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Monument of nature? An ethnography of the world heritage of Mt. Kenya

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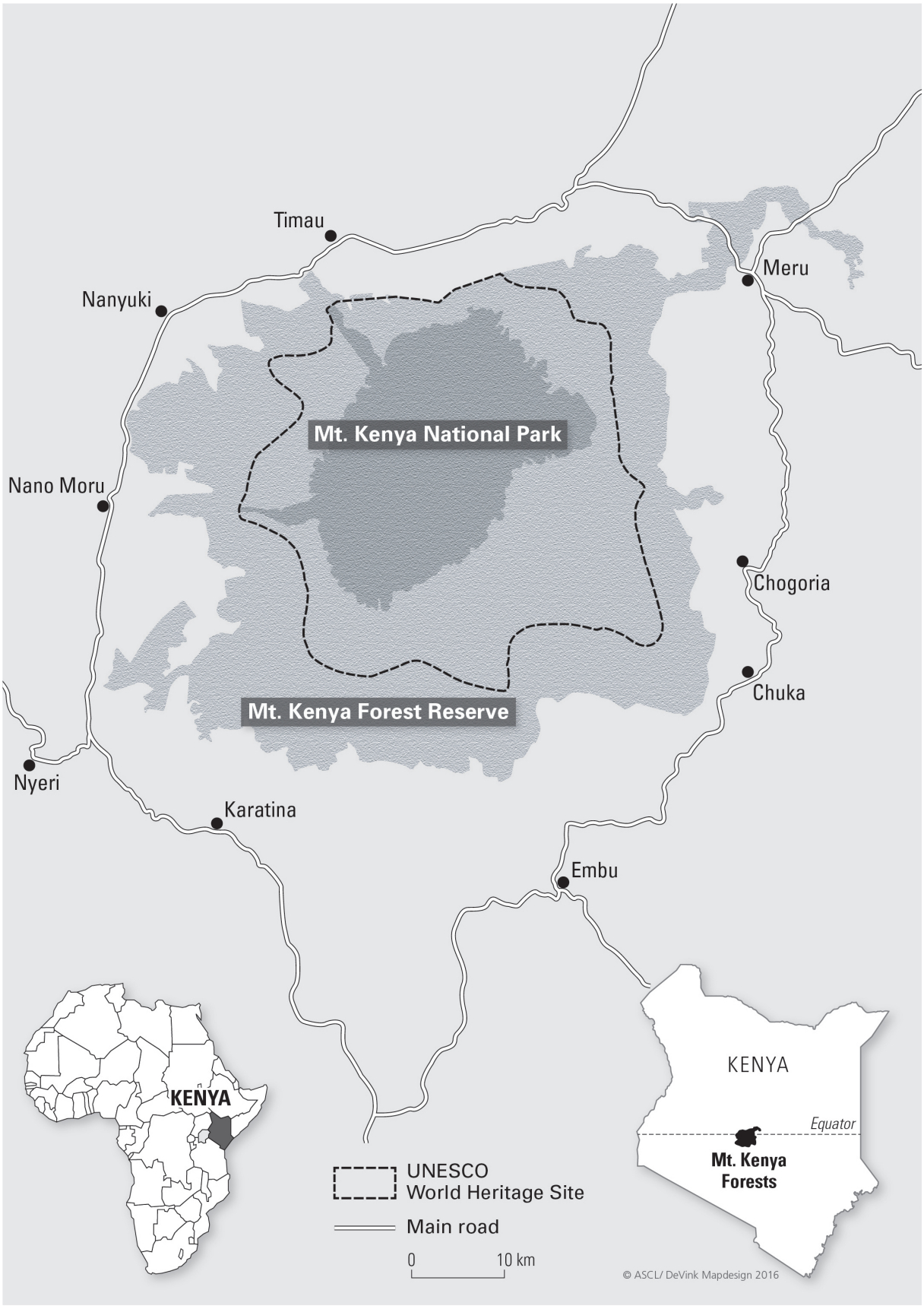

