



# The spectacle of inclusive female anti-poaching: Heroines, green militarization and invisible violence

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## ABSTRACT

Staged ‘spectacles’ are increasingly becoming important in communicating potential solutions for environmental challenges such as poaching. In this paper, we explore the spectacle of ‘inclusive female anti-poaching’ (IFAP) through an analysis of the Akashinga and Black Mamba projects in Zimbabwe and South Africa respectively. Both IFAP initiatives emphasize the inclusion of local women in anti-poaching. Such projects gain increasing public attention but have thus far hardly been studied academically. Based on ethnographic fieldwork and critical discourse analysis, we unpack the IFAP spectacle’s three core pillars: first, their claim to break gender stereotypes and the intersection with race; second, the portrayal of female rangers as heroines in relation to their socio-economic status and their political-economic and historical contexts; and third, the projects’ responses to increasing green militarization and their often ambiguous relation with ‘demilitarization’. We argue that the staged IFAP spectacle is for a large part based on invisible or objective (i.e. symbolic and systemic) violence and its claims to break gender barriers and support demilitarization are ambiguous and not fully convincing. It seems as if an important driver of these claims is to render IFAP more attractive for funding.

## 1. Introduction

Online ‘spectacles’ have become important to inform the public about pressing conservation issues such as increasing commercial poaching, playing a crucial communicative role to raise funds for anti-poaching (Büscher, 2016; Goodman et al., 2016; Igoe, 2017; Lunstrum, 2017; Massé, 2019; Verma et al., 2015). In southern Africa, such anti-poaching spectacles often include violent visuals and discourse, relating to the increasing ‘green militarization’ in the area, which is “the use of military and paramilitary personnel, training, technologies and partnerships in the pursuit of conservation efforts” (Lunstrum, 2014, 817). However, green militarization has been critiqued based on human rights violations, the use of violent practices and consequent negative social, political and (especially for rangers) psychological implications, including a reinforcement of the park-community divide (Büscher and Ramutsindela, 2016; Duffy et al., 2015; Lunstrum, 2014; Massé et al., 2017; Smidt, 2022). An important component of this critique focuses on the use of spectacular militarized imagery and how this conceals complex socio-historical contexts from which poaching practices emerge (Brockington et al., 2008; Igoe, 2010; Massé, 2019). Spectacles of anti-poaching are thus not only about what is being represented, but also

about what is *not* represented (Massé, 2019). Recently, in addition to militarization, a parallel shift away from militarized anti-poaching practices can be observed, in which the participation and development of local communities plays a pivotal role. Such initiatives are often referred to as ‘community-based’ or ‘inclusive’ anti-poaching (Danoff-Burg and Ocañas, 2022; Massé et al., 2017, 19; Mkono et al., 2021). Whereas the initial focus of spectacular anti-poaching focused on heavily armed, predominantly male conservation ‘armies’, the increase of inclusive anti-poaching has now initiated a spectacle of female rangers through initiatives such as the Akashinga project, Zimbabwe, and the Black Mamba anti-poaching unit, South Africa, that together form the empirical heart of this paper. As we will show, both projects gain much public attention today, but inclusive female anti-poaching (IFAP) projects have thus far hardly been studied academically (Smidt, 2020). Critical engagement with these projects is important regarding the increasing attention for the role of women in conservation and the critiques on green militarization.

Fundraising for IFAP happens for a large part through the creation of a spectacle, which affects knowledge and subsequent conservation interventions (Brandon, 2021; Massé, 2019) that remain little understood in the social sciences (Igoe, 2010). In fact, considering the passionate

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support of such projects “in social media, there is potential to mobilize ongoing funding on a global level” (Mkono et al., 2021, 12; see also Brandon, 2021). Social media allows a larger audience to become a part of (‘co-create’) the spectacle of environmental solutions (which is much harder in analog media) (Büscher et al., 2017). We contribute to these debates with an analysis of IFAP as a ‘staged’ spectacle (Debord, 1967; Igoe, 2017), to search for how and why it indeed ‘mobilizes’ to raise funds. To this aim, we unpack the IFAP spectacle through an analysis of (1) gender and racial articulations; (2) the status of female rangers (and both founders of the project) as heroic celebrities in relation to their socio-economic status and their political-economic contexts; and (3) the ambiguous relation the projects show with green militarization. In addition to the identified knowledge gap regarding IFAP, there is also a more general demand to better understand the meaning of women’s empowerment and leadership in conservation. This need can benefit from “applying theoretical frameworks from the social sciences that aim to more deeply understand and address gender inequity, power and patriarchy, and the complex interplay of social and cultural norms” (James et al., 2021, 6). Two notable exceptions that have studied IFAP are Mkono et al. (2021), whose main focus is on hunting tourism, social justice and postcolonial power relations at Akashinga, and Danoff-Burg and Ocañas (2022) who focus on community impacts of the Black Mambas. Some of our findings, especially regarding gender and the heroic status of female rangers, confirm specific research results by Mkono et al. (2021). However, our paper is the first to analyze IFAP more broadly by including both flagship IFAP projects Akashinga and the Black Mambas as an example of the *spectacularisation* of conservation.

### 1.1. Spectacular conservation

In our paper, we show that IFAP is presented as a spectacular type of conservation. Hence, the ‘spectacle’ (Debord, 1967) functions as the overarching theoretical concept. Debord explains that “[t]he spectacle manifests itself as an enormous positivity, out of reach and beyond dispute” (1967, thesis 12). Through ‘spectacularisation’, the endless accumulation of images that taken together form a spectacle presents itself as a coherent narrative that, while being produced, simultaneously reproduces the ‘reality’ it portrays (Debord, 1967; cf. Igoe, 2010). This production and re-production of the spectacle becomes a “representation of hierarchic society to itself, where all other expression is banned” (Debord, 1967, thesis 23). Presented realities then form a ‘hyperreality’ that is able to *selectively* present aspects of the world, but *only those* that fit within the logic behind these productions (Baudrillard, 1991). In doing so, the spectacle also resonates with what is called ‘staged authenticity’ in tourism studies (MacCannell, 1976), in which “spectacular productions thus become their own evidence, continuously referring back to themselves in affirmation of the realness of the world (s) that they show their viewers” (Igoe, 2010, 389).

