

## Placing the Maasai

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### INTRODUCTION

Contemporary geographical approaches to place include those which understand locations as ‘imbued with meaning that are the sites of everyday practice’ (Cresswell 2009, 176). Anthropologists (notably Khazanov and Wink 2001; Spencer 1998; 2003a and 2003b; Talle 1999; Waller 1999; Waller and Spear 1993) interested in the Maa-speaking people of southern Kenya and northern Tanzania have paid close attention to meaning in Maasai practice and to the micro-dynamics of Maasai identity, relationships, beliefs and socio-economy. Such work, often ethnographic in nature, focuses in on sub-tribal levels<sup>1</sup> and is ineluctably concerned with the everydayness of place in Maasai culture. In contrast to these studies, the focus of this chapter is on how the Maasai are positioned or ‘placed’ in different, arguably less reflexive contexts, namely those of biodiversity conservation and safari tourism. It is in these particular contexts that the Maasai are ‘positioned’ in relation to notions of place which are widely produced in conservation and development. This chapter will survey how aggregate and frequently reductive definitions of the Maasai have been, and continue to be, constituted, which ‘place’ Maasai as a problematic and/or exotic people.

The chapter will argue that conservation and safari tourism has and continues to discursively and materially construct and order the Maasai and Maasailand. It argues that, in general, there is an asymmetrical set of power relations which marginalises Maasai people while framing Maasailand as a place of particular global imagination. On the one hand, the Maasai are viewed as proud and free; as threatened; and as distant from modernity. Large-format books, lavishly illustrated, with titles such as *Last of the Maasai* and *Maasai – Beautiful People*, entice visitors to East African safari lodge gift shops. On the other hand, this romantic imaginary sits alongside other notions of the Maasai which position them as having declined from an historical state of (tribal) power to a contemporary state of relative powerlessness in which they are seen as intransigent pastoralists resistant to outside influence. In the following analysis of biodiversity conservation and safari tourism there are parallels to arguments made by several authors about the privileging of Western views of place over other ‘less-developed cultures’ (particularly Haraway 1989; Verran 2001; Ingold 2000). Ingold talks of the understanding of place being an issue of ‘apprehension’ which is shaped by culture (2000, 20). The ‘apprehension’ of Maasai within particular Western cultural perspectives has been a view of them as subjects of study or something to be acted upon. This perspective reflects Western ideas of places as ‘substrate for the imposition’ (ibid, 35) of human societies rather than as lifeworlds which are quite different to such Western ontology.

<sup>1</sup> Such as *olgilata* or clan level.

Ingold suggests that this view of people and place derives from a Western ‘idea that the “little community” remains confined within its limited horizons which “we” – globally conscious Westerners – have escaped ... [this] results from a privileging of the global ontology of detachment over the local ontology of engagement’ (2000, 38).

The chapter is structured as follows. First I examine the concept of Maasailand itself. The geographical reality of the ‘homeland’ of the Maasai is strongly linked to the conceptualisations of Maasai people noted above. It is therefore important to trace the ‘creation’ of Maasailand in the early 20th century. Second, the chapter examines the position of the Maasai in the conservation of the habitats and wildlife of Kenya, venerated as the global heritage of biodiversity, with a particular focus upon pastoralism as ‘threat’ and upon the relationships of Indigenous knowledge to scientific knowledge. Finally the chapter presents a condensed discussion on the ordering of Maasailand and the Maasai within safari tourism.

#### MAKING MAASAILAND

The binary constructs of Maasai as ‘romantic’ and ‘awkward’ have their roots in colonial literature dating from the late 19th century. Joseph Thomson’s *Through Masai land* (1895 [1885]) termed the Maasai ‘beautiful beasts’ (Hughes 2006b, 269), and imagined Maasailand as a moral test for the imperial body and mind. Moreover, such writing reinforced colonial administrators’ assumptions that Maasai occupation of place ‘was aimless thereby justifying land snatching and forced moves’ (Hughes 2006b, 274).