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INTRODUCTION

DOING ETHNOGRAPHY ON MT. KENYA'S WORLD HERITAGE STATUS

In August 2010, a man called Teddy Munyao climbed to Point Lenana, the lowest of Mt. Kenya's three peaks. The act itself was not exceptional. Each year, thousands of tourists visit Mt. Kenya National Park and many of them come for mountaineering. The hike to Point Lenana is not particularly harsh: under the instructions of a good guide even inexperienced climbers generally pull it off. But Teddy Munyao's trek meant to write history. He carried with him a copy of the new Kenyan Constitution, which had just passed parliament, to plant it on top of the mountain. He succeeded and his action received national media coverage (see for instance *Daily Nation*, 24 August 2010, 29 August 2010; *Standard Media*, 24 August 2010).

Nearly three years prior to Teddy Munyao's deed, Kenya had witnessed an outburst of extreme violence. The brutality had been sparked by the outcome of the general elections held in December 2007, after which the supporters of two opposing political parties had attacked one another. The atrocities lasted until late February 2008. By that time, more than a thousand people were confirmed dead, and an estimated three hundred thousand people had left their homes and possessions to escape the bloodshed (Anderson & Lochery 2008: 328). Roughly a month into the conflict, United Nations' Kofi Annan intervened in an attempt to calm the hostilities. Under his mediation, the leaders of the two competing parties eventually agreed to a comprise and divided the country's key administrative positions amongst their members. In the years that followed, the international community pressured Kenya's politicians into drafting a new constitution, so that future elections would not end in such

mayhem again. Teddy Munyao's climb marked the end of this process – it meant to symbolize that former difficulties in organizing the country's leadership democratically had finally been surmounted.

It was not the first time that Mt. Kenya got caught up in nationalist propaganda. In fact, Teddy Munyao's hike was a reiteration of an earlier event that had taken place in 1963. In December that year, Kisoi Munyao, Teddy Munyao's father, had climbed Mt. Kenya to mark the end of colonial rule. While the British made preparations for the transfer of governance an assistant of the soon-to-be president Jomo Kenyatta had asked Kisoi, who was a trained porter boy, to raise the republic's new flag on Mt. Kenya at the exact moment of Kenyatta's inauguration. The act was part of a larger celebration programme that one Kenyan journalist later recounted as follows:

> Midnight December 11-12 found two elderly men standing in the middle of the huge arena of the Uhuru Stadium in Nairobi. The band played the British national anthem. Then suddenly the lights were dimmed. There was a profound silence among the 250,000 people who filled the Stadium that night. Once I heard a boo, but it sounded as stupid as it was mannerless. Then the lights went on, and all I could hear was the deafening roar of the crowd as they cheered the raising of the black, red and green flag of the new Kenyan nation. Prime Minister Jomo Kenyatta, for whom this was the crowning moment of his forty-year political life, walked back to the Royal Pavilion waving his white fly whisk. At his side walked the grey-haired Malcolm MacDonald, the last but most popular of British Governors in Kenya and the country's first Governor-General. Then fireworks exploded to light the sky and, as it were, officially announced the birth of the new nation.
>
> Ng'weno (1964: 36)

While in Nairobi groups dressed in tribal costumes were performing indigenous dances, and while men of faith were leading public prayer ceremonies (Ng'weno 1964: 37), Kisoi Munyao and his crew struggled on Mt. Kenya. The group had aimed for the highest of Mt. Kenya's three summits, called Batian, but bad weather conditions had forced them to settle for Mt. Kenya's second highest peak Nelion (Ng'weno 1964: 38). On arrival, Kisoi took the Kenyan flag from one of the backpacks and planted it firmly on Nelion's rocky surface. According to popular belief, this happened exactly at midnight and it is said that while Nairobi exploded into fireworks and cheers, Kisoi watched the cloth flutter in the wind.

Kisoi Munyao's expedition was one of symbolic reconquest. As we will see in the course of this dissertation, both the country's Kikuyu population as well as British administrators had claimed ownership over Mt. Kenya in the past – the latter even named the entire colony after it (Colony and Protectorate of Kenya 1920: 404). Kisoi's flag hoisting adventure was to supplant these histories and turn Mt. Kenya into a national symbol that belonged to all citizens. By implication, Kisoi became a national hero. On his way down from Nelion he was picked up by helicopter, shipped straight to the capital, and welcomed into the independence festivities as a celebrity (Nyamweru 2012: 282).

