus, Zebras und Antilopen in die Mara von der Serengeti ziehen. An Tag drei steht eine Pirschfahrt im Lake Nakuru Nationalpark an sowie eine weitere an Tag vier im Nationalpark der Hauptstadt.

### LEISTUNGEN & INFOS

**Reisebeginn:** Ausgewählte MO **Unterkunft:** Camping (2 Nächte), Lodge (1 Nacht, DZ) **Gruppengröße:** Max. 20 **Mahlzeiten:** 3 x Frühstück, 3 x Mittagessen, 3 x Abendessen **Sonstiges:** Alle Transports, Parkgebühren, Pirschfahrten inklusive **Hinweis:** Eintritt in den Nairobi Nationalpark und Giraffen-Center sind nicht im Preis enthalten  
**Tour Code:** 15NBODSK – Discover Kenya

## MASAI MARA, AMBOSELI & NAKURUSEE CAMPING SAFARI

6 Tage, Nairobi → Nairobi

ab € 1.287 / CHF 1'489

<sup>1</sup> As Shepherd writes in his article with Storch & Deumert (forthcoming), this dress code is also regarded as a sign of professional affiliation for researchers in anthropology, archaeology and other related fields.

<sup>2</sup> [https://issuu.com/statravel\\_centraleurope/docs/sta\\_travel\\_katalog\\_afrika\\_2018\\_2019/2?ff&e=1544688/64647376](https://issuu.com/statravel_centraleurope/docs/sta_travel_katalog_afrika_2018_2019/2?ff&e=1544688/64647376) (accessed on 11.01.2019).



The touristic spaces are presented as quiet areas in the advertisements. Francesconi (2014: 79) differentiates between intentional and non-intentional aural choices. The former is defined as such, that is fulfilling the purpose itself (e.g. a loud voice in a public speech), the latter as one that is a by-product of another action or experience and not necessarily performed or perceived for the sound itself (e.g. traffic noise). If intentional aural choices like music or loud voices are present in advertising, they would always occur in combination with direct consumption. For example, during the visit to a Maasai village crafted goods will be sold or a music playing bar where the tourist is invited to dance will sell overpriced drinks. Interestingly, such events are unlikely to be depicted in the tourist ads. One explanation can be that spending money is indeed necessary for going on vacation, but many people would not want to be confronted with it in advance. In order to not lose potential customers, only pictures are shown that would most likely create positive emotions and desires among the larger number of travelers. Therefore, all intentional aural choices like loud music or voices are shut out. Instead, non-intentional natural sounds like wind, animals or crushing waves are suggested. Francesconi (2014: 80) writes:

When visitors look for the presence of a view, they also ask for the absence of sound, *for the sound of silence*. Silence is an important pull factor that accommodation can offer to its visitors, and is associated with the push factors of relaxation, serenity and tranquility. (original emphasis)



Screenshot of Video 1: Diani Beach in Kenya  
(Storch 2017; access at <https://themouthjournal.com/2019/02/12/soundscapes-in-tourism/>)

Screenshot of Video 2: El Arenal in Spain  
(Traber 2018; access at <https://themouthjournal.com/2019/02/12/soundscapes-in-tourism/>)



The sounds imposed on the tourist by the holiday advertisements are such that can be heard, but must not actively be listened to. They are presented as enjoyable and responsible for real relaxation. Comparing video 1 and 2, the visual impressions are similar, although taken at two very different sites. Both show artificially installed water in touristic settings and they both include the burbling of water. However, video 2 is accompanied by the sounds of a nearby construction site. Although the formation of the site in video 1 is just as well the result of heavy man-made performance, the knowledge about the human origin of the sound in video 2 would be highly disturbing for a tourism commercial.

In reverse conclusion, the information that intentional human aural impressions do not fit the frame must be assumed. Another extension of this perception is the fact that many tourists consider walking the streets outside the hotel resorts potentially stressful, as they might be approached by street vendors ('beach boys', see Mietzner forthcoming and Nassenstein forthcoming) or travel guides. The walls enclaving the quiet tourist space do not only mark the borders of the visual tourist experience (Urry 2002), but also those of the 'domesticated' soundscapes. Leaving them means entering fields of unpredictable noise. LaBelle (2010: 47) suggests that "in [the] exposure to noise and silence [one] confront[s] questions of place and placelessness". Knowing where one's expectations about the 'proper' amount of communication and sounds will be met provides the tourist with a feeling of security. Leaving the 'tourist bubble', the local population is met with suspicion by many, to which they instead react with the feeling of being rejected by the tourists as they do not speak

to them. "You like only animals, not people", would one man in Ukunda shout at tourists, implying that they travel to Kenya for gazing at wildlife while ignoring the possibilities of human communication.