Furthermore, spectacular images and representations are not just a mere visual archive, but constitute “a social relation among people, mediated by [these] images” (Debord, 1967, thesis 4). Igoe (2010, 376, emphasis added) expands this to also “include the mediation of relationships between people *and the environment* by images.” As such, constructed spectacles not only influence how we “*think* about the environment but also how we *should relate* to it” (Goodman et al., 2016, 680, emphasis added). This emphasizes the spectacle’s political, spatial and temporal dimensions: although it is generally staged at one specific site, it is important to analyze its broader context too (Koch, 2018). A spectacle highlights its ‘spectacular accumulation’, which refers to its capacity as “a commodity that people will pay to consume and a medium for marketing commodities” (Igoe, 2010, 378). In this way, spectacles become a central ingredient for marketing specific causes at the global level and to earn profit (Brockington et al., 2008, 195), including fundraising (especially through social media) (Brandon, 2021). Today, what we know about the environment is heavily mediated through

‘spectacular environmentalisms’ (Goodman et al., 2016): anyone engaging with conservation practices and the concept of nature more generally, can no longer afford *not* to deal with online imagery and representations (Brockington et al., 2008). Through the accumulation of text and images taken together, spectacular discourses appear to represent a coherent narrative (Debord, 1967; see also Igoe, 2017). Its framing is important to persuade an audience in the creation of such a coherent narrative. Framing is used strategically to influence the perceptions of the audience: words and imagery are carefully chosen and staged to influence the perception on the cause of a problem as well as its solution (Aarts et al., 2014). This makes the spectacle “a technology of government, which actors use strategically to advance certain agendas and visions of the world” (Koch, 2021, 36; see also Koch, 2018).

### 1.2. Heroines, green militarization and invisible violence

Crucial in the IFAP spectacle are first, the portrayal of the black female rangers (and the white male founders) as heroines (heroes), some of whom have become famous, and second, how green militarization is presented. Regarding the first point; the portrayal of these rangers as heroines is for a large part based on their female status. Most conservation approaches in Africa hardly include women at a large scale (James et al., 2021), and regarding rangers specifically Seager (2021) estimates that between 3 and 11 % is female globally. Despite their relatively small role in conservation and as rangers, women are often considered closer to nature than men, and as having a better understanding of it as “guardians of nature” (Leach and Green, 1997, 363; cf. Nightingale, 2006). Women’s ‘natural’ characteristics of “nurturing, giving life and protecting” Mother Earth (Belausteguigoitia Rius, 2012, 213) are often emphasized, which implies that “the reversal of environmental destruction cannot fully occur without the emancipation of women” (Nightingale, 2006, 167). Despite serious critiques on such presentations of women in conservation as an essentialist way of thinking about gender and the environment (Fuss, 1990; Gaard, 2011; Nelson, 2015; Nightingale, 2006), we show that this perspective is a core pillar of the IFAP spectacle.

From a feminist political ecology perspective gender roles are generally not perceived as natural, but “as embedded in and intersecting with various socio-economic and sociocultural regimes of power and hierarchy in a specific historic, geographic and political context” (Wichterich, 2015, 69). While some movements have celebrated the figure of ‘Earth Mother Goddess’ as a heroine, this can be problematic for people of all genders: ‘branding’ a group or individual as a hero figure is regarded a technology of government, which is being used by activists, governments and corporations to all kinds of ends (Nelson, 2015). This can also create the status of heroes for environmental celebrities (Abidin et al., 2020). Furthermore, the socio-economic status of IFAP rangers adds to their status as heroines, showing how they have untied themselves from exploitative situations (e.g. poverty, domestic violence) by becoming a ranger. We explore the role of female rangers of IFAP in the spectacle as famous heroines, since “the persistent desire for and celebration of hero figures warrant critical reflection” (Nelson, 2015, 131). And although today it is widely recognized that men and women are affected differently by global processes, much less attention has been paid to “how gender ideologies shape global flows or the ways in which women’s agency shapes the trajectories and outcomes of development interventions, especially at the micro level” (Beck, 2017, 139–40). This paper contributes to this gap.

Second, as this paper will show, the presentation of ‘green militarization’ is crucial in the IFAP spectacle. In southern African nature conservation, green militarization is overall characterized by armed, male rangers wearing military-like uniforms, visuals of “rigorous militarized training”, the use of air surveillance techniques such as drones, and “the permission to use more deadly force” (Lunstrum, 2014, 819). Spectacles can sell a techno-optimistic future, in which this future can be engineered through technological solutions to prevent environmental

crises. As such, narratives about environmental crises (e.g. poaching) become opportunities that one can profit from (Koch, 2021). This also applies to green militarization, which is based on conventional military tactics and a large variety of (old and new) technological solutions (Duffy, 2014). However, militarized anti-poaching practices can have negative consequences for park-people relationships: access to resources within national parks might be restricted due to security considerations. Moreover, relations between park management and surrounding communities can be restructured to fit anti-poaching practices, for instance by extending the role of rangers to include informant activities within their communities (Büscher and Ramutsindela, 2016). Green militarization can thus threaten social cohesion within communities (Massé et al., 2017), and because both IFAP projects have an ambiguous relation with militarization, this makes it an important connection to investigate. It raises the question how the community-based element of IFAP relates to its specific and spectacular articulations of green militarization that are also part of these projects.

As the paper will show, both the presentation of IFAP rangers as heroines and green militarization resonate with ‘symbolic’ and ‘systemic’ violence (Žižek, 2008). Together these are classified as invisible, or ‘objective’ violence, which is “less immediately perceptible” (Kapoor, 2013, 93) than physical, material or ‘subjective’ violence. Whereas the latter is clearly and immediately visible and “performed by an identifiable agent”, objective violence is not directly visible (i.e. invisible) and required for the ‘normal’ functioning of our social and economic systems (Žižek, 2008). Invisible/objective violence functions as “the background against which subjective violence happens” (Kapoor, 2013, 93). This ‘background’ is constituted of two main pillars: first, *symbolic* violence, which concerns systems of representation and how certain actors are presented both through language and visuals. It represents a fundamental form of violence that “pertains to language as such, to its imposition of a certain universe of meaning” (Žižek, 2008, 1). Its representational character, allowing it to represent and, importantly, also conceal certain aspects, make symbolic violence a crucial aspect of staging a spectacle (Kapoor, 2013). Second, *systemic* violence refers to “catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems” (Žižek, 2008, 1), containing “often slow yet steady social oppressions (e.g. gender exclusions, wage discrimination, the daily grind of alienating work)” (Kapoor, 2013, 93). Symbolic and systemic violence thus mostly concern aspects that are strategically rendered visible or invisible through the spectacle, and this “recurring ideological strategy [contains] tendencies to ignore key details or broader contexts [that] are integral to the types of photos or films produced by NGOs” (Kapoor, 2013, 97).

In the remainder of this paper we first explain our methodology. Next, we combine data from both Akashinga and the Black Mambas with analyses concerning dynamics around gender and race, heroism and green militarization as described above. Last, in the conclusion, we iterate our main argument that the staged IFAP spectacle is based on invisible (i.e. symbolic and systemic) violence and is ambiguous and not fully convincing in its claims to break gender barriers and support demilitarization. However, these claims seem to render IFAP more attractive for funding.