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In December 1997, Mt. Kenya obtained World Heritage status. The World Heritage listing was vested in the mountain's natural characteristics and celebrated its moorlands, its indigenous forests, its lakes and glaciers, and its distinguished flora record. Because Mt. Kenya World Heritage Site focuses exclusively on ecological processes and geological formations, it might seem a far cry from the political events described above. Nevertheless, I began this dissertation with father and son Munyao because their hikes epitomize what became this work's core theme – namely, Mt. Kenya's involvement in struggles over power and recognition, as well as its association with nation-building and statecraft, in a political climate in which ethnic and racial tensions predominate.

In this dissertation I examine Mt. Kenya's 1997 World Heritage designation (chapters two and three) as well as modifications to that designation that materialized roughly one and a half decades later (chapters four and five). World Heritage is a state affair, yet so far World Heritage case studies have largely failed to engage with the notion of 'state' critically. In light of this, I set myself the task of unpacking the 'Kenyan state party' that was responsible for Mt. Kenya's original World Heritage nomination, and unpacking the 'Kenyan state party' that initiated later site adjustments. This revealed a number of things. For instance, both events were brought about by a small group of stakeholders that meant to capitalize on World Heritage to secure property rights and management authority; both events drew heavily on natural scientific arguments for nature conservation and in the process obscured various struggles over decision-making power; and, most importantly, both events were a response to the present-day legacies of Kenya's colonial history.

There are important insights to gain from breaking down World Heritage state parties into the actual individuals who drive World Heritage initiatives. Such an exercise reveals, among other things, the histories and political processes that World Heritage's professional technical idiom obscures, and in doing so it can make contributions to the anthropology of heritage and World Heritage studies. But there are not only academic merits. When we conserve and celebrate heritage sites without paying attention to how these sites came about in the first place, we might fail to recognize how heritage articulates and reinforces social, cultural and political boundaries. This is particularly pertinent in the case of Mt. Kenya, because, as we will see, its World Heritage status is intimately tied up with the country's colonial history. I develop this thought in the chapters to come. In the remainder of this introduction I address how I organized my project methodologically.

'Following around' Mt. Kenya World Heritage Site

Since its foundation in 1972 there has been ample critique on the World Heritage Convention. Among others, scholars have pointed to the top-down implementation of Western heritage values and practices in other parts of the world (Butler 2007; Byrne 1991; Derrida 2002; Elliot & Schmutz 2012; Rowlands

& Butler 2007); to the favouring of well-known heritages, particularly religious buildings and historic towns, over less well-known places and places with a negative connotation (Breen 2007; Meskell 2002; Labadi 2005; Rico 2008); and to its static understanding of heritage, vested in the idea that heritage sites have a permanent value and meaning (Bianchi 2002; Harrison 2004; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004; Scholze 2008; Smith 2006). These are all legitimate points, but I chose to approach World Heritage differently – this dissertation is not about how and why the World Heritage Convention is inappropriate, and it is not about all the different ways in which World Heritage failed Mt. Kenya. Instead, it focuses on how World Heritage status affected and complicated the mountain, and on how it served as a mobilizer in its own right. As such, it for instance considers how Mt. Kenya World Heritage Site engendered negotiations and the formation of alliances, or how it gave expression to and got entangled in existing conflicts. In doing so, this dissertation intends to walk the middle ground between instrumentalist and critical views of World Heritage. I found inspiration for this in David Mosse's (2005) work on development policy.

