Neoliberalism and the Mis(representation) of the Maasai in Kenya and Tanzania

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Abstract

Western colonizers are notorious for employing the normative category of "the Other" against people whom they consider to be inferior, subsequently marginalizing those of different cultural and ethnic origins through Eurocentric discourses and material suppressions. In our so-called "post-colonial" period, this paper argues the violence of colonial legacies persists, with certain colonial aspects transfigured into neoliberalism. I look into the ways neoliberal discourses and narratives jeopardize the representation and benefits of the Maasai people living in Kenya and Tanzania today, and how they aim to marginalize the Maasai from their lands. Nonetheless, the Maasai, as autonomous agents, actively engage in neoliberal practices and participate in Indigenous rights activist movements to increase recognition of their rights as holders of their native lands.

Introduction

More than just economic patterns, the ubiquitous globalization and neoliberalism of the modern era has been reconfiguring our ways of perceiving the world, consequently re-shaping our material world as well. These two global forces, globalization and neoliberalism, are especially effective and "violent" in their homogenizing power which renders everything commodifiable without exceptions (Han 13). This paper looks into the interplay between neoliberal forces, marginalizing narratives, as well as representations, of the Maasai in tourism and conservation discourses in Kenya and Tanzania, where their native Maasailand is located. I argue that such narratives and representations imply the disassociation and displacement of the Maasai from their contemporary socio-political contexts and their tangible land through addressing Maasai in ahistorical/anachronistic or incongruous ways. In a neoliberal economy, Maasai are 'meant' to be consumed as a detached token wiped out of their meanings and identity, removed from a deeply entrenched connection to their lands. While I acknowledge that the Maasai people living in Kenya and Tanzania are bound to policies and geopolitical realities specific to their own countries, discussing them separately in every section is beyond the scope and capacity of this paper. Thus, sections discussing the Western misrepresentation of the Maasai also involve a level of generalization that reflects how Western thought often portrays the Maasai in a homogenizing way.

The Maasai

The Maasai are a Maa-speaking pastoral Indigenous group living in the Maasailand, located in southern Kenya and northern Tanzania (Homewood et al. 239-40; Salazar 56). Since

they do not share the same language and culture as the majority ethnic groups in both Kenya and Tanzania (Igoe "Conservation and Globalisation" 4), the Maasai face similar marginalization and suppression in both countries, being viewed as 'backward'. The Maasai struggle to maintain their traditional livelihoods – in regards to aspects of diet, housing, customs, and being forced to engage in the process of 'modernization' (Bruner and Kirshenblatt Gimblett 437; Gardner 5; Igoe "Conservation and Globalisation" 4; Schneider 104). Despite their engagement in the tourism industry and international Indigenous movements, the Maasai are still seen as an icon of "traditionalism" due to long-lasting stereotypes and suppression (Salazar 56).

Historical marginalization and (mis)representation of the Maasai

Ironically, during the colonial period of the early Twentieth Century, colonizers initially considered the image of a typical Maasai male warrior to be nobler than other African Indigenous males (Schneider 104). The Maasai's representation as the 'noble savage' collapsed, however, as the discordance between the colonizers and the Maasai escalated. The former displaced the Maasai community into reserves, both in Tanzania and Kenya, in order to expropriate their most arable lands (Galaty 352; Hodgson 65; Igoe "Conservation and Globalisation" 5). Colonizers adopted self-contradicting policies to marginalize the Maasai: on the one hand, they diminished the Maasai's access to receive education and healthcare in the name of "preserving" their culture. On the other hand, they implemented radical policies to promote "productivity," "progress" and other aspects of 'modernity' among the Maasai community (Hodgson 65). Despite such attempts, the prototypical image of a male Maasai warrior, as a brave "primitive" African who kills lions simply with a spear, feeding on raw animal blood and milk, was perpetuated in colonial narratives and continues to shape contemporary tourists' expectations of the Maasai (Bruner 882).

