

ECAS 2013

5th European Conference on African Studies (Lisbon)

June
27-29



African Dynamics in a Multipolar World

ISCTE - Lisbon University Institute

ECAS 2013

5th European Conference on African Studies

African Dynamics in a Multipolar World

©2014 Centro de Estudos Internacionais do Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL)

ISBN: 978-989-732-364-5

STRUCTURAL OBLIVION AND PERSPECTIVISM: LAND AND BELONGING AMONG CONTEMPORARY WHITE KENYANS

Janet McIntosh
Brandeis University

janetmc@brandeis.edu

Abstract

This paper explores how white Kenyans descended from colonial settlers understand their own entitlements to land. In 2004, Maasai activists drove livestock onto white Kenyan owned farms in Laikipia District as part of a broader bid for reparations for the colonial administration's land seizures. White Kenyan responses draw on longstanding colonial discourse to criticize Maasai land use and what they frame as the "romance" of Maasai activism. I deem their occluded understanding an example of "structural oblivion"; that is, difficulty understanding the perspectives and resentments of marginalized groups. I explain too that pressures for Community Based Conservation have led some white Kenyans to make (partial) concessions to the alternative perspectives of the communities bordering their lands.

Keywords: Whiteness, colonialism, land, Kenya, Maasai

This presentation emerges from a wider project that explores the vexed sense of belonging of middle- to upper-middle class white Kenyans descended from European settler families. There are only a few thousand such individuals, and those I spoke to tell me how passionately they love the country and wish to be accepted as fully Kenyan. Some proudly tout themselves as third, fourth, or even fifth generation Kenyan, a mantra I interpret as a bid for some version of autochthony, especially by contrast with the European and American expatriates they refer to rather disparagingly as “Two-Year Wonders.” While their colonial forebears clung to a European identity, many white Kenyans pronounce themselves good nationalists, and broadcast their investment in Kenya’s modern, “developed” future.

But from time to time over the last decade or so, hostile public feeling toward whites from former settler families has reached a high pitch, perhaps more than at any point since Independence in 1963. The controversy I focus on here was sparked in Laikipia District in 2004. Most of the large tracts of land in the District are currently owned by elite Africans, Asians and Euro-American expatriates, but approximately 40 former settler families own roughly one million acres of the land, devoting it to commercial cattle ranching, conservation, and luxury tourism.¹ A marginalized population of thousands of Maa-speaking Maasai pastoralists also lives in the region. In August 2004, Maasai activists made a major bid for damages from the British and Kenyan governments, and as part of this, drove large herds of cattle onto the ranches of whites from old Kenya families, demanding the return of ancestral grazing lands that had been taken by the British colonial government a century earlier. White Kenyans living there felt besieged, charged with the collective guilt of their colonial ancestors.

¹For more on recent land deals in Laikipia, see the presentation by John Lekai of Oxfam, UK, (also the President of the Organisation for Indigenous Peoples of Africa) at: <http://www.ids.ac.uk/files/dmfile/JohnLekaiPRESENTATION3.pdf>

But the Laikipia events were hardly isolated. Many of my respondents, too, felt collectively implicated in the social drama surrounding the Honorable Thomas Cholmondeley, heir to the vast colonial-era Delamere fortune, including a huge tract of land in the Rift Valley. In 2005 and '06, Cholmondeley was accused in two separate incidents of murdering an indigent Kenyan on his land, and was widely vilified as an unreconstructed colonial who “shoots Africans for sport”. Politicians attending the funeral of one of the deceased men delivered furious speeches, several of them calling for Cholmondeley’s summary execution. Kenya’s deputy immigration minister Ananias Mwaboza invoked Zimbabwe’s notorious “land reform” campaign to expel whites from their estates, saying: “We now know why Robert Mugabe acted the way he did” (“Angry Kenyans demand expulsion of white settlers,” 2006). Some of my respondents told me of being taunted on the street as “another Delamere,” and say it was a terrible jolt to see themselves being seen through hostile eyes. Many were defensive as well, holding Cholmondeley at arm’s length and portraying him as a foil in the old colonial mode as if to detach themselves from his reputation—and indeed from colonialism itself—as much as they could.

Starting in 2005, white Kenyans also had to reckon with the local and international publicity surrounding two books documenting the colonial regime’s atrocities against Mau Mau insurgents in the 1950s (Anderson, 2005; Elkins, 2005). Soon after, several Mau Mau Veterans initiated a lawsuit against the British Government for the torture they suffered at the hands of British authorities. After the surprise discovery of an archival cache in the United Kingdom that supported their testimonials, their case succeeded in June of 2013 (the British government, remarkably, issued an apology, as well as financial compensation). My white Kenyan interlocutors, almost none of whom were personally involved in the crackdown on Mau Mau but

who felt their community and extended families implicated in these charges, expressed various shades of denial, concession, and chagrin in conversations with me about Mau Mau. Clearly, then white Kenyans exist in a complex state of suspension between historical privilege and projected resentment. In their darkest moments, some of my respondents fretted the nation might someday “go the way of Zimbabwe” when it comes to hostility against white citizens.