In 1906 the British restricted the Maasai to newly formed reserves in British East Africa – the ‘Northern Masai Reserve’ and the ‘Southern Masai Reserve’ (Hughes 2006a).<sup>2</sup> In 1916 all those in the Northern Reserve were moved to an expanded Southern Reserve. Prior to this date most Maasai were widely distributed and interspersed with other pastoralists and agriculturalists who did not necessarily speak Maa. The British argued for the formation of reserves to ‘protect’ the interests of Maasai as a ‘tribe’:

Most administrators attributed the scattering to their continued suffering after the ravages of the epidemics and civil wars of the late nineteenth century [...], rather than to a conscious effort by Maasai to diversify economically, re-establish involvement with neighboring peoples, and reassert their own models of spatial interaction. Upset that such fragmentation and dispersal had occurred among ‘the Maasai’ of travelers’ tales and colonial lore, they vowed to restore ‘the Maasai’ to their reputed former colonial glory and vitality as a ‘tribe’ by reuniting the scattered fragments and concentrating them in a single, bounded area. (Hodgson 2001, 51)

Thus, the modern notion of ‘Maasailand’ was made concrete as an ethnic geography with the creation, between 1916 and 1926, of two reserves in the driest areas of southern Kenya and northern Tanganyika. Furthermore, this newly fashioned geography itself became a place in which ‘the Maasai’ were constituted, as colonial administrators grouped together all Maa-speaking nomadic pastoralists who *seemed* to possess the same look, language and social structure. Such assumptions put into practice also meant that in the early 20th century the Maasai became regarded

<sup>2</sup> The Kenya colony came into existence in 1920.

as a people who were viewed as properly subject to external control. The British were, by the late 1920s, proud of themselves for 'saving' the Maasai when in fact what they had done was to politically demarcate a particular geographical area as a place they termed 'Maasailand' (Miller 1971; Hughes 2005), populated by a people removed from their traditional homelands.

After 1945 the colonial livestock scientists focused on the transformation of savannah in the reserves for livestock production, or 'rangeland improvement'. Simultaneously, protected areas for game were also strengthened. The Swynnerton Plan<sup>3</sup> of 1954–1959 was designed to introduce 'models' of ideal land use which assigned a livestock quota to each Maasai household and a set area of land for each herd and imposed agreements to sell surplus stock to the government. However, 'Most pastoral groups viewed the colonial administration with suspicion and believed that the colonial government did not understand the real nature of pastoral cultures with their many attendant problems' (Ng'ethe 1993, 3). Indeed, the very notion of 'development' in the context of the Maasai, even by post-colonial state and international agencies since Kenya became independent in 1963, is a curious mix of idealising the 'tribalness' of the Maasai and simultaneously regarding them as 'backward' and 'uncooperative' because of their apparent unwillingness to 'modernise', particularly in respect of lack of cooperation with range management models. Group ranches were territorial arrangements with the emphasis on collective tenure of defined areas for livestock grazing outside protected areas. Males over a certain age are entitled to membership, but in practice the benefits of membership frequently accrue to the political elites within each of the circa 90 group ranches in Maasailand (Republic of Kenya 1990).

Throughout the 20th century, as the Maasai were being represented in popular culture for being noble primitives and guardians of the savannah, they were simultaneously portrayed by colonial and postcolonial governments as truculent, conservative and stuck in the past (Hughes 2007). On the one hand, an assumption is that they neglect the land and ignore opportunities for exploitation of their traditional resource. Yet, on the other hand, the alternate assumption is that they are interfering with range ecosystems by putting stock on land that is regarded as wildlife habitat, with the consequences of reducing water and grazing available for wildlife (African Conservation Centre 2010). There is, therefore, an inference that the Maasai are poor guardians of place and that other, more enlightened, interests are better poised to characterise and direct the management of 'rangeland'.

