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Rough Time in Paradise: Claims, blames and memory making around some protected areas in Kenya

Lotte Hughes

I use historical examples of forced relocation, or alleged relocation, from protected areas in Kenya to challenge some of the points made by Rangarajan and Shahabuddin in their 2006 *Conservation and Society* article. I suggest that the debate thus far (at least within these pages) has failed to discuss the role and uses of social memory, especially in relation to land restitution claims. Also, that relocation should be examined in deep historical focus; anthropological analyses, although valuable, do not suffice. Imaginings of environment and ‘pastness’ by both European settlers and (in this case) indigenous Africans should be factored in and deconstructed.

Maasai communities were forcibly moved into reserves by the British colonial government in British East Africa (later called Kenya) in the 1900s. This was not done for conservation purposes, although portions of the areas to which the Maasai were moved were later set aside for national parks or game reserves. One of these areas — the Maasai Mara Game Reserve (MMGR) — has recently become the focus for restitution claims.

But from a historical — rather than a human rights — perspective, it is a very poor example because it can be proved that there was no forced eviction from the area that

became MMGR, and few people were moved at all. No one lived there all year round, because of tsetse flies. Moreover, as a result of wildlife tourism revenues, MMGR is today a milk cow for Maasai communities living around it, and for the Maasai-controlled county councils which manage it — facts that are conveniently ignored by those who claim it ought to be ‘returned’ to the community that effectively already owns it. Historical and contemporary land losses have been elided in Maasai social memory, leading to claims that all relocation from areas that became parks involved force. This is inaccurate, and is an example of what happens when ‘memory’ (and its uses in political agitation) becomes confused with ‘history.’

I also discuss criticism of my doctoral work, which questioned the veracity of Maasai oral testimony that I used when describing the environmental effects of the colonial-era moves and their impact on human and stock health. I debunk some of the points made by critics, comparing biological and historical approaches to my original case study and the disjuncture between the two. I advocate a fusion of disciplinary approaches, in order to produce more nuanced analyses.

Further, I discuss how MMGR provides a good example of the need to

look beyond rhetorical claims and to examine historical facts. I draw on contemporary oral and archival sources in order to prove that very few people were moved to make way for the reserve in 1948, and that the migration was not coerced.

This is set against claims by indigenous rights activists, which tend to be accepted uncritically by their western sponsors, that the creation of MMGR deprived the Maasai of some of their best land. These claims imply that the eviction was forced, when, in fact, Maasai elders reportedly ‘gave’ the Mara to the government. In conclusion, it is not correct to assume that all displacement from protected areas was coerced, just because politicians and pundits say so, or that forced removals took place at all in order to create certain parks. What scholars of social memory call ‘purposeful forgetting’ may be a factor on both sides of the fence — settler and indigenous.

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