In the fuller version of this project, I explore the subjectivity in this foundered elite from several angles. Among other things, I explore how white Kenyans strive to belong to Kenya through their positive attitude toward the Swahili language (among younger generations, anyway), and through what they say are kin-like relationships with their domestic staff. Their expressed affection toward staff members seems an implicit rejoinder to the charge that they exploit the African populace in colonial style, while their enthusiastic language ideologies seem an attempt to compensate for colonial disparagement of Swahili as an almost polluting, animalistic tongue. Yet I suggest that at a subtler, often unconscious level, they haven't fully jettisoned their colonial baggage from either matter. Their language ideologies, for instance, still uphold a hierarchy in which English marks content for rationality and power, and Swahili is considered essentially more “emotional” and less sophisticated, a language used for “slang.” Meanwhile, I argue, their enmeshments with domestic staff result in part from a paternalistic structure in which white Kenyans pay low wages and ensure that staff are thus dependent on them for *ad hoc* handouts or loans when it comes to medical emergencies, their children's education, and the like. All in all, I suggest, many white Kenyans say they wish to belong to a contemporary Kenya, but still channel a problematic historical residue, even when they don't realize it.

I have found it useful to work with the phrase “structural oblivion” to capture some aspects of white Kenyan subjectivity. Structural oblivion gets at some of the themes that recur in whiteness studies—see, for instance, Melissa Steyn’s (2012) “ignorance contract,” Shannon Sullivan’s (2006) notion of white privilege as “habitual” and unconscious; and Jane Hill’s (2005) discussions of “racism without racists”—but the concept could apply as well to many elite situations. Structural oblivion is a condition that emerges *from* one’s social structural position, and it is constituted by oblivion *to* certain implications of social structure, particularly the fact of and reasons for the resentment of the subaltern. I see structural oblivion as a common subject position among the powerful in hegemonic social arrangements. If “hegemony” is a system in which all social strata are implicated in the process of oppression (see, for instance, Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991), then not only do the subaltern sometimes unwittingly collude in their own oppression, but sometimes, too, the powerful unwittingly oppress. Perhaps this is so obvious it needs no statement, but the powerful can also oppress quite deliberately—and the line between deliberate and unwitting oppression may sometimes be a difficult one to trace. In this paper I focus on what looks like structural oblivion because I am interested in how white Kenyans make their privilege seem credible, to some others and to themselves. And yet, among my interlocutors in Kenya, I also see a continuum from structural oblivion to awareness of the problematic structures they are part of, sometimes in the same individual, depending on the subject matter or context. The shocks and shifts of history, including events of recent years in Kenya, have compelled some white Kenyans to reckon with other vantage points in new ways (the reasons for the individual differences are beyond the scope of this paper, but for now suffice it to say that like all social groups, theirs is an internally diverse one). This epistemological loosening is what Nietzsche called “perspectivism”: an expansion of one’s sense of possible truths through the

recognition of others' conceptual schemes. In their responses to Maasai land claims in Laikipia, we see both stubborn structural oblivion, in the form of an erasure of history and ignorance of the historical forces that have shaped Maasai ecology, *and* shades as well of perspectivism that offer hope for (further) change. White stances toward the Laikipia land, then, furnish an opportunity to see how members of an elite group, challenged in a particular way, may respond by digging in their heels or by questioning their community's earlier convictions.

I turn now to a brief history of the land controversy in Laikipia. In the late nineteenth century, Maasai pastoralists ranged from the Laikipia plateau to the north, down through what is now Tanzania, and West into much of the Rift Valley, including the cool, green highlands that would become so desirable to colonial settlers. The technical phrase for Maasai pastoralism is “transhumant seasonal migration,” meaning that Maasai followed the rains to graze their cattle, and by shifting between lower and higher ground, they allowed the vegetation to grow back. Within their sub-cultural groups (between 14 and 22 of them, depending on how they are counted), Maasai had a complex system of rights to land and resources. In the nineteenth century, British officials' maps recognized this proprietorship, labeling the East African highlands “Maasailand” (Hughes, 2006, p. 3-4).