## 2. Methodology

The data for this paper are based on ethnographic research and critical discourse analysis (CDA). The first author conducted ethnographic research (Marcus, 1999; Russell Bernard, 2018) about the wildlife economy and rhino poaching in the Lowveld area, South Africa, with a specific focus on tourism (Koot, 2021). He undertook participant observation between September 2016 and June 2019 for almost five months in total, during which he conducted 87 semi-structured interviews (Russell Bernard, 2018). As part of this fieldwork, he visited the Black Mambas several times, joined a fence patrol, participated in a tourist lodge activity about and with the Black Mambas, held informal

conversations with some of the Black Mambas and conducted four interviews (recorded with permission) with people directly involved in the project. As a white European male, there is a likely chance he was perceived by the Black Mambas with some caution, considering the apartheid history of the country. He was introduced to the Black Mambas by others working with them on a daily basis. In addition to this direct information, the Black Mambas are well-known in the area and in many other interviews opinions and ideas about the project and the people involved also came up.

The second author focused on CDA, which concentrates on “*the role of discourse in the (re)production and challenge of dominance* [...] by elites, institutions or groups, that results in social inequality, including political, cultural, class, ethnic, racial and gender inequality” (Van Dijk, 1993, 249–50, emphasis in original). Furthermore, CDA investigates “what structures, strategies or other properties of text, talk, verbal interaction or communicative events play a role in these modes of reproduction” (Van Dijk, 1993, 250). ‘Discourse’ here refers to language, texts and images articulated as “particular knowledge about the world which shapes how the world is understood and how things are done in it” (Rose, 2001, 136). In discourses, “a specific visuality will make certain things visible in particular ways, and other things unseeable” (Rose, 2001, 137). Thus, discourses involve ‘reading’ what is shown, but also what is *not* shown or said, in line with staging, the spectacle and objective violence. Due to the important role of framing in the creation of a spectacle, frame analysis—a popular method within CDA (Aarts et al., 2014)—offers various ways in which in-depth analyses of images can be included. Three core elements of framing were used: first, ‘selection’ refers to the fact that in the process of framing certain aspects are being put on display, while others are left out. Second, ‘salience’ refers to *how* particular aspects that are being shown are displayed, for instance as striking or eye-catching, while third, ‘spin’ refers to how a certain topic or image is given a twist (e.g. through a caption that accompanies an image or video) (Van den Broek et al., 2010).

In our selection of sources, we have conducted a structured analysis of online media expressions between 28 March 2020 to 23 April 2020, during which we analyzed 33 online media expressions of Akashinga and 36 of the Black Mambas. In online media following this demarcated period of data collection, we continued to observe trends in line with our findings until March 2023, implying that the IFAP spectacle is a longer term occurrence. We used some examples from that later period too,<sup>1</sup> but the core focus is on data from the demarcated period. The analysis contains different types of online media: articles, audio recordings, videos, images and social media posts, but it is impossible to classify the 69 online sources into simply these types of media because most online sources contained a combination (e.g. social media texts with images). The content was gathered from the official websites of Akashinga and the Black Mambas, and their Instagram and Facebook pages. Additionally, some online media produced by third parties about both projects was analyzed. However, due to the large amount of such content available online, the selection of this data predominantly includes articles, visuals and documentaries that were also shared/promoted by the projects on the organizations’ own websites or social media. Although the actors involved with the IFAP spectacle tend to be very visible online, we decided to anonymize all names of people and blur faces on the three pictures, because the purpose of the paper is not to highlight any individuals or individual dynamics.

### 2.1. Case studies

The two case studies have been chosen because they are the most visible examples of IFAP in the public domain. Despite some differences between the projects (e.g. Akashinga portrays the socio-economic

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Instagram – natgeo – Akashinga: The Brave Ones, [https://www.instagram.com/tv/CDy3-uupe\\_n/](https://www.instagram.com/tv/CDy3-uupe_n/), accessed 29 April 2022.

background of the rangers much stronger, while the Black Mambas contain an unarmed unit), together they have gained much attention globally, and there are many similarities between the projects. That does not mean that there are no other, similar projects, and likely more will be initiated.<sup>2</sup> Importantly, the amount of funds generated by both projects differ substantially and over the last years especially Akashinga has grown enormously in this regard.<sup>3</sup>

Akashinga is an all female anti-poaching unit based in the Phundundu Wildlife Area in Zimbabwe's Lower Zambezi ecosystem,<sup>4</sup> initiated by the International Anti-Poaching Foundation (IAPF)<sup>5</sup> and founded in 2009 by a former special operations sniper.<sup>6</sup> Initially the Foundation was heavily militarized, working with male rangers only, but in 2017 they started Akashinga, "a community-driven conservation program",<sup>7</sup> that "builds an alternative approach to the militarized paradigm of 'fortress conservation'".<sup>8</sup> Akashinga aims to empower the most vulnerable women from rural communities as rangers and biodiversity managers, selecting only "unemployed single mothers, abandoned wives, survivors of sexual and physical abuse, wives of poachers in prison, widows and orphans".<sup>9</sup> They work with the communities surrounding the Phundundu Wildlife Area, in which the female rangers are closely involved. Their duties are patrolling, interacting and maintaining close relationships with the communities, conducting training and maintaining a high conservation ethic.<sup>10</sup> Akashinga "relies on (Western) donor funding for all its operations, including the women's income [and] solicits donations from the public, with an emotive appeal" (Mkono et al., 2021, 10). By employing women, they claim that more money ends up in the local community as women invest up to three

<sup>2</sup> Another IFAP project that was initiated in 2019 is Team Lioness in Kenya, see IFAW – we're transforming what it means to be a woman ranger, <https://www.ifaw.org/projects/team-lioness>, accessed 21 September 2022.

<sup>3</sup> For both IFAP projects the exact amounts of funding generated based on their online presence is hard to establish, yet the International Anti-Poaching Foundation (Akashinga) and Transfrontier Africa (Black Mambas) provide (sometimes incomplete) financial statements/reports on their respective websites (see <https://www.iapf.org/> and <https://transfrontierafrica.org/>, both accessed 4 April 2023). The International Anti-Poaching Foundation received US\$ 13.610.051,- of 'public support' between 2017 and 2021, including gifts, grants, contributions, and membership fees. This amount has increased every year and applies to the International Anti-Poaching Foundation as a whole. Akashinga is their biggest project (receiving almost 85% in 2021). Transfrontier Africa received a total amount of donations of ZAR (South African Rand) 3.277.870,- (about US\$ 183.528,-) in 2019 and ZAR 10.850.744,- (about US\$ 607.533,-) in 2020. Although it is not specified how much exactly of this went to the Black Mambas for these years, this is specified for the first quarter of 2021, which indicates that most of the money goes to the Black Mambas.

<sup>4</sup> This was the original focus area, but over the last years the IAPF program has expanded beyond Zimbabwe to "some of the largest wild landscapes left in Africa. With 3.7 million hectares (9.1m acres) of wilderness under the custodianship of more than 500 personnel, the women of Akashinga are making an increasing impact of global magnitude". Their future goal is to include 12 million hectares by 2030. See IAPF - Judith Neilson Foundation Gives IAPF US \$700,000 to Back Zimbabwe's Women Wildlife Rangers, <https://www.iapf.org/news/judith-neilson-foundation-gives-iapf-us-700-000-to-back-zimbabwe-es-women-wildlife-rangers>, accessed 4 April 2023.

