

THE REPUBLIC

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Two related issues in northern Tanzania are currently making headlines.

The first is a [plan](#) by the government of Tanzania to relocate the Maasai pastoralists from the Ngorongoro Conservation Area or ‘NCA’. The second is the intention by the same government to [grab 1,500 square kilometres](#) from the same people, in the Loliondo division—a few miles away from the NCA. Both plans are legitimized in the name of wildlife conservation. The authorities claim that growth in human and cattle populations threatens the ecology of the area and that of the greater Serengeti-Maasai Mara Ecosystem. Those parading this narrative appeal to national and international audiences to embrace the ‘goodwill’ of the state to protect critical water sources, animal residues and wildebeest migratory routes. The intention of the current contribution is to debunk this official narrative by unmasking the economic interests, as well as the colonial and racist logic behind the unjustifiable evictions of the Maasai from their ancestral lands.

As a Maasai myself, I provide something of an insider’s perspective on the issue at hand. When it comes to land rights, the Maasai have suffered more than any other community in Tanzania. The community has lost more than 60 per cent of its pre-colonial territories to wildlife conservation in northern Tanzania. The famous wildlife sanctuaries like the Serengeti, Manyara, Tarangire, Arusha, Mkomazi and NCA were carved out of Maasailand. In public discourse and practice, there is both a [patronizing](#) attitude and treatment, a marginalization and othering that has turned our people into [strangers in their own land](#). The indigenous Maasai lifestyle and mode of livelihood is often [ridiculed](#) and the Maasai people are viewed as conservatives, relics of the past. The total sum of these discourses and practices is a Maasaiphobia that we are now experiencing in the wake of [climate change-induced](#) dispossession by conservation.

The government and miseducated conservationists are convinced that the areas concerned can only be preserved (or protected from climate change) if the Maasai [move out](#) of them. The coloniality in which these conservationists and state planners are trained and socialized has blinded them and made them believe that they possess the only true scientific knowledge. Coloniality is defined here simply as the political, economic and cultural project of ordering the world according to principles rationalized from the standpoint of a racist, Eurocentric, largely male consciousness. From this standpoint, the Maasai are viewed as basically inept folk who don’t know

how to utilize their land properly. Consequently, land use policies and game laws are used to deprive the Maasai of an important means of providing for their own survival—the land. This colonial and racist thinking and practice culminates in utterly hostile policies and interventions.

Two questions quickly come to mind: when did grazing become inimical to wildlife? What is being conserved and for whom? Let me try to summarize the Maasai conservation ethic. A recent [song](#) by Mary Lemburis sums up the terrain of Maasai politics of belonging from historical, social, economic, ecological, and political contexts (translation is mine):

God save us, the remnant of the minority household of Maa,

We run unto you for refuge, shield us from oppression,

Defend and save us from oppressive hands, that are downpressing us.

They are evicting us from our ancestral lands, the lands of our births,

The inheritance from our grandparents,

Behold we are made refugees!

It is we, the Maasai who safeguarded these lands for centuries for our livestock,

From the Serengeti to Masai Mara, Ngorongoro to Embusel,

*Mkongonero in Kimotorok to Njapai and Kitwai, We the Maasai protected all of them, in coexistence with wildlife
from time immemorial.*

The lions, giraffes, and zebras, but also elephants, buffalos, gazelles, and kudu

We have always been together on grazing lands, herding together in harmony

But we are now being separated.

We have always coexisted with wildlife. In June I went to my village for a visit. On arrival, I learned that nine of our goats went astray and we went searching for them in what turned out to be an unsuccessful mission. The dark of the night would not allow us to proceed. We woke up early morning to continue with the search, but we faced yet another obstacle; three elephants were lying right beside our house. We had to wait patiently until they left. Our goats were devoured by hyenas, only two were left! ‘We are grateful for this remnant, nature hasn’t devoured them all,’ my father remarked. This one example validates the powerful truths found in Lemburis’ song about Maasai’s conservation ethics that include peaceful coexistence with wildlife. Lemburis is invited to community gatherings and public prayer rallies organized by the community to seek divine intervention.

In my village here, close to the Kenya-Tanzania border, almost everyone is talking about the looming evictions in the neighbouring District of Ngorongoro. Lekuti, a 70-year-old man, and his family migrated to this village in the 1990s when restrictions became unbearable in the NCA. Upon hearing the ongoing relocation plans he wondered, ‘kai toi kenya kipwo!... enyito! emekinjo ejit iyiok ilayok loo-loreren tengopang’: ‘is there not a place of belonging for us!... arise! Let us not allow the sons of others wipe us from our ancestral lands.’ In a widely circulated [video clip](#), another Maasai elder sent a message to the world asking all the people to beseech the president of Tanzania not to disappear the Maasai community.