In search of answers to the kind of questions posed above I applied a methodology of 'following around' (Marcus 1995). This is a method in which the issue under study comes to identify chains, paths, threads and conjunctures (*Ibid*.: 105), thus revealing to the researcher relevant social networks. The method of following around typically results in multi-sited ethnographies that examine the relations, translations, and associations between different settings (*Ibid*.: 102). Although I applied Marcus's method, I am hesitant to call this work multi-sited for at least two reasons. First, for Marcus, 'different settings' translates into physically different places of fieldwork. Following around Mt. Kenya World Heritage Site brought me to all sorts of research sites, which I describe below, but all these sites were connected to just one fieldwork locale, namely a town located on Mt. Kenya's west slopes that I introduce below. Secondly, I am reluctant to use the term multi-sited given the hype surrounding this concept in recent years. Proponents have claimed, and continue to claim, that multi-sited research marks a radical break with classical anthropological fieldwork traditions. Yet, it is debatable whether this is really the case. Bronislaw Malinowski and Edward Evans-Pritchard arguably already did very similar things – they were just less explicit about it (Herzfeld 2015: 338; Hannerz 2003: 202).

In practice, following around Mt. Kenya World Heritage Site took various forms. Firstly, it brought me to a large variety of organizations and institutes. These included government institutes such as the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS), the Kenya Forest Service (KFS, before called the Forest Department), and the former Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife, as well as NGOs such as the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the Mount Kenya Trust, the African Wildlife Foundation (AWF), Space for Giants (SFG), the Laikipia Wildlife Forum (LWF), the Green Belt Movement, the Kenya Forest Working Group (KFWG), Ngare Ndare Forest Trust (NNFT) and The Nature Conservancy (TNC). In addition, it brought me to the National Museums of Kenya (NMK), to the World Heritage Centre in Paris, to Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, and to a range of other

private conservancies located in the vicinity of Mt. Kenya. All these organizations and institutes have been key to my understanding of Mt. Kenya World Heritage Site, but I did not do in-depth ethnographic work on any of them. Rather, my interest in them was largely restricted to their link with Mt. Kenya's World Heritage status, and my contact with them typically consisted of conversations with one or two specific staff members who had an explicit connection to the mountain. In addition, I participated in a number of institutional events: I for instance sat in on community meetings organized by conservation NGOs and joined NGO staff on field patrols or project visits.

Secondly, following around Mt. Kenya World Heritage Site brought me to a variety of written sources that included websites, newspapers, policies, conventions, maps, agreements, management plans, evaluation reports and World Heritage application files. I have approached these written sources as authoritative texts deserving ethnographic attention in their own right. I examined how they constructed subjects, objects and social realities, and I focused explicitly on how they meant to foster administrative control (Hull 2012: 257-259; see also Shore & Wright 1997). In doing so, I followed in the footsteps of scholars such as Anders (2008, 2009), who analysed World Bank and IMF reports in relation to the implementation of good governance reforms in Malawi; Erikson (2001), who analysed the UNESCO document 'Our Creative Diversity' in relation to UNESCO's definition of the concept 'culture'; and Ferguson (1990), who analysed a World Bank Country Report in relation to the formation of development projects in Lesotho.

Lastly, following around Mt. Kenya World Heritage Site brought me to a wide range of informants who were largely, but not exclusively, associated with one or more of the above institutes. Among them were (former) KWS rangers, wardens and executives; KFS foresters and forest guards; politicians and ex-politicians operating regionally, nationally, or both; trained biologists, geographers and ecologists working as professional conservationists or having done so in the past; heritage specialists including freelance consultants and museum employees; Kenyan and foreign NGO workers; mountain guides; fellow researchers; recent settlers and descendants of colonial settler families; and the owners or managers of private conservancies. I invited these informants into my study for different reasons – sometimes their names appeared in one of the aforementioned written documents, sometimes organizations or institutes directed me to them, and sometimes my contact with one informant led to my introduction to another. How exactly I dealt with this colourful collective I discuss at the end of this introduction.

In sum, following around Mt. Kenya World Heritage Site marked out a scattered and fragmented research field that lacked an obvious geographic centre. This is something that increasingly complicates anthropological research today. In part, this is due to the way in which the discipline has come to conceptualize global interconnectedness and has come to organize fieldwork in line with this, and in part, this is due to how anthropology recently expanded its interest in topics such as policy or the functioning of bureaucracy (see for instance Gupta 2012; Mosse 2005; Müller 2013; Shore & Wright 1997; Wedel et al. 2005). For this reason, Gupta & Ferguson suggest conceiving of

contemporary ethnographic fieldwork not as a commitment to one particular local setting, but as 'an attentiveness to social, cultural, and political *location* and a willingness to work self-consciously at shifting or realigning our own location while building epistemological and political links with other locations' (1997: 5, original emphasis). I have aimed to do precisely this.