Within a few decades, British colonial lore came to erase these entitlements. Pastoralism itself, say historians, was unnerving to European politics of control and morality, involving too little labor and too much motion (Berman and Lonsdale, 1992, p. 35; Hodgson, 2001). From the early twentieth century, British all over East Africa were fixated on “developing” the land and indeed Maasai men themselves, with an eye toward “improving” their animal husbandry and making them into “modern ranchers” (Hodgson, 2001, p. 84-86). In Kenya itself, in 1904, the British persuaded Maasai—apparently without force—to sign away their rights to land in the

Naivasha and Nakuru areas of the central Rift Valley land. Over the next year, Maasai were moved into two reserves, one to the South and the other a very desirable grazing area in Laikipia to the North. Under the treaty agreement, the British promised these grazing areas “so long as the Masai as a race shall exist.” But in 1911 the administration wanted to make room for more white settlement in Laikipia, so coerced Maasai into signing a new agreement, this time with more pressure, even threats (Hughes, 2006, p. 172). Maasai leaders balked at first, realizing those in the north would be shifted into poorly watered, low-quality land in a broadened southern reserve. When they capitulated, it was with dread: “We are sure our stock will die there, but we are prepared to obey the orders of the Government and go” (Hughes, 2006, p. 43). Between 1911 and 1913 about 10,000 Maasai, 175,000 cattle, and over one million sheep followed four prescribed routes to the south, with hired white settlers and *askaris* (guards) from other parts of Africa herding them at gunpoint. Government officials at the time described Maasai as “well behaved” (Hughes, 2006, p. 44), but many wound up turning back, their move being postponed until a few years later. Oral testimony from elders who were children during the moves suggests there were at least a few deaths from sickness, exposure, and the stress of travel.

All told, by 1913 Maasai lost between 50-70% of the lands they originally used, and felt duped by the moves, which confined them to arid terrain (Hughes, 2005, p. 208).² Maasai were now unable to move through rich grazing areas or a wide range of habitats, and the southern reserve exposed them to disease (human and bovine) and population pressures. Their health suffered, the quality of their livestock plummeted, and the surrounding ecosystem was blighted by soil erosion and loss of vegetation (Glover and Gwynne, 1961; Hodgson, 2001, p. 106; Tignor, 1972; see also Hughes, 2006, p. 105, 118 ff). Maasai mourned not only the loss of their

²See as well DePuy (2011), and “The Root Causes of Maasai Predicament” by Navaye Ole Ndaskoi, at http://www.galdu.org/govat/doc/maasai_fi.pdf.

livelihood, but also the “bounty, freedom, and range” of their earlier lifestyle (DePuy, 2011, p. 48). Male and female Maasai elders in Laikipia today wax nostalgic about their forebears’ way of life. In a series of recent interviews conducted in English by environmentalist Walter DePuy (2011), they repeatedly cited the good feelings associated with their autonomy and mobility: “They were just free before these private ranches came up”; “nobody control[led] you”; “the life was okay and it was good...They were just free and roaming everywhere, so the life was just simple and it was good”; “They were just free...there was nobody who was ruling them...Because everywhere was just for them” (pp. 35-6).

Maasai have tried to find recourse for their losses. They appealed several times for the return of their northern lands, taking the case to the High Court in 1913 and the Kenya Land Commission in 1932, and raising the issue during independence negotiations in London in 1962.³ But in 1963 Britain officially renounced all responsibility for further obligations to them, and since then the possibilities for recovering lands have become increasingly obscure.⁴ Still, in 2004 activist leaders mobilized, including representatives from the Maa Civil Society Forum and an NGO called “The Human-Wildlife Conflict Network,” as well as Maasai professionals and lawyers. Collectively, they argued that leases allocated in the early twentieth century were 99 years long and so, on August 15, 2004, the land should revert to the Maasai people. This logic, however, disregarded the fact that the Crown Lands Ordinance of 1915 had extended the leases to 999 years (Hughes, 2006, pp. 25-6).

³ In the 1913 case, Maasai plaintiffs claimed that the Maasai signatories to the 1911 agreement had lacked the authority to enter into it, that it violated the 1904 agreement, and that it did not benefit the Maasai. Yet Maasai illiteracy proved a major disadvantage in their ability to establish their version of events (Hughes, 2006, pp. 6-7).

⁴For a discussion of the British renunciation of responsibility, see John G. Galaty and Kimpei Ole Munei, 2010. “Maasai Land, Law, and Dispossession.” *Cultural Survival*. 26 March. Available at <http://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/kenya/maasai-land-law-and-dispossession>

Maasai leaders issued a press release making claims of torture and killings that, says Hughes (2005, p. 221), exaggerated the facts. Although their disenfranchisement is clearly documented, the question of how many deaths and how much suffering took place on the moves themselves has been hotly contested (and indeed was a source of serious friction even among colonial officials at the time). Many Maasai now believe the British routed them to the south in a deliberate effort to kill them (Hughes, 2006, p. 118), and are convinced that during the moves, “hundreds if not thousands of people died from starvation, disease, exposure, or gunshot wounds.” According to Hughes, these claims are founded in genuine loss, but embellish the available facts and “suit the current mood for reparations” (p. 56). The question of which lost land was at stake also remained sketchy, with some activists focusing on Laikipia and others, such as MP William ole Ntimama, the entire Rift Valley.