Of late, I have been tempted to compare the Maasai predicament in Kenya and Tanzania to that of the Palestinians. I am not alone; this sad reality is shared by fellow Maasai who are suffering historical injustices and discrimination in environmental policymaking under the guise of national interest and global conservation agendas. One Tipilit Ole-Saitoti, a fellow Maasai brother, once [likened](#) the colonial fortress conservation model to Apartheid. That’s what it is.

The sense of [urgency](#) and securitization that we have seen for a couple of months now has purposefully sought to justify the postponement of a democratic dialogue. From the state's perspective, there is no need to waste time on weighing competing opinions, narratives and interests. Of course, since the Maasai pastoralists are already [othered](#) as irrational sub-humans, there is no logic of engaging them respectfully or democratically. When the issue of relocation was raised in parliament, lies, misrepresentations, mis/disinformation, spinning, censorship and Maasaiphobia dominated the floor of the House in the most terrifying manner. Some lawmakers suggested that the law governing the NCA be changed to legalize eviction. One even [recommended](#) a military operation right away. Against this background, one political party, Alliance for Change and Transparency or 'ACT-Wazalendo' issued a statement which partly reads as follows:

We would like to take this opportunity, first, to apologize to the entire Maasai community, especially those living in the Ngorongoro Conservation Area for the foul language, ridicule, mockery, contempt, and humiliation, used during this saga. We have witnessed in Parliament, in the media and on social media platforms how the debate on this issue lacked respect for the Maasai. We strongly condemn that foul language and statements.

The sustained media campaign reiterated inherent stereotypes, prejudices, and anti-pastoralist attitudes [prevalent](#) in Tanzania. Forceful evictions of the Maasai from their homelands is driven by a colonial arrogance which assumes that only private (foreign) investors can care for nature or safeguard wildlife. In fact, literature on [conservation](#) in Africa shows that the ideas about environmental degradation currently in vogue may derive more from racialized colonial discourses of power than from scientific investigations. This is what two Kenyan authors, Mbaria and Ogada, call [The Big Conservation Lie](#).

The Maasai have become strangers, victims, and miserable paupers on the lands that are rightly theirs. The government in its capacity and willingness to dispossess has continued to use taxpayers' money to carry out socially unjust and ecologically unsound plans. But why so? Why is it that the global agendas to supposedly preserve nature and protect wildlife somehow undervalue and disregard Maasai humanity? It is high time to move beyond [green grabbing](#) and [othering](#), and instead talk about racism

in conservation.

ORIGINS OF RACIST COLONIAL CONSERVATION

Historically, three forces, namely the Tanzanian state, the safari industry, and the international wildlife conservation lobby have sanctioned systemic violence against indigenous Maasai pastoralists in the name of conservation. The situation of pastoralists in Loliondo has for many years been characterized by human rights

violations and constant attempts at land grabbing to make way for hunting concessions. Likewise, the desire to relocate the Maasai from the NCA is as old as the history of the place itself. Thus, the recent claims made concerning growth in population size do not hold water, at least for those who understand the history and politics of the place in question.

The NCA was designed in 1959 as a multiple land use area. The Maasai were promised that they would come first, above wildlife and conservation. However, there is documented [evidence](#) that the Maasai were never wanted to start with: they are simply seen as people in the way. For instance, in the 1960s, Western conservationists were outraged by the decision of the British colonial rulers to reduce the Serengeti by a third in size to create a permanent homeland for the Maasai pastoralists in and around the Ngorongoro crater.

On September 8th, 1969, *The Nationalist* published an article titled ‘Ngorongoro Plans Won’t Impair Tanzania Image’. Edward Moringe Sokoine, the author, called out individuals he says were against the Maasai. One Bernhard Grzimek, then director of Frankfurt Zoological Society, offered 80,000—(the source doesn’t indicate the currency, but I assume to be Tanzanian Shilling)—as compensation for removing a school from where it was built by the Maasai people to a place where he said it would be away from the tourist eyes! Of course, the idea was unheeded to by the government of the day. Nevertheless, Grzimek’s racist vision of African conservation without Africans [remains](#) embedded in much of conservation and is ultimately destructive of both the environment and communities.