<sup>5</sup> IAPF – Akashinga – The Brave Ones, <https://www.iapf.org/akashinga/>, accessed 24 January 2020.

<sup>6</sup> IAPF – Founder & CEO, <https://www.iapf.org/damien-mander/>, accessed 16 March 2020.

<sup>7</sup> IAPF – About us, <https://www.iapf.org/about/>, accessed 16 March 2020.

<sup>8</sup> IAPF – Akashinga – The Brave Ones, <https://www.iapf.org/akashinga/>, accessed 24 January 2020.

<sup>9</sup> IAPF – Akashinga – The Brave Ones, <https://www.iapf.org/akashinga/>, accessed 24 January 2020.

<sup>10</sup> IAPF – Akashinga – The Brave Ones, <https://www.iapf.org/akashinga/>, accessed 24 January 2020.

times more than their male partners into their own household and family.<sup>11</sup>

The other initiative is the Black Mamba anti-poaching unit (Danoff-Burg and Ocañas, 2022), which is based on the "belief that the 'war' on poaching will not be won with guns and bullets".<sup>12</sup> Important elements of their mission are to achieve "social up-liftment and the education of communities around the reserves".<sup>13</sup> The Black Mambas were founded in 2013 to protect the Olifants West Region of the Balule Nature Reserve in the Lowveld, South Africa, from increasing poaching activities, making them the "first majority female anti-poaching unit in the world".<sup>14</sup> The area under their protection has now expanded to all boundaries of the 62.000 ha Balule Nature Reserve.<sup>15</sup> Just like Akashinga, the Black Mambas center the role of women and communities in conservation. In addition to their main objective to protect wildlife, they also "strive to create a strong bond and educate the communities that live on the boundaries of Balule".<sup>16</sup> They claim that the female rangers function as important role models in these communities by teaching children at local schools about environmental conservation and poaching (Danoff-Burg and Ocañas, 2022). An important difference with Akashinga is the Black Mambas' unarmed approach: the female rangers are not using arms, but their anti-poaching activities focus on early detection of poaching through 'visual policing' by engaging in daily patrols, roadblocks and lodge inspections.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the Black Mambas receive their salaries from the South African government, but still need funding for a large variety of other (operational) costs.<sup>18</sup>

### 3. Gender and racial articulations

Gender is a core pillar of the IFAP spectacle, which shows in the titles and sub-titles of the articles and videos: in most of them the female component is explicitly addressed, as them doing a 'typically male' job. For example, a professional photographer describes the Black Mambas in the New York Times as "taking on a typically male role and want[ing] to prove that women can also be rangers and scouts" (Gunther cited in NYT, 2015). This is confirmed repeatedly by Black Mambas themselves, who highlight that "[t]hey say it's hard for a woman to do that kind of job, that it's a man's job. [...] I proved them wrong".<sup>19</sup> Similar sentiments are found in descriptions of Akashinga rangers "smashing traditional perceptions of what women can do around here".<sup>20</sup> As various rangers highlighted, they have proven men wrong thinking that they

<sup>11</sup> IAPF – Akashinga – The Brave Ones, <https://www.iapf.org/akashinga/>, accessed 24 January 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Black Mambas – Our mission, <https://www.blackmambas.org/our-mission.html>, accessed 24 January 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Black Mambas – Our mission, <https://www.blackmambas.org/our-mission.html>, accessed 24 January 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Black Mambas – Black Mamba anti-poaching unit, <https://www.blackmambas.org/>, accessed 17 March 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Black Mambas – Black Mamba anti-poaching unit, <https://www.blackmambas.org/>, accessed 17 March 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Black Mambas – Our mission, <https://www.blackmambas.org/our-mission.html>, accessed 24 January 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Black Mambas – Our mission, <https://www.blackmambas.org/our-mission.html>, accessed 24 January 2020.

<sup>18</sup> However, at 31 March 2022, the Black Mamba Alliance was born, because government subsidies stopped after almost 10 years of assistance: "the Black Mambas APU, along with 2300 other conservation rangers, were left without this vital financial subsidy during the COVID 19 pandemic". The Black Mamba Alliance was set up to cover up for this loss. See Transfrontier Africa – Black Mamba Alliance, <https://transfrontierafrica.org/black-mambas-alliance>, accessed 4 April 2023.

<sup>19</sup> YouTube - The unarmed group of women fighting poachers in Africa, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R05uivRy7xc>, accessed 5 April 2020.

<sup>20</sup> YouTube - The fearless female wildlife rangers saving the African elephants 60 Minutes Australia, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xl7EXoU2xgo>, accessed 1 April 2020.

could not do this job. The women's success in 'a man's job' is further emphasized through highlighting the 'toughness' of anti-poaching work and the rangers' 'fierce' character. Articles and videos explicitly mention that they are tough, do not get tired, never quit and aren't afraid of anything. In this line, they repeatedly pose fiercely in front of the camera, which is strengthened by captions emphasizing this. See for instance Fig. 1, which shows a repetitive posture in pictures of Black Mambas:

This way, a unified whole is created; a coherent spectacle based on a carefully chosen orchestration. This staging has internalized among the Black Mambas: rangers automatically take poses when interacting with the media, once even instructing them "on what she thought he should film in order to get good material" (Huijssoon, 2017, 24). Furthermore, they have gotten used to "giving the same, prepared answers to interviewers" (Huijssoon, 2017, 7).

In addition to ascribing 'conventionally male' characteristics to the female rangers, the gendered component also articulates 'conventionally female' ones. Based on 'female' characteristics they are considered better suited for anti-poaching in two significant ways. First, women are considered naturally and instinctively better at building up community relations, as explained at the Akashinga website:

[T]hey've built strong relationships with locals, de-escalated conflict and invested in their communities. [...] The women of Akashinga have chosen conversations over conflict – following their natural instincts and becoming the bridge to communities that the increasingly militarised industry of conservation will need as part of a long-term solution.<sup>21</sup>

This sentiment is often repeated, also at the Black Mambas who "have created a new set of values, and they have become the role models" (interview 20 July 2017) that everybody "must feel comfortable to approach [...] Women are in my opinion much better at that".<sup>22</sup> However, Smidt (2020) found that the female rangers are not very well-known (yet) in the surrounding communities,<sup>23</sup> while the first author found that in the combined tourism and conservation industry in the Lowveld there are hardly any people who do *not* know them. This suggests a strong discrepancy regarding their supposed roles in the communities as role models on the one hand and their pedestalized status in the conservation and tourism industry on the other. It implies systemic violence in the sense that structural racial and economic inequalities play an important role in how and why IFAP is valued.