For instance, in Mayers Ranch, operated by a British family in Kenya during the postcolonial period of the 1980's, the Maasai were asked to dress as the 'noble savage', as in colonial fantasies, in their warrior attire, holding spears for tourist attraction. This scene took place under the white settlers' roof, serving as part of an imperialist nostalgia channeled by tourist realism in an immersive environment (Bruner 882; 886). It is worth mentioning that the Maasai were not allowed to speak to the tourists face-to-face, display themselves wearing modern attire, or show any industrial goods on their person (Bruner 884-85). By displacing the Maasai in an anachronistic vacuum, away from their contemporaneous contexts, this mode of (mis)representation immobilizes the Maasai as relics of the past who are disassociated from their lands, with no place in the neoliberal present and future aside from acting as 'features' in a tourist landscape.

Connecting tourism, conservation, and neoliberalism, and their impacts

Even after the independence of Tanzania and Kenya, forms of marginalization, notably land appropriation directed at Maasai communities, persist as the most profitable conservation areas of the two countries are concentrated in Maasailand(Gardner 5; Homewood et al. 240). Under the enforcement of national policies for neoliberal economic reform, recent years have seen the extensive encroachment into Maasailand both by states and foreign investors to turn their

lands into tourist spots (Igoe "Conservation and Globalisation" 5). On top of the fact that traditional grazing lands are converted into tourist sites, tourism revenues are mostly misappropriated by local elites without equal distributions, and most Maasai communities still struggle with poverty due to the loss of their pastoralist subsistence (Homewood et al. 246).

In Tanzania, however, the Maasai have come to actively adopt market-oriented conservation land management to reserve their lands for tourism. As a compromise to neoliberal values and markets, they see that direct foreign investments without state interventions would provide them with some advantages to secure property rights and a level of autonomy (Gardner 5-6). As an effort "to harness the narrative of conservation and African nature as a global good and firmly attach it to local histories, resource management, and sustainable land use" (Gardner 24), the Maasai, besides tangible profit, also gain intangible capital against the ongoing marginalization by manifesting their property rights to the state government from tourism contracts they have with a company (Gardner 154).

Globalization and neoliberalism as forces

Mediation of the Maasai people through a homogenizing lens

The flourishing of tourism in Maasailand coincides with the seemingly compelling narratives and representations of the Maasai that render their image and land exploitable. Typically, such images depict young Maasai warriors wearing exotic headdresses, red loincloths, with patterns painted in red ochre on their bodies. This kind of generic image is likely already imprinted by tourists traveling to East Africa, having encountered it several times on travel websites, brochures and souvenir shops (Bruner 884; Mieu 35). Such a homogenized and mediated appearance of an anonymous Maasai individual signifies the collective identity of his ethnic group, that such an image is never about a particular individual. This is enabled by "the tourist gaze" (Galaty 351; Mieu 52) that takes these images out of their specific geopolitical contexts and allows such mediated images to be consumed from a safe distance (Igoe "Spectacle of nature" 378).

It is precisely this 'tourist gaze' that is potent in configuring and commodifying the generic image of Maasai as a brand ready to be consumed. The interchangeability of Maasai-as-a-brand in its commodity form alienates the Maasai identity from Maasai individuals and their lands, as their culture can now be claimed by anyone who looks ostensibly similar to them. The Samburu, another Maa-speaking ethnic group, is known to dress in Maasai clothing and perform impersonations of Maasai warriors to tourists, simply because Maasai identity is more profitable than their own (Mieu 49-50). Like all other brands, Maasai-as-a-brand is "vulnerable to contingency", leaving gaps for the consumers' interpretation and reinterpretation of such a porous representation (Mieu 41).

The Maasai are aware that this vulnerability poses greater challenges to claiming their rights and identity in neoliberal contexts. To protect themselves from being exploited by people who take their pictures and profit off of them, the Maasai copyright their names and images of their ethnic group at an estimated value of $10 million per year (Mieu 49). It seems, the only way

to cope with the exploitation brought on by a neoliberal market is to join the market at the expense of being commoditized.