In the 1980s the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) commissioned research that was expected to provide evidence to justify a plan to evict the Maasai from the NCA. Contrary to the expectations of the UNESCO-funded program, the results of the study [showed](#) that restrictions placed on the Maasai pastoralists throughout the NCA were not only leading to increased poverty among the pastoralists, but also to the many ecological changes occurring in the area.

Of course, protecting wildlife and preserving areas of important biodiversity is a

noble cause. However, it goes without saying that the area of Maasailand straddling the Kenya-Tanzania border is home to the spectacular assemblages of the remaining African terrestrial wildlife populations. It is one of the [richest biodiversity regions](#) in Africa and [mammalian diversity centres](#) on Earth. Hence, treating the Maasai as irrational folks who cannot take care of their own lands or the wild animals at their doorsteps is racism, to say the least. There is no better way to explain the madness of the colonial form of conservation, that we must leave our homelands so that others, be they white tourists, Emirati royals or wealthy urbanites, can use our grazing lands as their playgrounds. This is undeniably cruel, morally wrong, and unacceptable.

EMIRATI ROYALS, WILDLIFE SELLERS, AND UNWANTED NOMADS OF NGORONGORO

On 14 June 2022, I shared a provocative [cartoon](#) to a WhatsApp group of which members are prominent Tanzanian scholars, some of them serving in senior positions in government. In the cartoon there is a transaction between two people: a woman in the image of Tanzania's President Samia Suluhu Hassan serving the severed head of a man named Loliondo on a plate to a male in the image of an Arab royalist, ostensibly so she can be rewarded with a bag of silver. One group member asked me to remove the cartoon from the platform with immediate effect because it was, to them, disrespectful to the government. I did not remove it! The context of the cartoon is President Hassan's visit to Oman and escalating conflict in Loliondo which has claimed at least two lives and wounded many.

As expected the government [denied](#) any chaos in Loliondo and accused activists of providing misleading information about the Maasai issues in Loliondo. The speaker of the National Assembly went even as far as to say that those holding anti-government stances on the issue are being used to sabotage the country in its economic efforts. President Hassan herself would send a [tweet](#) assuring the UAE leaders that their investments are safe. Oman and Dubai-based [companies](#) are heavily involved in the tourism business in the mainland and in the archipelago of Zanzibar.

The current urge to eliminate the Maasai to save the Ngorongoro or preserve Loliondo should be understood in the context of the Tanzanian government's post-COVID recovery strategy that aims to boost the tourism sector. This necessitates the creation of 'pristine' wilderness for sightseers—mostly Westerners and rich Emiratis. Launching the Tanzania National Day at the 2020 Dubai Expo, President Hassan assured investors that the business environment in Tanzania is more than conducive. Enticing the would-be investors, she [noted](#) that the country has opened doors to all investors from across the globe for business and leisure. But what has been the impact of these promotional activities to the Maasai and other local communities in Tanzania?

This year, President Hassan made two official state visits in February and June to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Oman respectively. Both visits to the Middle East states have attracted severe criticism from sections of the Tanzanian public. The subject of such criticisms is the government's promotional activities and investment policies, particularly in the tourism sector. For instance, a debate ensued following allegations that the government has unjustifiably paid \$68,000 for placing a promotional advertisement of Tanzania that went up in March 2022, on the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building. According to Mullen Lowe MENA, the marketing agency which manages the lighting displays, the cost to place a promotional advert or message on the façade of the Burj Khalifa starts from [AED250,000](#) (\$68,062) for a single three-minute display. However, the Tanzanian

government claimed that it has not paid any money to place the advert. The minister for investment, industries and trade, Dr Ashatu Kijaji said that Tanzania has not paid any money as claimed. She revealed that that was a gift given to the president of Tanzania due to cordial relations the country enjoys with the UAE.

Since 1992 the UAE-based Ortello Business Corporation or ‘OBC’ has had an exclusive hunting license in Loliondo, adjacent to the Serengeti National Park. Since then, they have also hunted and trapped thousands of wild animals, and further restricted Maasai pastoralists from vital grazing lands and watering points. These restrictive land laws and violent recurring evictions have led to widespread hunger and starvation as well as constant fear among the Maasai. The Maasai cry never received any serious attention because of the close ties between Emirati royals and powerful individuals within the Tanzanian government and its ruling party, Chama Cha Mapinduzi or ‘CCM’. However, the political landscape changed when a nationalist president came to power in 2015.