Second, women are described as naturally 'caring'. This ostensibly makes them not give away valuable information (for poachers) and less susceptible to bribery. Allegedly "[t]hat is one of the major benefits of the Mambas. In the almost four years that they have been deployed, I haven't lost a single Black Mamba to a polygraph test or an honesty verification process".<sup>24</sup> As a Black Mamba explains, women are better field rangers who "are so loving, and caring. What a woman loves, she's going to make sure that she protects it. She's not going to give information away [...] we are secretive, and we protect what is ours".<sup>25</sup> In

<sup>21</sup> IAPF - Recruiting nature's fiercest protectors for Akashinga Fieldreport by [the founder], 19 September 2019, <https://www.iapf.org/news/recruiting-natures-fiercest-protectors-for-akashinga>, accessed 15 June 2022, emphasis added.

<sup>22</sup> YouTube - The unarmed group of women fighting poachers in Africa, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R05uivRy7xc>, accessed 5 April 2020.

<sup>23</sup> This is different in the communities where they come from, for more details see Danoff-Burg and Ocañas (2022).

<sup>24</sup> YouTube - Prontuit: Onderhoud – Segment 2 – Black Mambas APU, 17 April 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aYsCHWpycps>, accessed 3 April 2020, see also Mkono, Rastegar and Ruhanen (2021) for a similar narrative on Akashinga.

<sup>25</sup> Facebook – The Black Mambas, <https://www.facebook.com/blackmambasapu/?eid=ARAZqDzUW8kE2CeGoyGQ83nqRWATxei7G-zAAzoBuegKxkFOI6b5xefVFU99bdZe5MteAXRuV2Totmg>, accessed 6 April 2020.

addition to this secretive component, caring is predominantly articulated as nurturing: in a recent article in Vogue Italy, the Black Mambas are called "Guardian Angels", based on their "[c]aring, nurturing attitude and a moral compass" (Scalia and Hugo, 2021). One Black Mamba describes them as "mothers to the animals, to the planet, to the trees, to [...] anything that mother earth has in store for us".<sup>26</sup> This is also emphasized when Akashinga rangers' vegan (i.e. 'nature friendly') diet is sometimes put in the foreground.<sup>27</sup> The symbiosis between being a protective mother and a guardian of nature is often repeated: "protection comes naturally to the Akashinga Rangers [who are...] fierce as a mother. [...] they hold within them a unique advantage - a mother's instinct to protect".<sup>28</sup> One Black Mamba explained: "As a woman, I know how to take care for the children, so I can also take care of the animals".<sup>29</sup> This explicit, essentialised connection with motherhood shows a deep belief that the interests of the environment and women are similar and complementary (Belausteguigoitia Rius, 2012; Leach and Green, 1997; Nightingale, 2006).

Furthermore, at Akashinga, rangers additionally stress physically violent personal histories, including physical abuse by an ex-husband and slavery by an ex-husband's family.<sup>30</sup> One of them explained that the "Akashinga women come from hardship. Violent pasts, broken homes, widows and orphans", and now Akashinga has changed their lives for the better: "[m]y daughter and I had nowhere to go. Now I am a proud ranger. I am giving my daughter a future. I am protecting my Africa".<sup>31</sup> Akashinga stresses the connection between exploited nature and exploited women: "Who better to task with protecting *exploited animals*, than women who had *suffered exploitation*?" (cited in Smith, 2019, emphases added).

To emphasize physical violence so specifically, predominantly conducted by men, together with these positive representations of female rangers, implies that men (especially male rangers) are less capable of doing community work and that they do *not* care, revealing symbolic violence. Such simplified images of 'men' and 'women' often still underpin contemporary development ideologies and initiatives. Instead of including the role and consequences that these initiatives also have for men, they are not based on the idea of *gender equity* but on a 'women only' perspective. This way such projects disregard social relations, global economic structures, and the gendered nature of development that are all crucial if one truly wants to transform existing gender ideologies (Beck, 2017). Important in this regard is that Akashinga also works with male trainers (Mkono et al., 2021), and Balule (where the Black Mambas operate) also makes use of male armed guards, who are all largely left out of visual appearances and media expressions. Both founders of the project are also male, and especially in the case of Akashinga the founder is highly visible in public communication. Therefore, whereas both projects claim to break stereotypes, the spectacularisation of a strong male/female dichotomy also fortifies this dichotomy through the articulations of essentializing very specific gender roles (Fuss, 1990; Gaard, 2011). This does not mean that there is not also a breaking of gender roles in IFAP: in an environment that is traditionally dominated by men (James et al., 2021), women's roles in anti-poaching grows and gains more (public) attention through such projects.

<sup>26</sup> Instagram – vogueitalia, <https://www.instagram.com/tv/CJvfZnVICLD/?igshid=413uz3itixzg>, accessed 28 April 2022.

<sup>27</sup> Live Kindly – This vegan kitchen in the African bush feeds and all-female anti-poaching unit, <https://www.livekindly.com/vegan-kitchen-african-bush-female-anti-poaching-unit/>, accessed 24 February 2023.

<sup>28</sup> Instagram – int.anti.poaching.foundation, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ccz-K-hqxe7/>, accessed 10 June 2022, emphases added.

<sup>29</sup> YouTube – South Africa's all-female anti-poaching team honored, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lClq44jSjDQ>, accessed 4 April 2020.

<sup>30</sup> IAPF – Will you sponsor a ranger?, <https://www.iapf.org/femalerrangers-spponsor/>, accessed 30 March 2020.

<sup>31</sup> IAPF – Will you sponsor a ranger?, <https://www.iapf.org/femalerrangers-spponsor/>, accessed 30 March 2020.



**Unarmed: The Mambas, swathed in green military fatigues, look more like soldiers than they do conservationists but they do not carry guns**

Fig. 1. Black Mamba staged pose (Source: Olwage in Akbar 2016) (Despite the public availability of the pictures, and thus the limitations to anonymize, we decided to blur faces since the aim here is not to highlight any individuals.)

Such framings also contain a strong racial intersection (see for example Burnett and Tommasi, 2017; Lunstrum, 2017; Mkono et al., 2021). This intersection reveals systemic violence by emphasizing racial differences in a context of structural and historical racial inequality in southern African conservation spaces (see e.g. Hughes, 2010; Kepe, 2009; Koot et al., 2022). Moreover, it reveals again more symbolic violence about black men specifically: an important racial connotation is made because both founders are white males who receive much praise for their work, while black poachers (and men more generally at Akashinga) are put in a bad light. So black men are presented first, as less capable of doing conservation than black women and second, as abusive and/or criminal (i.e. as poachers), while white men join the heroic status of black female rangers. Such frames potentially reinforce negative stereotypes of African black men as built up under colonialism, confirming that IFAP contains “risks perpetuating the very postcolonial power imbalances it seeks to undermine” (Mkono et al., 2021, 13). The International Anti-Poaching Foundation uses ‘success’ stories of catching these poachers as part of their funding strategy: at the end of various social media posts the organization pledges for their followers to support their cause by donating (Fig. 2):

Similar pledges are made at the end of their field reports published on their website: “Will you join the wildlife wars by donating today?”<sup>32</sup> Thus, the heroic female ranger vs. the criminalized poacher narrative is reproduced, an important danger in the creation of conservation heroes (cf. Nelson, 2015), to which we turn next in our analysis.