In 2004, while the ranches were being invaded, a procession attempted to deliver petitions addressed to the Kenyan and British governments, in Nairobi, Laikipia (Nanyuki) and the Rift Valley (Naivasha). The petition demanded the return of Laikipia to the Maasai community, urging the Government of Kenya “not to extend any of the leases, which are at the verge of expiring.” It also demanded compensation—land and money—from both governments for “all the historical and contemporary injustices” Maasai had been subjected to (Kantai, 2007, p. 112). A group of Maasai and Samburu Ministers and other leaders convened in Nairobi in September 2004 to discuss what kind of compensation might be just. The figure they quoted was 10 billion Kenya shillings for the land lost in Laikipia alone—approximately 125 million US Dollars in that year (Hughes, 2005, p. 221).

The pastoralists ultimately received nothing for their troubles. Up in Laikipia, the police guarded white-owned land, sometimes violently. Some white Kenyans from former settler

families felt it wasn't enough. Jeremy Block, a descendant of a well-to-do settler family, told Reuters, "[Maasai] have invaded all the ranches around here, they have destroyed an awful lot of property and it is time for law and order to take control...The police need to be harsher...There need to be more arrests. We need quicker, more forceful action" (Lacey, 2004). But the police *were* harsh, meting out abuses to send a message to those who had rocked the boat ("Government Forces Subject Laikipia Maasai," 2004).

Before Maasai were literally beaten back, the 2004 social drama repeatedly played to popular anti-colonial sentiment. At one point, for instance, the procession in Nairobi marched to the British High Commission, but it was closed for lunch and the High Commissioner, Edward Clay, did not happen to be in. A Maasai activist said: "Clay's refusal to see us shows how much contempt he has for us. It smacks of colonialism" (quoted in Kantai, 2007, p. 113). Maasai spokesmen invoked another complaint dating to the imperial era; namely, that "settlers" care more about African wildlife than they do about Africans. Said John Letai, the President of the Organisation for Indigenous Peoples of Africa (OIPA):

We have the ravaging drought killing thousands of our animals while we are [sitting] on a gold mine. The land next to us is electrified with all the lush pasture. Elephants, zebras and all other herbivores are having a holiday in these *so called settler ranches* while the rightful owners whom history deprived of this gold mine are languishing in abject poverty [emphasis mine]. (Ndaskoi, n.d.)

Ratik Ole Kuyana, a Maasai tour guide, remarked after narrowly escaping arrest during one protest, that "We're now squatters on our own land," continuing: "I'd rather spend my days in prison than see settlers spend their days enjoying my motherland." He went on to invoke the forcible seizures of white Zimbabwean farmer's lands: "I think Mugabe was right" ("Kenyan Land Struggle," 2004). The rhetoric surrounding the Laikipia upheaval erased the complexities

of Kenya's land politics, including the fact that many parties and ethnic groups in Kenya have been involved in land-grabbing and corruption in Laikipia since Independence (Kantai, 2007). Some current white Kenyan landowners in Laikipia, furthermore, purchased their lands after Independence rather than inheriting them directly from their settler forebears. But in 2004, Maasai activists painted a picture of a simple enemy dating to the colonial era. Placards held up during the demonstrations read: "We Demand our Land back from the British!" (Kantai, 2007, p. 110), and "Sunset for the British and sunrise for the Maasai" ("Betraying the Maasai," 2004). Contemporary white Kenyans were not citizens but interlopers, relics from a dead era.

Many white Kenyan landowners are derisive of what they call Maasai's "romantic" efforts to regain lands, and obviously they have material motives: They want to hold on to their title deeds. But they don't *experience* this dynamic as simple greed; rather, in much of their discourse, they model themselves as genuinely, legitimately entitled to the land rather than mere interlopers. They portray Maasai bids for restitution as unrealistic, particularly given how many times much of the land has changed hands, and represent Maasai as strategic opportunists. They also rationalize their ownership of Laikipia land through collective amnesia and old colonial rhetoric. Many white Kenyans have little firm knowledge of the Maasai moves of a century ago, and several told me earnestly that *all* of the Laikipia territories had been "fairly purchased" directly from Maasai. White Kenyans also use time-worn imagery, common among British colonials in East and Southern Africa, implying Maasai had no real claim to the land to begin with—in Laikipia or elsewhere. As David McDermott Hughes (2005, p. 14) has noted, many settler novels and memoirs represented African landscapes as if "unblemished" by human existence. True to form, Royal Geographical Society explorer Joseph Thomson wrote in the late nineteenth century that most of Laikipia was "quite uninhabited"—in spite of the evidence of