Nanyuki, a hub of sorts

I followed around Mt. Kenya World Heritage Site from Nanyuki, a town located on Mt. Kenya's western slope. Nanyuki was founded as a colonial township in 1920 in anticipation of the wave of Europeans that moved to the area in the course of the decade (Duder & Youé 1994: 261). Initially, it was fairly remote, but this changed when a branch of the larger Mombasa-Uganda railroad connected it to Nairobi in 1930. After that, Nanyuki attracted more and more Europeans and it became the typical white men's meeting ground (*Ibid*.: 260). Such developments characterized the region at large, and Nanyuki was part of an area that became known as the White Highlands, due to the massive number of white settlers. To this day, the area's colonial history complicates the distribution of land and struggles over ownership rights, as we will see in the course of this dissertation. My stay here had direct consequences for the themes I came to discuss in this work, and it inevitably turned my attention to the colour bar.

Nanyuki ceased to be exclusively white long ago, and today it is a colourful and multi-ethnic place. Nevertheless, it still has a distinct settler feel to it. This is due to, among other things, the presence of the British Army Training Unit Kenya (BATUK), which has a camp in town, and the presence of the Nanyuki Sports Club, which attracts white landowners and conservationists from all over the region. For a long time, Nanyuki continued to be the somewhat isolated and tranquil place that it once was, but this changed in the course of the 2000s. For one thing, in the aftermath of the 2007 elections, many residents of the Rift Valley, which was one of the epicentres of election violence, fled to Nanyuki for safety and stuck around afterwards. Secondly, in 2010, a new highway was completed that runs from Nairobi to Isiolo, a town some seventy kilometres northeast of Nanyuki that grew out of Somalian military camps established during the First World War. This highway greatly improved Nanyuki's access and, as a result, it now attracts a far larger number of tourists and white settlers than before. Correspondingly, the town swelled, house prices skyrocketed, and coffee corners, restaurants, curiosa shops and tourist camps continue to mushroom all over the place.

I first visited Nanyuki in January 2011, when I conducted a short three-week pilot study during which I travelled around the mountain in search of a suitable fieldwork base. I eventually chose Nanyuki, primarily for its proximity to two different Mt. Kenya National Park gates as well as for its facilities. I returned to Nanyuki from July to December 2011, and again from April to September 2012. In these ten months I rented a small cottage just outside town, which had been offered to me

after I had placed a small notice in a regional newsletter. From here I took a car, which I bought for the purpose and sold afterwards, to meet my various informants – many of them lived somewhere in the area, but I also made frequent excursions to Nairobi. In the capital, I paid regular visits to, among others, the Kenya Wildlife Service headquarters, the National Museums of Kenya, the offices of organizations such as IUCN and UNESCO, and a range of conservation NGOs.

In June 2013, roughly six months after I completed my last stretch of fieldwork in Nanyuki, I made one final fieldwork trip to Paris, to visit the World Heritage Centre. At the time, the Centre was in the midst of preparing for that year's annual World Heritage meetings. I was not invited to these meetings. But, due to the event, the Centre turned into a meeting place for different heritage experts, several of whom I was able to meet. The meetings themselves, during which decisions were made about the modifications to Mt. Kenya's original World Heritage designation, I later watched online[1] (see UNESCO n.d.[A]).

Informant engagements

The way in which the method of following around came to identify the informants of this study demanded a careful reflection on fieldwork possibilities. On the one hand, my informants were dispersed over many different locations and organizational settings, which meant that I continuously moved from one place to another and did not spend a prolonged period of time anywhere. On the other hand, many informants had demanding professional lives. Some were even considered leading experts in their field of specialization and, as a result, informants typically only had limited time to spare to contribute to my studies. In short, this type of informant did not allow for participant observation.

