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Monument of Nature?

An Ethnography of the World Heritage of Mt. Kenya

Marlous van den Akker

In *Monument of Nature? An Ethnography of the World Heritage of Mt. Kenya* Marlous van den Akker examines the World Heritage status of Mt. Kenya, an alpine area located in Central Kenya. In 1997, Mt. Kenya joined the World Heritage List for its extraordinary ecological and geological features. Nearly fifteen years later, Mt. Kenya World Heritage Site expanded and came to include a wildlife conservancy bordering the mountain in the north.

Both Mt. Kenya's original World Heritage designation and later adjustments were founded on, and exclusively formulated in, natural scientific language. This language partly echoes the beauty of Mt. Kenya's landscape, this work demonstrates, but it also reverts to a range of conditions that shaped the World Heritage nomination and modification processes. These conditions include the World Heritage Convention's rigid separation of natural and cultural heritages, reflected in World Heritage's bureaucratic apparatus; the ongoing competition between two government institutes over the management of Mt. Kenya, which stems from colonial forest and game laws; the particular composition of Kenya's political arena in respectively the late 1990s and the early 2010s; and the precarious position of white inhabitants of post-colonial Kenya, which for instance translates in constant fears for losing land rights.

This dissertation argues against studies that claim that World Heritage is a state tool that chiefly serves the dissemination of nationalist propaganda. Instead, it proposes to unpack World Heritage's technical and non-political rhetoric, to begin understanding how individual sites come about, from which agendas they emerge, and which social and political values are sustained in the process. This may reveal that World Heritage Sites do not necessarily or inevitably support state ideologies – in fact, the opposite may be the case.