pastoralism he himself documented (Hughes, 2006, p. 24). More broadly, in the early twentieth century colonial officials saw no permanent settlements in Kenya's highlands, overlooked pastoralists' seasonal migrations (as well as their regional migrations within seasons), and jumped to the conclusion that, in their words, "a considerable portion of Maasai country was masterless" or "empty" (*Ibid*). The same language lives on today, as my white Kenyan interlocutors repeatedly describe the land in Laikipia as having been "empty," "virgin," or "uninhabited." An elderly Laikipia cattle rancher, Devon⁵, tells me his great-cousin, who was employed to help move the Maasai out of Laikipia a century ago, found that there was "*nobody to move*," and then "moaned" for years that as a result of the dearth of people there he didn't get paid enough. Another white Kenyan named Clem, a safari guide with family in Laikipia, also employs a sweeping rhetorical gesture to erase the seizures from Maasai: "There was no one there" when whites settled. Maasai's historical presence in grazing lands all over Kenya is thereby swept under the rug, and the deep wounds left by their forced moves are simply not acknowledged in the white Kenyan narratives I heard.

Meanwhile, white Kenyans further criticize Maasai's "romanticism" when it comes to their ecological interactions with the land. My respondents were especially derisive about the narratives found among NGOs supporting Maasai efforts, such as the Maasai Environmental Resource Coalition (MERC), an influential group of grassroots organizations in Kenya and Tanzania. A publicity-oriented section of the MERC website, entitled "Maasai: A Living Legacy," describes how Maasai have "lived in harmony within the rich ecosystems of East Africa for centuries" ("Maasai, a living legacy," 2003). By contrast, white Kenyans argue pastoralism desertifies the land and works against conservation, and describe pastoralist mobility

⁵ To preserve confidentiality, I employ pseudonyms for my respondents.

as haphazard and impulsive, iconic of – that is, resembling or mirroring—a more general aimlessness, shoddiness, and lack of application. We can see the precedent for this discourse back in 1934, when former Commissioner Charles Eliot wrote grumpily, “I cannot admit that wandering tribes have a right to keep other and superior races out of large tracts merely because they have acquired a habit of straggling over far more land than they can utilise” (quoted in Bekure and Pasha, 1990, p. 234). The colonial language is preserved almost unchanged decades later. Take the Nairobi-based entrepreneur Olivia, who in 2004 phoned her Laikipia landowner friends on a near-daily basis. From her vantage point, Maasai mobility was too aimless for them to have rights to the land: “[T]hey wander from place to place to place, in a certain area. Now they say that’s our land. How did that suddenly become your land? *Why* have you got historical rights to that land? Just because you wandered round it for a couple of hundred years or whatever?” A Rift Valley farmer in his seventies, James, portrays Maasai as greedy and their mobility as utterly spontaneous: “They reckon they own the whole of Kenya,” he tells me, and begins to giggle at the image. “The Maasai just went wherever they felt like it ‘cause they were really tough, wiry people.” And most white Kenyans are convinced that when Maasai inhabit land, they do not use it responsibly or sustainably. These images stand in contrast with European ideals of responsible land ownership, which are Lockean at base; one mixes one’s labor with the land to “improve” it. In this ideology, by working the land one almost seems to establish belonging through a kind of reverse autochony; those of European descent may not be “born from the soil,” but the soil was born from them. Careful scholarly work, of course, has unpacked the ecological sense and social structure behind Maasai pastoralism in its pre-colonial incarnation, and has argued that problems with Maasai ecology today have their roots in their

colonial displacement.⁶ But white Kenyans' representations of Maasai erase this history, and seem designed to take the stuffing out of equally simplified sentimental portraits.

Still, white Kenyan romance does flourish, in their own sense of connection to the land. The landscape and wildlife, they say rhapsodically, are "in their blood." Mary, from a coffee farming family in the Rift Valley, frames it as an ontological bond: "Kenya's landscape is absolutely a part of me; it is just SO magnificent." A young man recently returned from University in the UK says that England never felt like home; "the smells and colors and the landscapes here are so much more vivid; it's like I feel more alive when I'm walking around." And the safari guide Clem tells me in a heartfelt voice: "Yeah for me I love the landscape. It's really- it's really- you know it's *engrained* in you! You just *love it to the bone*." Ironically, while white Kenyans treat Maasai mobility as a disqualification for land ownership, own attachments to Kenya's spaces, for many of them, are rooted in sentimentality about their "total freedom" in childhood when they could "go anywhere," "wander far and wide," and of course had all kinds of exhilarating encounters with wildlife that set the stage for their passion for conservation (see, for instance, the dozens of reminiscences found in Considine and Rawlins, 2008). In treasuring the ability to range freely, white Kenyans seem unaware that Maasai have an analogous nostalgia of their own for their "freedom" and mobility. But whites' "free ranging" emerges precisely from colonial and post-colonial white privilege, which has involved appropriation of land, access to technology, and wealth. Those who are considered "local" (once "native") are defined as such precisely because so many of them are incarcerated in space by poverty and consumed—in critical narratives, anyway—by parochial, "tribalist" ethnoterritorialism in a way that white

⁶ Glover and Gwynne, 1961; Hodgson, 2001, p, 106; Tignor, 1972; see also Hughes, 2006, p. 105, 118 ff.