Dunn (2005: 116) quotes Cronin (2000: 82): "[T]he experience of travel in a country where the language is unknown to the traveler will be heavily informed by the visual. If you cannot speak, you can at least look. Sightseeing is the world with the sound turned off", to explain that even language not understood provides a linguascape that can be experienced by a visitor. Still, it must be assumed that many tourists do not only travel to make the (new) experience of being unable to understand the spoken language and to take the adventure of making their way through it, but presumably do not want to understand. In many cases, a traveler would not know which meaning words and sounds in their temporary environment have. Yet, this releases the listener from a lot of responsibility for oneself and one's actions. Therefore, although "the semiotics of sound has not (yet) reached the same levels of abstraction and functional structuration as other codes" (Francesconi 2014: 79), we can argue that the taboo of noise and sound in hotels and places of retreat is also an ideological one.

### **3. The effect of the sound taboo on touristic spheres and visitor/host relations**

As mentioned before and shown in image 2, many tourists enjoy to acquire a certain dress for their trip to Kenya. Although the usual safaris are conducted by vehicle, khaki pants and pith helmets are not unusual to be worn by tourists sitting in them. Pan & Ryan (2009:

635) write that aural, olfactory and tactile senses are closely related to the experience of a natural environment. For example, for many people to go hiking in the forest is connected to the sounds of wind and birds, the smell of fresh air and freshly chopped wood and the feeling of soft soil beneath the feet. Urban environments, however, are dominated by the impressions of visuals. One would rather think of impressive architecture like skyscrapers and monuments as triggering attractions. In this regard, the suggested soundscape of this exemplary nature-related tourist activity is of high relevance. Although in image 2 the tourist is only placed in the margin of the photograph, he is essential to its informational content. The man is completely focused on his camera. Within the process of concentration, people are likely to be either blending out sounds or to be distracted by them. The fact that the person is able to focus as presented here means that there is surrounding silence. The wide savanna and the distance to the animals imply that their sounds cannot be heard either. And finally, although it is unlikely for a foreigner to make his or her way to a national park without a tour guide, there is no other human in the picture that would speak to the tourist. Hence, the expectation of silence is already established during the process of advertising. As well as the dress and the behavior of many tourists is regarded as neo-colonial attitude, so can the requirement for silence and intolerance for human sounds (meaning language) be interpreted as repressive and taming manner.

Schwarz (2013: 383–384) writes: „sonic practices and preferences in nature sites are associated with certain social identities and read as identity markers that mark group

boundaries“. Therefore, it can be assumed that for another customer profile completely different aural choices might be attractive. Reversibly, sound profiles of nature sites that differ from those expected by one’s own culture are regarded as disturbing or misplaced. This can easily be the case if the expectation of silence is established before a trip, which would then turn out to be shared with big groups of other tourists and tour guides and furthermore accompanied by traffic noise.

The reason why tourists in postcolonial contexts are granted such attitudes is described by Manning (1978: 198) as an effect of financial dependence: “Reliance on an economic system based on capital, management, and clientele coming chiefly from white metropolitan countries [...] erodes the sense of autonomy by tending to relegate the native population to a role of servitude and parasitism”.

Bandyopadhyay (2011) explains that in these settings, tourists easily take for granted the host population as serving while feeling charitable themselves as their visit allows them the opportunity for work.

As a result of this established touristic semiotic, further power imbalances can be attested in regard to the crossing of taboos.

As the predominant religion along the East African coast is Islam, many locals suffer from affronts by tourists entering shops or restaurants without appropriate clothing. Nonetheless, many visitors perform the exact same inconvenience, but it would be socially regarded as rude and distressing for a local to approach them and point out disaster. The influence of the ‘tourist bubble’ (Smith 1989) is demonstrably expanding. While the visitors feel no shame to transgress the boundaries of appropriate dress codes, the local popu-





Figure 3: Written but not spoken of (photo JT 2017)

lation feels prevented to speak up against this breach. But although it is not possible to confront the matter directly, a medium for avoidance language was found. In the shape of a big sign on the street shown in image 3, the personal confrontation of individuals is bypassed. This way, both the taboo of the educating verbal dispute, as well as (at least in some cases) the one of committing the act in the first place are avoided. Thurlow & Jaworski (2010b) write that silence can be read as cover up for unbalanced relationships and is the dominant linguistic form in socially ambiguous situations. “Space and silence

are two semiotic resources that work almost symbiotically to realize the kind of social exclusion upon which contemporary notions of class inequality are predicated” (Thurlow & Jaworski 2010b: 191). They go on that tourism acts as heavy influence on the reorganization of cultural practices, the establishment of ideologies of difference und perpetuation of unequal relations.

The described active (hotel sphere) as well as passive (unaddressed border-crossing) influence on and domination of the spoken soundscape results in the objectification of the hosts as holiday experiences that can be instrumentalized and consumed.