The problems of group ranches in Kenyan Maasailand – lack of recognition by Maasai pastoralists of state livestock quotas; supposed overgrazing; competition with wildlife; soil erosion; vulnerability to drought; conflict over resource access; social stratification and reinforcement of gender inequality – have been regarded by the state and by particular international non-governmental organisations as at least partly a product of the 'difficult' Maasai culture. Many development and conservation professionals would say the Maasai are recalcitrant and hard to modernise (Hodgson 2001). Taking an overview of colonial and post-independence multilateral development programmes in Tanzanian Maasailand, Dorothy Hodgson argues that this recurring focus on modernising the Maasai has had contradictory and even paradoxical effects:

<sup>3</sup> The Plan launched the enclosure of tribal lands so as to increase agricultural production and to better integrate 'tribal peoples' into the colonial land-use system.

Rather than producing food security, collective empowerment vis-à-vis the nation state, or adequate health and education opportunities, these development interventions increased stratification, limited food production and income strategies, and facilitated the economic and political disenfranchisement of women. Furthermore, despite these years of development, Maasai are still viewed as 'culturally conservative', stubbornly persistent in their pursuit of pastoralism and rejection of farming, sedentarisation, education and other more 'modern' ways of being (Hodgson 2001, 6).

In this section I have set out how the Maasai are constructed in certain categories by particular actors in relation to the environment and development. As Hodgson points out, such 'placing' of Maasai people and their lands has given rise to persisting effects that would seem to mitigate against integrating Maasai people more fully and from the bottom up into the objectives of environment and development.

#### CONSERVATION AND 'COMMUNITY'

In recent years heritage conservation has undergone a process that has putatively moved away from the 'fortress model'. Fortress conservation is based on policies which emphasise the centrality of meeting scientifically derived aims and the creation and scientific management of protected areas. These territories – game reserves, sanctuaries, national parks – were removed from their surrounding everyday context by partitioning and by the exclusion of people and their everyday practices. Indeed, it has been common practice for conservation authorities to evict local residents from many protected areas around the world. Over the last 25 years a new model has arisen, however, based on ideas of integrating the needs of human development with conservation; it has moved from excluding to including local people and 'trusting' Indigenous knowledge about, and ways of managing, ecosystems (Brockington *et al* 2008; Igoe, 2004; Maffi and Woodley 2010). Organisations such as the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources and the World Wide Fund for Nature, as well as several others, are aligning conservation with development and, in particular, the rights of Indigenous peoples. This internationalisation of the 'Indigenous' by global conservation institutions raises several issues around inclusion and exclusion in conservation in Maasailand.

The first issue that is problematic in the new conservation model concerns the construction of Maasai community. One of the new modes of the new model is called community-based conservation (CBC) and this ostensibly integrates the protection of highly valued species, habitats and ecosystems while meeting the development needs of communities, especially the rural poor. However, conservationists often fall into what critics of mainstream top-down economic development call 'normal development'. This happens when conservation policy and practices effectively reify community knowledge by assuming all Maasai to be a single, homogenous community and thereby ironing out differentiation within a complex social system (Neumann 1995). Further, some Maasai in positions of power within group ranches and in Maasai NGOs based outside of Maasailand have, in order to gain international support, 'often intentionally manipulated and projected homogenized exoticised versions of their cultural identities to accord with "Western" stereotypes of "indigenous" peoples' (Hodgson 2001, 231). These points about the Maasai parallels work on CBC in other parts of Africa where assumptions by conservationists about 'community' (such as which actors hold traditional land rights) have led to the reassertion of the fortress

model of conservation when CBC seems not to have 'worked' as effectively as the conservation agenda required (see, for example, Sharpe 1998; Kumar 2005).