Kenyans don't imagine themselves to be. This, then, is part of whiteness in Kenya—a claim to space accompanied by the sense that one transcends it.

White Kenyans understand their own emotional connection to land as authentic and their own mobility as innocent and exhilarating, while seeing Maasai's emotional appeals for the land as inauthentic and manipulative, and their so-called "haphazard straggling" across the land as deplorable. Structural oblivion extends, then, to the ideological politics of affect, where one's own affective states are evidentiary, but those of the subaltern are dismissed as concocted and disingenuous. It is as if whites' personal attachments to the smell of the soil and the look of the vistas, and their personal memories of care and labor on the land, operate on a separate plane from structural awareness of the arc of history, of injustices, of human resentments clamoring just beyond the boundaries of a national park or privately owned ranch (see as well Hughes, 2010).

Having sketched these examples of white Kenyan structural oblivion, I insist as well that in some, it has been rattled by national and transnational developments. Globally and locally, particularly through the state corporation known as the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS), there has been a strong push for so-called Community Based Conservation (or CBC) that attempts to enlist local citizens as partners in conservation, often through income-generating activities. In Kenya, Maasai themselves had pushed for community involvement in conservation as early as the late 1950s, forwarding an innovative proposal that local councils rather than the central government should manage the Amboseli and Maasai Mara game reserves, both of which extend across the Tanzanian border to the South. While the management of these parks has been contentious, subject to corruption and infighting, surrounding Maasai communities have still benefited from tourism through park revenues and ethnopreneurialism, and the incidence of poaching has been

low relative to other areas (Honey, 1999, p. 310). The shift toward CBC over the last three decades has also been influenced by innovators such as David Western (of British descent, born in Tanzania, but later a naturalized Kenyan citizen), who became director of KWS in 1994. Western succeeded Richard Leakey, a controversial figure with deep family roots in Kenya who, in defense of the threatened elephant and rhino populations, instigated a policy that authorized units could shoot poachers on sight. Mindful of the high tensions with surrounding communities, Leakey also promised that KWS would give 25% of park revenues to those who lived on the periphery, but the expectations he raised were impossible to meet, and Leakey was so cynical about corruption he remarked a few years after his resignation that “I don’t believe community-based conservation has a hope in hell” (Honey, 1999, pp. 301-3). But Western took a more holistic, less insular approach to disrupt the perceived conflict between wildlife and humans. Curious about Maasai, he came to a richer understanding of how their grazing habits might complement the Amboseli ecosystem, and championed a co-existence model of national parks and pastoralists that would not just benefit local communities but involve them.

In Laikipia District, the private conservancy that led the way since the early 1990s has been Lewa Downs, owned by the Craig family, who first came to Kenya in 1924 as part of the post-WWI soldier-settler scheme. Lewa was originally a cattle ranch, but was losing wildlife quickly from around it and failing to turn a sufficient profit. The managers turned to conservation, and have ramped up local employment, training, education, health, micro-credit, water, road infrastructure, community forestry, livestock for community grazing, and other major initiatives in the surrounding communities. “With the changed perceptions of local people,” the Lewa staff write on their website, “the protection and conservation of wildlife is a source of desperately needed income rather than poaching for rhino horn” (“Lewa Wildlife Conservancy

Community Programmes,” 2013). Not only has Lewa changed the perception of local people; it has also shifted the perspective of other white Kenyans. Its widely-touted example has, in the words of one slightly edgy landowner, “put a good deal of pressure on those who aren’t doing the same thing.” A Lewa insider delicately suggested to me that racism informs the mentality of those landowners who resist, and implied that attitude would be well supplanted by nationalism:

[When The Maasai came through Laikipia in 2004,] other ranches said: ‘Well look what you’ve done to us. You’ve just...stood up, you’ve done things...and we haven’t. And you’ve left us high and dry.’ Which is a bit of a narrow minded way—it’s, to be honest, it’s a bit of a sort of, I hate to say it, a sort of Zimbabwe mentality if that makes sense...it’s such a closed gate policy to anybody. [The policy at Lewa is]: We’re Kenyan, we’re a Kenyan company, we’re owned by Kenyans. The guy next door is a Kenyan, what’s the difference, there is no difference.

By now, a number of white Kenyans property owners have felt this pressure and incorporated community-minded initiatives into their conservation practices.