<sup>32</sup> IAPF – Ivory poachers sentenced – Akashinga unit breaks up syndicate, <https://www.iapf.org/jun19-ivory-poachers-sentenced/>, accessed 29 March 2020.

#### 4. Funding famous heroines

Today, environmental heroes and celebrities are a widespread phenomenon in conservation (Abidin et al., 2020). Throughout history, such heroism has predominantly been focused on men and masculinities (see for instance Nelson, 2015; Thakholi and Koot, 2023), but as we showed in the previous section in IFAP a female hero-narrative dominates, based on both the protection of nature and the female rangers as role models. As celebratory “indigenous heroines”, they occupy parts of the “conceptual space in the mind of the audiences in the Global North, and market demand, for environmental spokespeople who speak with the authenticity of coming from the land” (Abidin et al., 2020, 396). This allows for essentialised images of the rangers (Fuss, 1990; Gaard, 2011). For instance, they are portrayed as “Brave Women [...] saving wildlife”,<sup>33</sup> or as “South African Heroes”,<sup>34</sup> which is subsequently echoed on social media, e.g.: “These women are literally my heroes”,<sup>35</sup> or: “So proud of all the heroic work that you do!”<sup>36</sup>

The hero-narrative also percolates from online to offline environments. Both projects received nominations for different awards and

<sup>33</sup> YouTube - The fearless female wildlife rangers saving the African elephants 60 Minutes Australia, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xl7EXoU2xgo>, accessed 1 April 2020.

<sup>34</sup> YouTube - South African heroes – Black mambas (5 min), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V1iwrnIOD5A&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V1iwrnIOD5A&feature=emb_logo), accessed 4 April 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Instagram – int.anti.poaching.foundation, <https://www.instagram.com/int.anti.poaching.foundation/>, accessed 2 April 2020.

<sup>36</sup> Facebook – The Black Mambas, <https://www.facebook.com/blackmambasapu/?eid=ARAZqDzZuW8kE2CeGoyGQ83nqRWATxei7G-zAzoBuegKxkFOI6b5xefVFU99bdZe5MteAXRuV2Totmg>, accessed 6 April 2020.



Fig. 2. Update by the International Anti-Poaching Foundation including a call for donations (Source: Instagram International Anti-Poaching Foundation, 2019) (Instagram – int.anti.poaching.foundation, <https://www.instagram.com/int.anti.poaching.foundation/>, accessed 2 April 2020).

founders and rangers got invited to speak at international conferences. For example, the Black Mambas were awarded the Champions of the Earth award by UNEP,<sup>37</sup> and the founder and one of the Akashinga lead rangers toured along with *National Geographic Live* in Canada and the U. S. On tour they held personal Q&A sessions, one-on-one meetings and they presented on stage. This way, rangers are no longer solely heroic guardians of nature, but are rendered into celebrities that people line up for. In fact, “[s]ometimes the line of people waiting to meet them wrapped around the building!”<sup>38</sup> Often described as leaders of the female rangers, both founders are also repeatedly put in the spotlight and celebrated as heroic, especially the Akashinga founder who is most visible publicly with extensive elaborations about his military background and personal view on life. One Akashinga ranger explained about him that “he showed that a woman can be someone. Yeah he’s a big hero, he’s my hero”.<sup>39</sup> Celebrity-conservation at IFAP is thus not restricted to the black female rangers, but also contains white saviorism through a pedestalization of the founders: these roles—of ‘white saviors’ and ‘indigenous heroines’ alike—are often not deliberately sought, but “demanded of them by global audiences” (Abidin et al., 2020, 396). Famous heroic characters become part of a spectacle through a global reproduction in which celebrities or (high profile) conservationists are portrayed “as a heroic vanguard in the struggle to save the planet, and invite consumers to join them” (Igoe et al., 2010, 493).

Heroic celebrity environmentalism thus plays an important role in the IFAP appeal (cf. Mkono et al., 2021). This aligns with broader neoliberal conservation strategies (Büscher et al., 2012) in which the rangers and their heroic status are strongly commodified. Both Akashinga and the Black Mambas offer several ways to support the organizations financially, highlighting how they have increasingly turned

themselves into “charismatic brands” with logos and “product recognition” (Kapoor, 2013, 86–8). In addition to general funding strategies on social media—including special ‘Valentines’, ‘Holidays’ or ‘Mothers day’ actions, physical gifts and branded merchandise—the Black Mambas also offer an exclusive tourist experience. In collaboration with a luxury lodge, tourists can “meet the people that help to protect Africa’s precious wildlife. No one is more famous than Africa’s all woman Anti-Poaching team”.<sup>40</sup> And at Akashinga tourists can, in addition to all kinds of related merchandise, buy into the spectacle by doing ‘environmentalist’ activities: expensive environmental ‘do good’ exercises (Koot, 2021) including a “Ranger-led Safari Tour”, a “Day in Camp with [the founder]”, or a “Trip to Africa”, ranging in price from US\$ 9,500,- to 35,000,-.<sup>41</sup> In addition to reproducing colonial inequalities—activities with the white male founder are the most expensive ones—and a dependence on these to bring ‘development’ (Mkono et al., 2021), such fundraising strategies highlight the spectacle’s consumptive character as spectacular accumulation through which the spectacle further expands and reproduces itself. This focus on ‘ethical consumption’ reveals systemic violence, in which socio-economic inequality and environmental consequences of consumerism more broadly affects people and the environment globally in different ways (Koot, 2021).<sup>42</sup> The IFAP spectacle is thus strongly embedded in the current political economy and the broader neoliberalisation of conservation (Büscher et al., 2012). Spectacles need to be sold to be sustained, to financiers, the public they reputedly serve, and other advocates (Koch, 2021, 2018). Online requests to consume to save wildlife allows for consumer donors to get the “romantic illusion that they are adventurously saving the world even as they are consuming it virtually” (Igoe et al., 2010, 503). And, we add,

<sup>37</sup> Instagram – theblackmambas, <https://www.instagram.com/theblackmambas/>, accessed 6 April 2020.

<sup>38</sup> IAPF – Around the world with Damien and Vimbai, <https://www.iapf.org/national-geographic-live-features-iapf-founder-sergeant/>, accessed 29 March 2020.

<sup>39</sup> YouTube - The fearless female wildlife rangers saving the African elephants 60 Minutes Australia, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xl7EXoU2xgo>, accessed 1 April 2020.

<sup>40</sup> Pondero Game Lodge: World famous Black Mamba anti-poaching unit tour – R699 per person, <https://pondero.co.za/blog/world-famous-black-mamba-anti-poaching-unit-tour-r699-per-person/>, accessed 26 April 2022.

<sup>41</sup> IAPF – Own a story. Save the planet, <https://www.iapf.org/ownastory>, accessed 29 April 2022.