A second issue relates to the construction of Indigenous knowledge, which is frequently assigned a subservient position in relation to scientific knowledge. For Goldman (2003), Maasai knowledge is constituted as something which has relevance to conservation but only in ways which ecologists and conservationists prescribe. She argues that aspirations on the part of scientists and conservationists to 'build bridges' between Indigenous and scientific knowledge is flawed because within this process the balance between these knowledges is unequal. Indigenous knowledge cannot define itself on its own terms and becomes the political and scientific 'tool' of the conservation community rather than having epistemological equivalence. This hierarchy is maintained by the construction of boundaries between Indigenous knowledge and conventional science within community conservation in Maasailand (Goldman 2007).

The majority of people living with wildlife are passive participants in its conservation and generally have no devolved power or say in the direction and conceptualisation of the results that conservation exists to deliver or for whom those outcomes are important (Brockington *et al* 2008). Indeed, there is often a great deal of hostility to wildlife and international conservation in Maasailand. This is evidenced in the continued killing of lions to 'protect' cattle despite the establishment of instruments such as the Predator Compensation Fund (covering Mbirikani group ranch in southern Kenya). It is also seen in Maasai frustration over denial of access to grazing because of exclusion from reserves supposedly established and run on CBC lines (such as Kimana Wildlife Sanctuary between Amboseli and Tsavo national parks in southern Kenya). It is not uncommon to hear complaints about the poor terms given to Maasai in such projects, or about the high status of wildlife in relation to Maasai interests, for example: 'The government is wildlife and wildlife is government' (male junior elder, Kuku group ranch, *pers comm* 2010). It would seem from these relations of conservation that place is conceived of in the overarching terms of global biodiversity and that Maasai concepts and knowledge of place are, despite aspirations, unincorporated into conservation.

Despite the idealism around CBC, the language and practices associated with protected areas largely reflect the culture of conservation rather than local culture: 'The intended (and at times unintended) landscapes of conservation are crafted for legibility, manageability and foreign scientific expertise, leaving little room for "indigenous" or "local" knowledge claims' (Goldman 2003, 835). Indeed, science-based international NGOs made a considerable protest when Amboseli National Park proposed allowing Maasai grazing within its boundaries (Thompson 2002). These sorts of actors, in Maasailand but organised and funded internationally, 'still have significant influence in representing protected areas as people-less spaces, conserved free from the influence and despoiling activities of people' (Brockington and Igoe 2006, 445). This concept of Maasai place as lacking modernity is one that is consumed around the world and, as the next section discusses, is an idea central to the safari industry in East Africa.

#### BEING AND SEEING ON SAFARI

Tourism is a mainstay of the Kenyan economy and most Kenyan tourism involves some participation in safari to look at wild animals and experience 'wild' habitats. The development of modern safari strongly relates to the growth of hunting in the colonial era as a key part of the construction of the European imagination of East Africa and by the 1930s Kenya had become

the centre of 20th-century safari. In Maasailand, wildlife conservation and safari tourism exist in a mutually reinforcing co-existence. This section discusses safari tourism as something other than simply a business. It will briefly explore how wildlife and Maasai geography are organised and framed through a combination of discourses, materiality and practices into a functional whole: what van der Duim calls a 'tourismscape' (2007). The discussion suggests a distance between the ordinary experience of place in Maasai everyday life and the experience of tourists on safari, primarily seeking to experience, and in certain respects to 'capture' through photography, the 'wild' savannah, its animal species and its tribal peoples.

One of the most powerful framings of geography in safari tourism – the safari tourismscape – is of Maasailand as being 'wild' or 'wilderness' (Cejas 2007). The Maasai, as long as they are in 'native' dress, are often part of this framing of Kenya as something other than modernity, as an Eden-like landscape. In the adherence of safari tourism to the globalised discourse of ecology, Maasai geographies of everyday dwelling places are fixed as an ahistoric landscape, meaning a landscape that is predominantly unchanged and is, somehow, imagined as being like the world 'as it once was' (Massey 2005). Maasailand as an 'ecological' destination for tourists, as a place outside of the modern world and with its own inherent 'natural' rhythms, seems a part of this process of rendering peopled places as wild and, therefore, people-less landscapes.