In October 2017, the government of late President John Pombe Magufuli announced that no hunting licences in Loliondo would be renewed. The government also imposed a ban on exporting live wild animals. Dr Hamisi Kigwangalla, then newly appointed minister for natural resources and tourism fired the Wildlife Director and ordered Tanzania’s anti-corruption bureau to arrest and investigate the executive director of OBC, Isaac Mollel, for [corruption and bribery](#). Other prominent personalities as well as OBC [shareholders](#) like Abdulrahman Kinana fell out of grace with President Magufuli. Presently, however, Kinana seems to have regained his influence with the presidency, as has OBC.

When Mr Kinana was elected the vice chairperson of CCM, Tanzanians complained that wauzaji wa wanyamapori wamerudi, wildlife sellers are back. Early June, Tanzania wildlife management authorities temporarily [lifted](#) a ban on exporting live wild animals that was imposed in 2016. However, the government was forced to swiftly reinstate the ban following one day's worth of public outrage. In 2010, illegal exportation of wild animals and birds became a hotly debated issue in Tanzanian politics. The media reported that live animals were exported from Kilimanjaro International Airport aboard a Qatari plane. The Maasai linked this business with attempts by the government to grab their grazing lands which led to violent conflicts in 2009, 2013 and 2017.

It seems that the current government is determined to attract investors at all costs. Early June 2022, the current minister of natural resources and tourism, Dumas Ndumbaro, declared that the government had upgraded the (disputed) Loliondo Game Controlled Area to a Game Reserve meaning further restrictions of local resource use. This is despite the fact that: (i) the concerned land is the village land,

not vacant land as the government claims; (ii) the community submitted their land use [proposal](#) to the prime minister, Majaliwa Kassim Majaliwa on May 25th, 2022; and (iii) in 2018, the East African Court of Justice issued a court injunction against the state evicting the community.

[irp posts="2666" name="Curators of Forcible Evictions"]

FROM *SERENGETI DARF NICHT STERBEN* TO THE ROYAL TOUR

From Bernhard Grzimek's Oscar-winning 1959 nature documentary, *Serengeti Darf Nicht Sterben* (*Serengeti Shall Not Die*) to President Hassan's 2022 *Royal Tour*, the colonialist racist overtones of fortress conservation continue to motivate and legitimate violence and displacement of the Maasai from their ancestral lands. Grzimek envisioned the Serengeti and its surroundings as a 'gigantic zoo' that had to be protected—*emptied* of its inhabitants to give way to sightseers and commercial hunters. He [told](#) President Julius Nyerere that Tanzania could become a prime destination for novelty-seeking globetrotters if the then-young country made the bold decision to retain and expand its national parks.

As if to honour Grzimek's vision, successive post-independence Tanzanian governments continued to alienate prime grazing lands for wilderness preservation. The northern circuit that includes the Serengeti, Manyara, Tarangire, and Arusha National Park as well as Mkomazi National Park, were ancestral Maasai lands. Besides national parks, there are game reserves, game-controlled areas, and wildlife management areas throughout Maasailand. To date, approximately 40 per cent of the country's landmass is under some sort of conservation inspired by free-market logics and human-nature dichotomies. This fortress conservation model overlooks the philosophy and knowledge of the Maasai people who combine resource governance with biodiversity conservation.

On 6 April 2021, President Samia Suluhu Hassan, in the exact colonial language of Grzimek, warned that the Ngorongoro Conservation Area (NCA) is on the brink of extinction, ironically because of the Maasai and their herds. Her statement instigated ongoing evictions of the Maasai pastoralists from the area. President Hassan has also

filmed a documentary dubbed *Tanzania: The Royal Tour* to showcase Tanzania's vast opportunities in tourism and other sectors of the economy. *The Royal Tour* is a travel and adventure television series produced and hosted by Peter Greenberg, an Emmy Award-winning American journalist. In the programme, it is usually the heads of state who play the role of tour guides. In this documentary, President Hassan and Greenberg are shown flying in an airplane over Maasai territory. While the lands are shown as vacant, the Maasai are described by Greenberg as a primitive tribe still holding on their ancient traditions. This is but a continuation of imagery that reinforces the idea of Africans as intruders of sorts, sometimes even inconveniences in otherwise undisturbed nature.

The fortress conservation model which first came into being in the heydays of colonialism continues to hurt the innocent Maasai people. National parks and game reserves remain as hated symbols of the colonial era. Ultimately, contemporary vision of wildlife conservation is not apolitical. It is colonial, racist, and its costs are becoming unbearable. Anyone who is not racist and truly cares about all (wild)life, must stop supporting dubious conservation that terrorizes, wounds, alienates or seeks to destroy the Maasai or any other indigenous people✳

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