CBC has been widely touted by tourism operators, but has also been widely faulted. A wave of scholarship coming out of Tanzania, Kenya, and other sites of African ecotourism finds that in spite of good intentions, many CBC initiatives continue to marginalize local knowledge claims and secure Western economic and cultural hegemony. CBCs risk simplifying the desires of the surrounding communities, continuing to partition “nature” into protected and unprotected units, and in some cases fetishizing a view of Maasai as “custodians” of wildlife while overlooking the fact that, as Mara Goldman (2003, p. 20) puts it, wildlife has become “the animal of the government” for many of them (see as well Akama 1996; Brockington and Homewood 1999; Neumann 1998). A founder of MERC, Maasai activist Ole Dapash, accuses white-owned ranches of using the “guise” of community-engaged ecotourism to hoard land and

resources in the hands of a few families (Honey, 1999, p. 325; see also Akama 1996). A young white Kenyan wildlife expert, Trevor, gives this claim some credibility in his remark: “The ranches shouldn’t be given back, as long as they are managed in a way that’s benefiting the local people.”

But my primary focus here is not the political complexities or shortcomings of CBC. My point, rather, is that although the “new conservation” has its own blind spots, it—alongside other historical shifts—appears to have prodded some white Kenyans into a shift in consciousness, however unevenly distributed, that makes concessions to the points of view of those who object to their privilege. So, for instance, in 2004, even as his Laikipia neighbors urged police to crack down harder on Maasai invaders, a white Kenyan landowner named Michael Dyer told a journalist: “Everyone knows there is a land issue here. It is causing quite a lot of distress now to the [Maasai] community...My feeling would be let’s get everyone around the table and let’s get some proper interpretation of the Maasai agreements, and let’s start the process of reconciliation” (Phombeah, 2004). Such talks never took place, and we cannot know how far empathy would have stretched if they had, but Dyer’s comments show that some white Kenyans are willing to start to reckon with radically different points of view, and different historical narratives.

Laikipia whites have been heavily invested in conservation, both for its own sake and as a means of luring tourists. But ranch by ranch as they have witnessed the rise of CBC and felt a tension with resentful Kenyan neighbors, they have begun to realize that, in the words of one landowner, “If people don’t care about it and they’re not part of it, it won’t work. You can’t simply say, ‘You can’t kill that.’” Their personal experiences combined with external pressure—including Maasai activism—have compelled some landowners to acknowledge points of view rather than dismissing them outright. For all of its documented imperfections, then, the “new

conservation,” combined with African activism, has amounted not only to new *practices*, but to a broadened *epistemology* for some; a shift in consciousness that makes preliminary concessions to subaltern points of view. “How *can* an African value an elephant higher than the farm he uses to feed his family?” asks one middle-aged woman. A Rift Valley landowner characterizes pastoralist antipathy to wildlife as “quite understandable,” while a safari guide, discussing hunting on protected lands, says, “If I had ten children at home and no job I’d do the same thing.” One young white Kenyan woman employed by a Laikipia conservancy imagines herself into her neighbors’ subject position: “Within a five kilometer radius of our boundary there are close to 50,000 people...all looking over the fence and thinking: ‘Well, they’ve got firewood, they’ve got wildlife. They’ve got everything we don’t have.’” One wealthy urbanite man, whose family sold their extensive landholdings at Independence, has read more than most of his white Kenyan peers about the history of Laikipia’s lands, and frames today’s tensions clearly in terms of perspectivism:

From our perspective, from the white perspective [creating privately held conservation areas] was the right thing to do. But for the poor guy who lived in the park, and the poor guy who wants to poach—the motive behind poaching is probably poverty...But if you’ve got one family on 60,000 acres, it’s easy to conserve...If I was a white landowner I’d have anxiety but the fact is I’m not, [and] I *kind* of think that land should be redistributed...I don’t think you can hold on to a title deed that was got from an injustice system [sic] 100 years ago, in a colonial time, you see, ‘cause the chiefs all signed it away.

Another young woman from a Laikipia family even shifts her pronouns to position herself neutrally: “They’re both right and they’re both wrong, really at the end of the day.” Both white ranchers and Maasai are “they,” in this formulation, and neither side has a lock on the moral high ground.

Given that representations of whites in colonial (and post-colonial African) contexts have tended, in the words of historian Terence Ranger (1998), to “distort them by the burden of power” (p. 256), it has been hard sometimes to notice the moments when they admit to being humbled. But in various post-colonial sites—in South Africa, through the public narratives generated by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and in Zimbabwe through the land reform campaign, for instance—white Africans have had to reckon with the historical legacies of colonialism. While their defensiveness is interesting in itself, as a mechanism of staying power, so too are the ways in which some post-colonial whites interrogate their community’s historical rationalizations. The first forays into perspectivism look like an expansion of their understanding of truth itself. This unsettling of conscience, however partial, is clearly part of the story of “whiteness” in Africa today, and it may ultimately prove materially, ecologically, and structurally important to the way events unfold from here.

