



## The Maasai at Kolmården is a Project that Exoticizes the Blacks

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During the summer there has been a show with Maasai at the Kolmården Zoo, Sweden. Many have reacted against this, remarking that the Maasai have been displayed in a colonial fashion at the zoo.

One of Kolmården's partners, Ritva Jönsson, CEO of Kenya Airlines, gave a statement about the Maasai. In an interview in *Dagens Nyheter* (July 21, 2006), she described the Maasai as "children" who "jump and dance" for the viewers, and she pointed out that the zoo is a "natural environment" for them, because of the connection to the animals and the savanna. Should we really accept that Ritva Jönsson's colonial gaze and reduction of the Maasai to children formulate the common knowledge about the Maasai culture?

The critique against these protests has for the main part consisted in different ideological arguments aiming to establish that the Maasai culture belongs in the zoo. These ideological arguments are grounded in colonial conceptions about the African as something "Other" than the Occidental man, which is supposed to explain why their culture can be defined as something "other", which can then be marginalized, reduced and confined to the zoo.

Stereotypical images of the "jumping and dancing" African have a history in Sweden. An example can be found in a newspaper advert from 1892, "Negerkaravanen i Gävle 1892" [the Negro Caravan in Gävle 1892]:

*"There were 8 negroes and they had brought along 7 big snakes that one of the negroes wrapped around his neck, it was terrible, in addition they made a lot of different tricks, they danced and made faces and shapes toward each other and acted so shamefully that one felt downright ashamed."*

Values and one-sided views of Africans like these are still around today and must be fought. Whose gaze should have the privilege to define how the blacks are represented? Are there racist and discriminating structures, regardless of what ideas certain individuals may have? Apparently not, the Kolmården CEO Magnus Nilsson seems to think, who says that he is devastated by the protests. According to him, the Maasai give the employees invaluable knowledge, furthermore they are great PR for their country and for their national parks. This may be true, but is this not yet another way of exploiting and colonizing upon the knowledge of others without being interested in giving them any real influence of their own? If Magnus Nilsson really wants the knowledge of the Maasai to be preserved, then Kolmården should see to it that they are valued in a way that give the Maasai true power over their activities without legitimizing their subordination. Instead, the Kolmården officials have chosen the simplest path, "hiring" the Maasai from Kenya Airlines, and the only knowledge they are interested in is the one that reinforces colonial structures. We should all think it is sad and shameful that the Maasai are only allowed to be seen in public space when they are exoticized at the Kolmården Zoo. That the Maasai themselves have stated that they do not feel that they are being equated with animals is not surprising, if one takes for granted that they are economically dependent on Kolmården and its partners.

However, we must point out that this discussion is not about different individual opinions on this matter. It is about showing that there are real structures that present Africans as exotic and as exhibited objects for the colonial gaze to regard and enjoy. Kolmården's project is a very typical example of the way in which the cultural manifestations of the Africans are placed outside of the established culture and are ethnicized. No one asks the question why Kolmården did not choose to present the cultural manifestations of the Maasai in the salons of high culture. We must all clearly distance ourselves from taking part in things that determine and reinforce the idea of the Africans and their cultures as something exotic, since this is a way of limiting the possibilities of the Africans to assume non-stereotypical positions.

The Maasai are not exotic in themselves, they are made exotic in order to please the Occidental gaze and its need to shape itself as the subject that has the right to regard, judge and interpret its surrounding world.

If you as a black person choose a position where you criticize the stereotypical notions about Africans, you get a weak support both from established society and from certain anti-racists. Each time we raise our voices against the fact that

the blacks are always represented according to exoticizing models, there is a counter-attack. Racism and discrimination are just figments of the blacks' imagination, they say, in an attempt to silence the resistance. What surprises us is that one happily invites the Maasai to do their show in a zoo at the same time as one would prefer not to have Africans too close around where one works, where one lives or in public space. It is alright to exploit people, at the same time as one denies them access to the possibilities to change and influence their own lives.