Safari itself comes in several forms, but most frequently has at its centre the evocation of a romantic kind of 'aristocratic' tourism promoted to European elites in the early days of the Kenya colony. This is tourism linked to an imaginary landscape, as land untainted by the depredations of the modern world. Indeed, the romanticism referred to here links to inter-war literary expressions of what the original British colonialists felt about East Africa – that it was unaffected by the wider world and in particular by the erosion of values that was occurring in Britain, especially the loss of a particular rural way of life in the 1930s (Youngs 1999). The more 'upmarket' safari packages still trade on this romantic version of the African experience.

Another hierarchy implicit in the safari tourismscape relates to safari spaces themselves which are pre-eminently protected areas. The safari tourismscape is one in which globally mobile actors move through particular sites in Maasailand. In Kenya there is a hierarchy of parks built around notions of an ascending order of spectacle. Inevitably all parks build up to a visit to Maasai Mara (in south-west Maasailand), as it is considered within the safari tourism industry to be the climax of visual spectacle in the Kenyan context. The location of places is crucial and many roads and facilities in rural Kenya exist primarily to serve safari traffic. It is not uncommon to experience roads of much better quality within protected areas than without. However, the main point is that the safari requires accessibility for globally mobile subjects. The tourist is the legitimised visitor to the wild, the 'natural' inhabitant of the touristic enclaves formed by the geography of protected areas. There is a distinct paradox in safari tourism, in that the imagination of, and usually non-African desire for, 'Africa' as extensive untamed geography collides with the fact that, in reality, such notions are confined to and played out in identifiable demarcated spaces.

Places such as Amboseli and the aforementioned Kimana Wildlife Sanctuary are presented to non-Maasai tourist markets as a point in a wider, threatened, ecological space (such as a gathering point for wild animals on migration). These places are marked by their familiarity to Westerners, as reassuring commodified locations; watered, comfortable zones of Africana. The safari lodge – with air-freighted luxuries – is an idea of a place in the savannah. The effort is spent on creating and maintaining the realism of the idea of safari. In the case of Kimana Wildlife Sanctuary, like so many other cases, the safari tourismscape (in this case supposedly ecotourism) ties to fortress



conservation. The people living in the area are often excluded from these spaces despite a reliance on such land for activities long practised in the area. This is the case in Kimana. As the Chief Warden of Kimana Wildlife Sanctuary once stated: 'people come to see wildlife, not Maasai or their cattle' (pers comm 2002). Thus there is an assumption about how many safari tourists expect to experience Maasailand as wild savannah.

A further dimension of the framing of Maasailand as 'wild' is in the meeting of (Western) human and non-human. In the safari tourist's quest for the 'big five',<sup>4</sup> encounters between human tourist and non-human hold within them inherent notions of 'realism', such as certain ideas of animal subjectivity, authenticity and specific models of human–animal relationships (Desmond 1999, 176). When the tourist on safari regards nature, a realist understanding is generally taken as being in play. The non-human is regarded primarily as an extra-discursive entity. Non-humans are evidence for the safari tourist of a (partly) asocial and ahistoric nature, one that by its apparently obvious apartness from modernity defines its existence. In this sense, to be in the presence of an elephant or a big cat is to be present among another reality, essentially one of an unmediated nature at its most fundamental. The wildlife comes to signify 'global ecology' and the safari tourist therefore may come to experience the safari encounter with wildlife species as part of a moral geography in the sense that safari encounters are part of a positive moral contribution to the conservation of 'global heritage' through safari tourist shillings feeding into conservation science and management.