Bibliography

- Akama, J. S. (1996). Western Environmental Values and Nature-Based Tourism in Kenya. *Tourism Management*, 17(8), 567-574.
- Anderson, D. (2005). *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Angry Kenyans demand expulsion of white settlers. (2006). Accessed December 12, 2011 at <http://www.aaj.tv/2006/05/angry-kenyans-demand-expulsion-of-white-settlers/>
- Bekure, S., and Pasha, I. O. (1990). The response of the Kenya Maasai to Changing Land Policies. In Paul A. Olson (Ed.), *The Struggle for the Land: Indigenous Insight and Industrial Empire in the Semiarid World*. Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press.
- Berman, B. and Lonsdale, J. (1992). *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya & Africa. Book One: State & Class*. London: James Currey Ltd.

- Betraying the Maasai. (2004). *The East African*. 13 August. Accessed December 12, 2011 in <http://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/magazine/-/434746/477414/-/view/printVersion/-/119qmx/-/index.html>
- Brockington, D. and Homewood, K. (1999). Pastoralism Around Mkomazi Game Reserve: The Interaction of Conservation and Development. In M. Coe, N. McWilliam, G. Stone, and M. Packer (Eds.). *Mkomazi: The Ecology, Biodiversity, and Conservation of a Tanzanian Savanna*. London: Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers).
- Comaroff, J., and J. L. Comaroff. (1991). *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa*. Vol. 1. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Considine, J. and J. Rawlins, eds. (2008). *Childhood Reminiscences of Colonial East Africa, 1920-1963*. Lancaster, UK: Bongo Books.
- DePuy, W. (2011). *Topographies of Power and International Conservation in Laikipia, Kenya*. (Master's thesis). Natural Resources and Environment at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI.
- Glover, P. E. and Gwynne, M.D. (1961). The Destruction of Masailand. *New Scientist*, 11(249), 450-53.
- Goldman, M. (2003). Partitioned Nature, Privileged Knowledge: Community-Based Conservation in Tanzania. *Development and Change*, 34(5). 833-862.
- Government Forces Subject Laikipia Maasai to Human Rights Abuses. (2004). *Cultural Survival*. 17 September. Accessed December 12, 2011 at <http://www.culturalsurvival.org/news/michael-tiampati/government-forces-subject-laikipia-maasai-human-rights-abuses>
- Hill, J. (2008). *The Everyday Language of White Racism*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hodgson, D. (2001). *Once Intrepid Warriors: Gender, Ethnicity, and the Cultural Politics of Maasai Development*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Hodgson, D. (2011). *Being Maasai, Becoming Indigenous: Postcolonial Politics in a Neoliberal World*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press.
- Honey, M. (1999). *Ecotourism and Sustainable Development: Who Owns Paradise?* Washington, D.C.: Island Press.
- Hughes, D. M. (2010). *Whiteness in Zimbabwe: Race, Landscape, and the Problem of Belonging*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hughes, L. (2005). Malice in Maasailand: The historical roots of current political struggles. *African Affairs*, 104(415), 207-224.

- Hughes, L. (2006). *Moving the Maasai: A Colonial Misadventure*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kantai, P. (2007). In the Grip of the Vampire State: Maasai Land Struggles in Kenyan Politics. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 1(1), 107-122.
- Kenyan Land Struggle. (2004). Accessed December 12, 2011 at <http://www.assatashakur.org/forum/afrikan-world-news/203-kenyan-land-struggle-kenyan-gov-uses-violence.html>
- Lacey, M. (2004). Tribe, Claiming Whites' Land, Confronts Kenya's Government. *The New York Times*. 25 August. Accessed December 12, 2011 at <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/08/25/world/tribe-claiming-whites-land-confronts-kenya-s-government.html>.
- Lewa Wildlife Conservancy Community Programmes. (2013) Accessed June 10, 2013 at <http://www.lewa.org/community-development/community-programmes/>
- Maasai: A Living Legacy. (2003). Maasai Environmental Resource Coalition (MERC). Accessed December 12, 2011 at <http://www.maasaierc.org/maasailegacy.html>
- Ndaskoi, N. O. (N.d.) The Roots Causes of Maasai Predicament. Accessed June 10, 2013 at http://www.galdu.org/govat/doc/maasai_fi.pdf
- Neumann, R. P. (1998). *Imposing Wilderness: Struggles Over Livelihood and Nature Preservation in Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Nietzsche, F. (1996). *On the Genealogy of Morals* (Transl. Douglas Smith). Oxford University Press.
- Phombeah, G. (2004). The Maasai's century-old grievance. September 1. Accessed December 12, 2011 at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/3614808.stm>
- Ranger, T. (1998). Europeans in Black Africa. *Journal of World History*, 9(2), 255-268.
- Steyn, M. (2012). The ignorance contract: Recollections of apartheid childhoods and the construction of epistemologies of Ignorance. *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 19(1), 8-25.
- Sullivan, S. (2006). *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Tignor, R. L. (1972). The Maasai Warriors: Pattern Maintenance and Violence in Colonial Kenya. *The Journal of African History*, 13(2), 271-290.