“These beautiful people are here to amuse visitors, not because they are people in their own right with individual lives and priorities”, states an enraged travel writer on the website of *The Guardian*<sup>3</sup> on retrospective generalizations of many tourists. Another person answered:

This is fluff. Try to live and let live. Perhaps you lke [sic!] to travel “responsibly”. Fine, but some of us travel to relax, to see new things in a detached I-am-not-going-to-do-an-exam-on-this fashion. We ooze superficially through the new experiences, we recall few details and the people we encounter are remembered as an undifferentiated mass of niceness. That is what relaxation means to many of us.

Reactions like this show a blunt rejection of a critical self-reflection of tourist’s behavior. The experience of being on holiday seems to be connected to neither needing nor wanting to care about other individuals. The author of the

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/08/people-beautiful-colonial-tourism-travel> (12.01.19).



comment draws a feeling of freedom from this attitude that results in 'relaxation'. The remark suggests that even if personalized interactions would take place, they would remain generalized and undifferentiated in the tourist memory.

As speaking a lot is connoted by being intrusive or even pushy by the tourists, it would easily result in a negative generalized impression. In other touristic spaces, some entrepreneurs have already elaborated a marketing strategy to benefit from this perception. An Italian restaurant in the much-visited harbor city of Chania on Crete (Greece) proudly offers silence as their unique advantage in comparison to their abundant competitors. "WE DON'T SPEAK TOO MUCH...", while the use of all capital letters is often meant to express shouting the respective words in chat rooms or messenger apps, here it might be used to state the phrases sincerity. The plate's content creates the image of a safe restaurant the tourist can escape to. Although it still employed staff that would explain the gastronomic specialties and placed music producing speakers in the corners, just to claim that it would be more silent than the other restaurants would invite more customers. Furthermore, it creates a demand that might have been unnoticed before. Before reading this intensely written in capitals-plate, many tourists might have not even been experiencing the restaurant promoters along the street as tiring. Therefore, the concrete offering of less language and less intentional aural experiences creates a demand in this case, and if subsequently fulfilled a more positive memory and unfolds in a higher chance for a return of the visit.



Figure 4: Restaurant sign board  
(Chania in Greece, photo JT 2018)

#### 4. Future perspectives and concluding remarks

The reasons for the imposition of silence in form of the absence of language as well as other intentional human noise lie in the combination of the demand for relaxation, the ignorance of other cultures as well as the construction of neo-colonial attitudes before and during the vacation.

By the absence of specific sounds in the images of a perfect holiday that are created by the tourism industry, they are being constructed as intrusive noise. But the connotation of sound can change. In the past, the howling of wolves was considered ominous 'noise' that had to be tamed, but has shifted to a positive 'sound of nature' within the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the upcoming movement of environmental consciousness (Coates 2005). Therefore, it is plausible to assume that if the powerful tool of tourist advertising would present the guest/ host relations more often and at balanced eye level, the encounters in reality would be positively affected.

The reception and rating of sounds varies culturally and different sonic norms can co-exist at the same time (Schwartz 2013: 383). Edensor (2002: 96) for example describes how a British tourist couple pays a visit to the Taj Mahal, both remaining deliberately and devoutly silent. As they recognize that local tourists would feel no requirement to be silent and therefore engage in active loud conversations, the British couple felt affronted. For the example of Kenya, it is mostly European visitors that have dominated the tourist industry in the last decades. Due to political instabilities, the number of arrivals has decreased between 2005 and 2008 and has not yet recovered. Therefore, if tourism will focus on attracting another profile of visitors in the future to keep the economy alive, it must be assumed that their reception of sounds will differ from the so far established standards and result in a change of the aural norms. According to Secorun Palet (2016) the numbers of domestic tourists have been highly increasing during 2015. If that tendency breaks into the market, the economy could increase and the set of approvable soundscapes and their inherent ideologies would expand. For many people one of the first reasons to travel is curiosity. By allowing for speech and more variable soundscapes in the future, a richer holiday experience for tourists could be created, while the relationships with the hosts could be on eye level.

The expectations about soundscapes in tourism were historically constructed in the course of the industrialization of the touring nations. Nostalgic memories and imaginations about holidays at the beach comprise a certain arrangement of space and architecture that are crucial for the perceived authenticity of a destination. While advertisements suggest not only what to look at, they also present the absence

of sounds in many ways. In combination with the way tourists themselves are represented in them, the ideology of the visitor as predominant factor in the creation of the touristic space is established. This concept leads to a gap of verbal communication between the guests and hosts, as the latter perceives it a taboo to indicate the occurring transgressive behavior to the visitors and the former distinctly does not want to communicate in the first place. As a form of avoidance medium, signs are erected between the beach zone and the local dwellings. They serve to discipline and to mark social territory. The touristic economy in Kenya seems to be orienting to a broader profile of visitors in the future. As aural preferences are highly culturally scripted, it can be expected that the soundscape of the tourist zones might diversify as well.

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