<sup>42</sup> From a sustainability perspective the most striking contradiction is probably that one can buy “African Air (Canned)” to support Akashinga, which then needs to be transported to global consumers. See IAPF – Own a story. Save the planet, <https://www.iapf.org/ownastory>, accessed 4 April 2023.

this neoliberal approach to conservation also shows when consumption takes place *beyond* the online environment, for instance in tourism. A Black Mambas spokesperson, however, is also critical on tourism initiatives that involve themselves in anti-poaching. He explained that lodges hide a lot behind supporting anti-poaching because it is good for their business. However, in some cases these same lodges do not allow ecological researchers to collar elephants anymore, because it looks ‘unnatural’ in photographs for tourists. Meanwhile, they burn firewood, throw garbage all over the place or drop dirty water in the river, because it happens unnoticed (interview 20 July 2017). Thus, both symbolic and systemic violence, in which visual representations are used to strategically highlight some and hide other aspects, play a crucial role in this type of consumption.

In this line, the rangers’ (famous) personal stories are also commodified to attract funds: one can sponsor or ‘adopt’ a specific female ranger at both Akashinga and the Black Mambas by choosing from a pre-arranged selection of women who are presented on both websites with a photo and a short personal story. While the campaigns mostly use the words ‘sponsor’, ‘support’ or ‘donate’, the Helping Rhinos website also uses the word ‘adoption’, which makes this endeavor p/maternalistic to say the least. A Black Mamba literally asks visitors to “adopt one of us”,<sup>43</sup> while the website presents several ‘adoption tiers’. When selecting a Black Mamba, the sponsorship is finalized when clicking on “adopt [name of Black Mamba].” In return, donors receive a picture and a profile of the ranger they have sponsored.<sup>44</sup> Such personalized funding appeals render the rangers themselves into a consumable product. Akashinga’s focus on both violent pasts (i.e. subjective violence) and its own life-changing potential enhance these women’s important role in marketing, which confirms how the spectacle functions as a commodity that is used in marketing for people to consume (cf. Igoe, 2010). The IFAP spectacle is thus strongly based on market-based mechanisms that commodify the (heroic status of) the female rangers. In fact, it seems as if it works based on the same logic as broader dominating neoliberal conservation strategies: structural issues such as the increase of privatized conservation initiatives reinforcing historically built up racial and gendered land divisions tend to be ignored and even reinforced through the same logics (Thakholi and Koot, 2023).

## 5. IFAP and green militarization

Historically, women played an important role in the liberation of southern African countries from colonial and apartheid regimes, including as combatants, although their roles were largely ignored post-war (Sadomba and Dzinesa, 2004; Siphokazi, 2015). IFAP projects bring back a war-like narrative about women through all types of symbolic military links. Phrases such as “[t]he war to save wildlife runs 24/7”<sup>45</sup> emphasize a (subjective) violent approach. Akashinga rangers are regularly described as “women gunning for poachers”,<sup>46</sup> an “army of women”,<sup>47</sup> or “anti-poaching sharpshooters” (Barbee, 2017). Similarly, the Black Mambas are described as to “strike poachers”,<sup>48</sup> or “fight

against poachers”,<sup>49</sup> and Akashinga rangers act “on the front lines of Africa’s poaching war” (Smith, 2019). One Black Mamba ranger explains that “if the poachers get inside the reserve, obvious [sic] they are going to get killed”,<sup>50</sup> and the founder of Akashinga reveals that “they will kill anybody standing in their way”.<sup>51</sup>

Moreover, in both projects women are almost continually photographed in military-style uniforms. While the Black Mambas are shown in military uniforms consistently, there is only limited footage of them holding or working with rifles. Several conservation workers in the Lowveld explained that they do not truly consider the Black Mambas anti-poaching, but community development instead, mostly because they operate unarmed. One lodge owner who strongly favors a militarized approach, explained that “I don’t think it [Black Mambas] is as critically important to anti-poaching as they would like anybody to believe” (interview 1 November 2017). In disagreement, another lodge owner stated that such conservationists are conservatively married to militarization, while the Black Mambas are “revolutionary” and not “just a show” (interview 26 July 2017). Rather, they are presented in various articles and videos as unarmed, emphasizing that “this war on poaching, is bigger than guns and bullets”.<sup>52</sup> Despite this, they still “look like soldiers in their camouflage uniforms” (Ellin, 2019).

In contrast, Akashinga rangers *are* armed, and they are repeatedly photographed or filmed engaging in military training or handling rifles (Fig. 3): “nearly all of IAPF’s [International Anti-Poaching Foundation’s] public information features images of Akashinga women holding military-grade weapons, wearing military-style clothing, with their faces painted and conducting training that includes hand-to-hand combat” (Mazvarirwofa, 2018). Despite this military image, *both* IFAP projects highlight that the rangers’ connection to the community is most important, and “not their skills with firearms” (Mazvarirwofa, 2018). However, this narrative in which subjective violence is celebrated contrasts the caring community-focus.

Thus, despite the fact that both projects claim to have a demilitarized approach to anti-poaching, they are essentially also part of the broader militarized anti-poaching discourse. This creates a hyperreality in which the media—and actors from the project in the media—communicates a war-like narrative to emphasize how these rangers ‘fight’ poachers, supported by the continuous portrayal of the rangers in military uniforms. The Black Mambas are portrayed as “an almost paramilitary anti-poaching unit that works quite independently in the reserve” (Huijssoon, 2017, 44), but their role in anti-poaching actually fulfils “that bottom rang of our policing model”.<sup>53</sup> Some scholars have pointed out the potential danger of such inclusive projects that can “serve as a means to raise even more funds for a paramilitary, enforcement first-approach” (Massé, 2019, 12; see also Huijssoon, 2017). However, it is important to note that IFAP is not meant to replace traditional, militarized anti-poaching, or to fund it. Nonetheless, in the IFAP spectacle military solutions are also idealized through the portrayal of green militarization. We suggest that this legitimizes a broader military approach as realist, or even needed, regardless of the projects’ community focus. Interestingly, most of the daily work of the Black Mambas is very mundane (e.g. checking fences for hours), which is also the opinion of most Black

<sup>43</sup> Helping rhinos – Black Mamba appeal, <https://www.blackmambas.org/sponsor-a-mamba.html>, accessed 3 April 2020.

<sup>44</sup> Helping rhinos – Sponsor a Black Mamba, <https://www.helpingrhinos.org/sponsor-a-black-mamba/>, accessed 6 April 2022.

<sup>45</sup> YouTube - The fearless female wildlife rangers saving the African elephants 60 Minutes Australia, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x17EXoU2xgo>, accessed 1 April 2020.

<sup>46</sup> BBC News – Zimbabwe women’s anti-poaching group protecting elephants, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-africa-43965312/zimbabwe-women-s-anti-poaching-group-protecting-elephants>, accessed 1 April 2020.