Ever since Bronislaw Malinowski, participant observation has been central to anthropology and the mystique that surrounds it has had direct consequences for the identification of 'suitable' ethnographic research topics (Gupta & Ferguson 1997; Shore 2002). Laura Nader, for instance, exemplified just how strongly the discipline's identity and self-esteem seems to depend on participant observation:

> The degree to which our field choices might be determined by whether or not we can observe as participant was made clear to me when two of my students went to Washington to study a law firm that did not want to be studied (even though individual members were willing to cooperate in a limited way). How could they participant-observe if the firm wouldn't let them in the door, and *if they couldn't participant-observe then how could they do anthropology*?
>
> Nader (1972: 306, original emphasis)

The method of participant observation fits the study of the marginalized and the subaltern best. As a result, these groups have long formed, and arguably continue to form, anthropology's main field of

interest. But already in the early 1970s Nader pointed out that such a limited vision hampers the discipline's development. She argued that the insights that anthropologists can offer are inevitably distorted, and likely play into stereotyping and stigmatization, as long as anthropologists fail to study 'the colonizers rather than the colonized, the culture of power rather than the culture of the powerless, the culture of affluence rather than the culture of poverty' (Nader 1972: 289). A study on white collar crime amongst middle-class corporate staff and business elites would, for instance, put crimes amongst the residents of a shanty town in a different perspective, and it would unsettle the idea that criminality is confined to the poor (*Ibid*.: 299). Clearly, participant observation does not lend itself well to the study of the rich and the powerful (see also Konrad 2002; Shore 2002), and it has even been suggested that ethnographic invisibility is in itself one of their many privileges (Gusterson 1997: 115). Yet, this does not mean that anthropologists should not, or cannot, study elites. Rather, we must think of ways to engage that can replace participant observation but that do not compromise ethnographic authority.[2]

I have tried to do this in two ways: I have critically analysed various written documents that informants composed themselves or used for administrative purposes, and I have sought dialogue. Schrijvers (1991) has drawn attention to how dialogue is complicated by power differences, and she suggested that anthropologists are largely unable to build dialectical relations with elite groups on equal terms because the latter are unlikely to 'climb down' to the level of the researcher (*Ibid*.: 177). I do not necessarily disagree with this, but I believe that her evaluation deserves at least two additional comments. First, I would describe my encounters with informants as conversations that I guided towards certain topics and themes, but during which I also shared my own ideas and insights (see also Hannerz 2003: 209). Especially the latter helped to establish my position as an 'expert', which, in turn, contributed to levelling power differences. Secondly, Schrijvers's claim raises the question of whether it is always necessary to aspire to equality in dialogue, if such a condition is even possible at all. I have experienced that sometimes it may work in one's advantage to be taken as unknowing and unthreatening, and being exposed to how informants try to establish and maintain power differences during conversations can in itself be a useful source of information.

Over time, I came to discuss Mt. Kenya World Heritage Site with roughly one hundred informants. Not all of them appear in this dissertation, but even those I do not directly refer to are implicitly present, for they helped to ground my understanding of Mt. Kenya World Heritage Site, as well as of Kenya's overall political conditions. I visited about twenty informants on different occasions and I met a handful regularly – they became my key informants. On three or four occasions I failed to meet people face-to-face and only spoke to them by phone or email. More often, however, first-hand conversations and emails complemented one another, with private meetings continued online or vice versa. I have a very basic understanding of Kiswahili and always communicated in English. To my knowledge, this never caused problems or created misunderstandings.

I did not tape-record my conversations but took extensive notes. Occasionally, I asked informants to pause for a moment, so that I could write down their words verbatim – whenever a block quote appears in this work it was recorded in this way. Shortly after each informant consultation I used my notes to write a detailed report. This meant that a considerable part of my time in Nanyuki was spent behind the screen of a laptop. This had advantages and disadvantages: on the one hand, it limited the time I could spend 'out in the field'; on the other hand, it also aided me in processing the information I collected analytically. This helped to identify themes that needed further attention.