Similar to how the branding of Maasai identity works, a "spectacular production" and "Disneyfication" of the Maasailand occurs on the same grounds of neoliberalism. These two modes of mediation leave space for interpretation and reinterpretation for its viewers, where, so often, Western viewers reinvent the narratives of other cultures through fragments of another's identity (Igoe "Spectacle of nature" 385-86). For instance, during Jim Igoe's fieldwork at the Tarangire National Park in Tanzania, a part of the *Maasai Steppe Heartland* under the African Wildlife Foundation (AWF), he discovered that sporadic success under the management of AWF was often inflated as the success of the entire region, thereby concealing the real issues faced by people elsewhere. Through aligning these homogenized fragments, a timeless spectacle is produced and celebrated by people who are not in situ (Igoe "Spectacle of nature" 385-88).

Moreover, a spectacle in and of itself, such Disneyfication has to be enabled by the tourist in situ. In an "Out of Africa Sundowner" cocktail party (as described in Bruner) held in an outdoor setting in a Kenyan Maasai reserve, Western tourists encounter their homogenized fantasies of appropriated African culture (as seen in products of Western popular culture, such as, Disney) in its place of origin. The performance of the song "KumBaYa," – that has its origin in Africa – was reinvented in other parts of the world with a "New World Caribbean reggae beat" letting the North American tourist find it "comfortable and safe […] for it is their own" (Bruner 890-94; Igoe "Conservation and Globalisation" 17). The far-reaching potency of globalization is, again, manifested here as an abstracting and alienating force. The solipsistic ideologies of globalization and neoliberalism are in effect only when they extract the subject out of its original context. While such ideologies still allude to the subject's place of origin in its commodity form, it is the illusion of such that is perpetuated. Even when tourists are having direct contact with the Maasai, standing on their land, they are not interacting with the African people and their surroundings, but with the mediated by-product of their fantasies. Within the fantasized realms, the Maasai are rendered as the *Other* despite the fact that they are the ones who are the native.

Demarcated territories of human and wildlife: another mode of mediation

The dissociation of the Maasai from their native environments is further bolstered in narratives and practices of demarcating humans and wildlife as seen in Western media and beyond. Wildlife, such as lions, are presented on one TV channel, while the Maasai on the other. They are very unlikely to be presented on the same channel simultaneously, for Western viewers generally deem that nature should stay intact without the intervention of humans. Without realizing this dichotomy of culture/nature being a construct in itself, the Westerner takes for granted this expectation to be the same for other cultures (Igoe "Conservation and Globalisation" 14). This notion, nonetheless, coincides with and likely gave rise to the 'fortress conservation model' – first seen in the colonial period under German rule of East Africa. Such a model demarcates humans from wildlife through coercive displacement; it eventually leads to ecological unbalance, resulting in unfavorable conditions, such as, "crop-raiding by wildlife" caused by the

depopulation of both humans and livestock (Bluwstein 147-48). Despite this notion, the independence of Tanzania saw a major shift towards wildlife conservation aimed at the protection of wildlife "through sustainable resource use" such that cases like crop-raiding would be prevented (Bluwstein 150). It has been noted by scholars that such fortress conservation had still been practiced in Tanzania and that the wellbeing of wildlife was prioritized over humans (Hodgson 78). This disintegration of the Maasai and wildlife is proved to be profitable for some and will only escalate at the expense of the Maasai people's wellbeing.

How the Maasailand is stolen: governmental discourses and land appropriation in practice

Since the 1990s, and the introduction of neoliberalism, the Tanzanian government has further adopted strategies to appropriate the lands of pastoralists and hunter-gatherers, in order to generate revenue by turning them into profitable enterprises, such as commercial firms and wildlife reserves (Hoodgson 69). Since pastoralists do not use their lands during droughted and dry seasons, the government justifies their act of appropriation by labeling their lands as "unused" and therefore, readily available to be purchased by national and foreign investors (Hoodgson 70). Since pastoralists have also been regarded as "backward" and "unproductive" for their highly mobile way of managing their livestock, the government has attempted to settle the pastoralists and their animals in ranches to "improve their productivity" at the expense of their mobility and decentralization (Hoodgson 70; 75). So as to alienate and disassociate the Maasai from their native lands, the Tanzanian government also uses narratives that condemn and misrepresent the Maasai as people who are either 'total strangers' or as misusing their lands.