<sup>47</sup> Facebook – Akashinga – Nature protected by women, [https://www.facebook.com/akashinga/?epa=SEARCH\\_BOX](https://www.facebook.com/akashinga/?epa=SEARCH_BOX), accessed 2 April 2020.

<sup>48</sup> Black Mambas – Black Mambas strike poachers, [https://www.blackmambas.org/uploads/8/3/5/5/83556980/more\\_vukuzenzele\\_sa.pdf](https://www.blackmambas.org/uploads/8/3/5/5/83556980/more_vukuzenzele_sa.pdf), accessed 4 April 2020.

<sup>49</sup> YouTube - South Africa’s female park rangers DW documentary, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7CMp1gU5PXM&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7CMp1gU5PXM&feature=emb_logo), accessed 3 April 2020.

<sup>50</sup> DKR films and Adorni films – The Black Mambas: Official trailer, <http://www.blackmambasmovie.com/>, accessed 15 April 2020.

<sup>51</sup> IAPF – National Geographic presents – Akashinga: The Brave Ones, <https://www.iapf.org/akashinga-film/>, accessed 15 April 2020.

<sup>52</sup> YouTube – Meet the world’s first all-female team created to combat poaching. Short film showcase, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d7wIS9ZFGgg&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d7wIS9ZFGgg&feature=emb_logo), accessed 5 April 2020.

<sup>53</sup> YouTube – Prontuit: Onderhoud – Segment 2 – Black Mambas APU, 17 April 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aYsCHWpycps>, accessed 3 April 2020.



Fig. 3. Akashinga rangers (Source: Stirton in Smith 2019).

Mambas themselves (relating to what Koch, 2018, calls ‘unspectacular’), but when they are being shown/show themselves to the outside world a spectacle is created that appeals to global audiences.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion: Staging the spectacle

This paper analyzed the IFAP spectacle based on two case studies: Akashinga and the Black Mambas. While both projects gain much public attention today, they have thus far hardly been studied academically. To address this gap, we unpacked the IFAP spectacle and showed three core elements: the articulation of gender and race dynamics, the celebratory and heroic aspect and the ambiguity regarding green militarization. Although we analyzed these dynamics critically and found several contradictions and ambiguities, we feel it is important to state that we have no reason to doubt the projects’, the rangers’ or the founders’ good intentions and results as presented. Our analysis is not evaluative in nature, but based on dynamics and articulations of three core elements and not on any individual, to better understand such spectacles. Akashinga and the Black Mambas are two very specifically located projects, but they cannot be seen apart from their larger political, temporal and spatial context (Koch, 2018).

First, while IFAP emphasizes to break gender stereotypes, they simultaneously confirm essentialist gender constructs. This includes a strong emphasis on the female rangers’ connection to nature and their motherhood, something that has both been supported and critiqued in feminist literatures (Fuss, 1990; Gaard, 2011). Ironically, as emphasized by feminist scholars, these jobs also remove mothers from their children when on duty, revealing an ideology of labor as only paid work, disregarding unpaid productive labor that these women are often also involved in and that is critical in global production chains. In fact, this is a clear example in which:

[c]lose attention to local realities often reveals that seemingly monolithic global forces are transformed by local (spatial or institutional) gender ideologies and agencies and often have varied and contradictory effects, complicating attempts at classifying development projects as ‘successes’ or ‘failures.’ (Beck, 2017, 150).

The IFAP rangers’ portrayal as better environmental protectors and social community workers than men, while black men are portrayed as poachers or abusers, also shows the importance of intersectionality of

race and gender in (historically and continuing) spaces of racial inequality (see also Thakholi and Koot, 2023). Importantly, the white male founders of the projects are part and parcel of the heroic narrative of the spectacle.

Second, IFAP women are portrayed as heroines and they (and the projects’ founders) gain global fame through this, which is aimed at attracting funds to the projects, but simultaneously disregards their socio-economic status and their political-economic and historical contexts. Third, the projects present a questionable relation with green militarization: both emphasize their de-militarized approach to anti-poaching, while continuing to use a war-like narrative and military imagery. We argue that the staged IFAP spectacle is for a large part based on objective, invisible (i.e. symbolic and systemic) violence and its claims to break gender barriers and support demilitarization are ambiguous and not fully convincing. It seems as if these claims predominantly function to render IFAP more attractive for funding.

Community-based conservation, like other conservation models, distribute unequal benefits to different groups involved. Local community interests are very diverse and do not always coincide with conservation interests (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999; Brockington et al., 2008), revealing systemic violence behind the community-based approach. Moreover, such approaches in anti-poaching also pose new challenges, including “threats of violence, and even death” expressed towards community rangers as a result of “being labelled ‘traitors’ or accused of ‘working with the white men’” (Massé et al., 2017, 25). Working in anti-poaching is often perceived to benefit (mostly white-owned) private reserves, instead of local communities (Massé et al., 2017; Smidt, 2020). This stands in stark contrast to the IFAP narrative that presents the female rangers as heroic, having close relationships with the communities and being unafraid of anything. Some Black Mambas confirmed the potential threats that come with their role, explaining they do not speak freely about their anti-poaching work to strangers and in their communities: “maybe they will come at night at our home, using to kill you, maybe they attack you” (Huijssoon, 2017, 29). Various Black Mambas expressed the existence of a sentiment of “dislike, or even hate, towards them in the communities” (Huijssoon, 2017, 40). There is thus a fear for subjective violence, and this fear in itself can be regarded systemic based on the rangers’ position in society. This confirms that park-community relations change when anti-poaching rangers come to include informant activities within (their own) communities (Büscher and

Ramutsindela, 2016), something which both ranger groups practice yet is not visible in the IFAP spectacle.

A central part of any spectacle, in line with symbolic and systemic violence, is how it *strategically* highlights certain aspects of reality, in the case of the two projects by staging IFAP in a particular way. However, we also want to emphasise that we showed that IFAP rangers take up an active part in the creation of the spectacle, and they seem to be very conscious of it. We thus do not consider them victims: taking part in IFAP activities also gives them pride, confidence and economic revenues, but this should be seen in light of the socio-economic situation in the areas where they come from and their possibilities to get (other) jobs or development opportunities. Nonetheless, IFAP presents itself as “an enormous positivity” (Debord, 1967, thesis 12), in which the spectacular narrative is to be passively accepted as reality. This process of ‘staging’ (cf. MacCannell, 1976) creates a specific spectacle through recurring scenes, personal stories, quotes and imagery, in which “[t]he same people, places and situations [appear] repeatedly in support of a story that hardly varie[s] in its main themes and tropes” (Igoe, 2017, 61). Certain events are strategically used to raise funds, but these often leave out or obscure how these events play out. More broadly, the tendency is to ignore negative implications and complex socio-historical contexts from which poaching practices emerge (Massé, 2019). This is needed to successfully function in the current ‘global economy of appearances’, in which dramatic performance can be considered a pre-requisite in order to gain international attention and raise funds (Igoe, 2010).

## 7. Credit author statement

**Koot:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.  
**Veenbos:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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