While writing this dissertation I ran into two types of difficulties, both related to the nature of this study. First, some of the issues I deal with in this work are politically sensitive and often informants only wanted to discuss them off the record. One of the more critical problems of elite studies is that the use of pseudonyms does not necessarily help to hide an informant's identity, especially not when the person in question is a public figure and his or her steps are therefore easily retraceable. For this reason, at times I only mention that I learned about something through 'a landowner', 'a conservationist', or 'a KWS employee', and on a few occasions I even leave out those comments. As a result, the reader will not always be informed on how I gathered my data and will be left in the dark on how I obtained certain information. I have chosen to do this to protect my informants – I hope that when the situation occurs readers will accept my judgement and have confidence in my analyses. At the same time, there are numerous instances where I do mention people by name. In fact, unpacking the Kenyan state party was one of my prime goals, as I mentioned earlier, and this specifically requires that identities are made public. Where I link statements and remarks to individuals I clarify in a footnote where and when I consulted them.

Secondly, my dependence on a diverse range of informants raised questions on the issue of loyalty. The conventional idea still seems to be that an anthropologist's paramount obligation is to the people he or she studies. I believe that such reasoning oversimplifies how researcher and researched produce knowledge jointly – besides, it is a principle grounded in an ethnographic focus on the subaltern that is untenable for elite studies (Shore 2002: 11). Especially when applying a method of following around, a researcher occasionally works with – and at other times works against – continuously changing sets of subjects (Marcus 1995: 114). To deal with such contradictions, and to prevent anthropologists from losing touch with informants altogether, Marcus suggests taking a stance:

> In conducting multi-sited research, one finds oneself with all sorts of cross-cutting and contradictory personal commitments. These conflicts are resolved, perhaps ambivalently, not by refuge in being a detached anthropological scholar, but in being a sort of ethnographer-activist, renegotiating identities in different sites as one learns more about a slice of the world system.
>
> Marcus (1995: 113)

Throughout this work I have tried to follow Marcus's advice and take a stance in relation to the issues discussed. On some occasions, specific informants may feel offended by my interpretations.[3] Taking this into account, I want to emphasize that I do not mean to make personal allegations. I position myself vis-à-vis subjects and themes, and I look into the role that informants play in relation to particular structural conditions, but without the intention of criticizing anyone personally.

Finally, in light of the diversity of informants and sources I have used, I feel the need to address one of the more fundamental critiques on Marcus's method. This critique holds that when anthropologists follow too many research paths and explore networks too widely, there is a real risk that ethnographic data spreads too thin. As a result, the anthropological account dilutes, touching upon surfaces rather than examining in depth. I share these concerns and I can see how networks can become overwhelming in scale and extent. At the same time, such comments need further sophistication. Firstly, when applying the method of following around it can be perfectly valid to pay more ethnographic attention to some parts of the networks that emerge than to others (see Marcus 1999: 8). I, for instance, relied heavily on a handful of key informants and mainly used conversations with others to contextualize their comments and actions. Secondly, Michael Herzfeld (2015) recently suggested that what matters most in multi-sited research, or in research that lacks a specific geographic focus, is not the number of sites or the scope of the networks that one studies but the level of social intimacy that one manages to cultivate (*Ibid*.: 339). In my particular case, relations with informants were reinforced by the growing awareness that my interaction with them was part of a larger scheme that also included co-workers, superiors, partners in other organizations, former business associates, and so on – Hannerz (2003) calls this a form of ethnographic embeddedness that follows from mutual acquaintance, rather than from deepening relations with any particular individual (*Ibid*.: 204). I like to believe that this, together with informants' increasing willingness to confide things to me off the record, or to share critiques with me that were potentially harmful to them, marked the social intimacy that Herzfeld speaks of. After more than ten months of fieldwork in Nanyuki I felt I was a 'local' in the social networks that I studied, not least because my presence and interest in Mt. Kenya's World Heritage status had itself tangible consequences – it mobilized people, as we will see in the course of this dissertation, and had repercussions for what Mt. Kenya World Heritage Site looks like today.