In Loliondo, during the 2009 drought, more than ten-thousand Maasai villagers and their livestock were evicted by the state for grazing their cattle near hunting areas during a period they were supposed to avoid them. A foreign company had contracted the area for trophy hunting a few months every year, resulting in more than a hundred homesteads being burned, and several Maasai jailed. Notably, the state failed to mention that the Maasai still have the land rights of the area despite its conditions (Gardner 76-77). After the eviction, two untenable narratives were given by the government: the first was that the eviction only targeted Kenyan Maasai who had illegally crossed the border and intruded on Tanzanian land. After this narrative was discredited by the fact that there had been no Kenyan among the evicted Maasai, the government turned to a secondary narrative in which the Maasai's pastoralist way of grazing livestock "was destroying the nation's natural resources" (Gardner 79-80). Such ungrounded double talk foregrounds two aspects that justify eviction and alienate the Maasai from exercising their legal rights over their lands in the first place. The former narrative promotes xenophobia, from the perspective of the state, and the latter boosts paternalism, from the perspectives of both the state and its economy.

Mobilizing the discourse of the Maasai as the Indigenous

Uprooting the Western misrepresentation could be overwhelmingly challenging, as it is also deeply rooted in the colonial past, but the Maasai can cope with the marginalization that they experience within their country. The Maasai themselves are not passive agents and are, as mentioned in previous sections, actively adopting neoliberal practices, increasing their

international recognition as Indigenous people, and coping with forms of marginalization that subjugate them as “second-class citizens” (Hodgson 6; 37). The speech given by the Maasai activist Moringe ole Paripuny, addressing the Maasai as the Indigenous people of their native land, to the United Nations Working Group, marked the rise and spread of the Indigenous Peoples Movement across Africa (Hodgson 25-7; 37-8). Maasai NGOs have also consciously “appropriated and reconfigured […] the ahistorical” stereotypes of them being backward and primitive and “selling their own marginality” to appeal to Indigenous rights activists, internationally (Hodgson 76; Salazar 60).

In their active participation in transnational movements, the Maasai came to establish connections with foreign NGOs and investors, as well as Tanzanian government agencies to “shift their status within the nation-state” (Gardner 15). Despite the Maasai not necessarily wanting to adopt the practices of a neoliberal mindset, it seems to them that between foreign investors and an arbitrary state government, the former is the lesser of the two evils. With foreign investors, they can still hold their land rights with a rising recognition of Maasai as the land owner, while minimizing the harm being done to their lands through their contract of ecotourism with international investors, without the state-intervention (Gardner 15). Within the ever-expanding realm of globalization and neoliberalism, the Maasai choose to employ “strategies of extraversion” that would allow them to seize resources necessary to cope with existing marginalizations (Igoe “Conservation and Globalisation” 12).

Conclusion

By claiming their status as Indigenous, the Maasai symbolically and materially reclaim their inalienable lands in which their symbolic representations intertwine with their material realities, shaping one another constantly. Through years of suppression and marginalization, the Maasai have come to grasp the violence and potency of neoliberalism, transforming it into a weapon against violence allowed by the state. One question remains unsettled for the Maasai: can the master’s tool ever dismantle the master’s house? To some extent, they may not intend to dismantle their government through neoliberalism but rather to achieve a state of equilibrium. Yet, as suggested by Alexander Rüsto, the inventor of the term “neoliberalism,” it appears neoliberalism only leads to social fragmentation, where the ‘antidote’ lies in a “politics of vitality” underpinned by “solidarity and community spirit” (Han 14). Perhaps, through the global nexus of the Indigenous movements, the Maasai may be able to dispel the shadow that neoliberalism and colonialism has cast on them.

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