Another feature of the safari touristscape of 'wild' Maasailand is what may be called 'self-disciplining': the process of preparation, knowledge and comportment involved in being a safari tourist, such as the process of acquiring the necessary awareness of the correct behaviour for encountering a range of wildlife. Thus safari starts before the tourist arrives in Maasailand. Clothing, language, technology and so on are all vital and the subject of numerous texts on 'how to' experience the African wild. The contemporary use by tourists of optical equipment to 'see' and 'capture' animals is linked to a form of knowledge that is about seeking out, collecting, classifying and displaying animals (Ryan 1997), and this is a central part of the construction of Maasailand as an ecological domain. The space in which safari is staged displaces the everyday dwelling space of Maasai people and becomes framed by particular readings of global environmental concerns and discourse. Indeed, the driver guides are mediators of global environmental discourse when describing species and environments to tourists.

The Maasai position in the touristscape is harder to characterise, perhaps. This is possibly because the image of the Maasai warrior in traditional dress, standing on one leg, or leaning on a spear, is a cliché in this context. Maasai moran in tribal dress are often employed by safari lodges as *askari* – armed guards – and to dance as part of visitor entertainment. The Maasai in this framing are self-evidently *the* people in the safari landscape as long as they are positioned and staged 'correctly'. For some Maasai, 'playing themselves' for tourist interest is an unproblematic performance, but elsewhere it has been noted that some safari tourists are resistant to the idea of 'Maasainess' as something that is staged for tourists as a performance (Bruner 2005); rather, safari tourists typically regard Maasai as authentic and any glimpse of the 'backstage' (ie Maasai not

<sup>4</sup> The big five refers to the most valued target species for colonial hunters and for modern safari tourists: There are actually six species, as rhinoceros is usually grouped together: African elephant (*Loxodonta africana*); black rhinoceros (*Diceros bicornis*); white rhinoceros (*Ceratotherium simum*); lion (*Panthera leo*); Cape buffalo (*Syncerus caffer*); and leopard (*Panthera pardus*).

conforming to a particular physical representation of Maasainess) is resisted and even disregarded (Bruner 2001; Bruner 2005; Bruner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1994; and see also Whittaker 2009). One thing that is pre-eminently left out by the framings of the safari touristscape is the ordinary world of Maasai people, the sense of place experienced in the everyday.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has given an overview of how the Maasai are framed in conservation and safari tourism. The approach has emphasised the processes and ordering of the Maasai in relation to conservation and tourism as powerful (global) discourses and practices. The chapter has suggested that, on the one hand, Maasai are framed as Indigenous people living in harmony with the savannah environment, and, on the other, the Maasai are framed as persistently stuck in the past, with a poor understanding of rangeland management in relation to wildlife and prone to wantonly disregarding rules such as refraining from grazing in protected/safari game reserves. The chapter also discussed how safari tourism emphasises the realism and romanticism of Maasailand and that this ties in strongly to the marginalisation of Maasai concerns in conservation. For some, the Maasai performing for tourists is an inauthentic act reinforcing negative stereotypes and is at a distance from enabling tourists to understand the realities of Maasai life. To others, Maasai people are entitled to present the 'stereotypes' of Maasainess for consumption by tourists. As analysed here it is as if these discourses and practices make the Maasai their subject and subjugate the different Maasai people's own lived environment; their own understandings of place.

I have also not discussed in the short space available in this chapter how, for example, Maasai people see their own place in the world. But it might be appropriate to end the chapter with the following anecdote from conversations with Maasai colleagues. Among the *Odo-mongi* (people of the red cow) subsection of Kenyan Maasai, the current *olaji* or age set of male junior elders were originally called *Ilkiponi* by their elders. This means 'innovators', or 'people who make things multiply', indicating an aspiration to increase the numbers and value of livestock. However, the self-chosen nickname for that age set is *Iltakerin*, which means 'a mix of traditional and modern' or, more accurately, 'hybrid people', reflecting their desire to be something other than how others see them and their place in the world. The (mis)placing of the Maasai is evidently in stark contradiction to their own, much more sophisticated, self-image.

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