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# Maasai Fight for Survival: Land Grabs, Evictions, and the Struggle for Cultural Identity in Tanzania

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In Tanzania, the Maasai,  
one of Africa's most  
iconic Indigenous

Peoples, are relentlessly struggling to protect their

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marginalization—often justified under the guise of conservation and tourism development—there is still hope for dialogue and constructive solutions.



Tanzania is home to approximately 130 diverse ethnic groups, including the Maasai, Hadzabe, Barabaig, and Akeiye, who identify as Indigenous Peoples. Although the country has endorsed the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), it does not provide specific legal recognition of Indigenous identity. This significant gap in legal protection undermines these communities' deep connection to their land, identity, and traditional culture.

In February 2025, my colleagues Rosy Sul González (Maya Kaqchikel) and Nati Garcia (Maya Mam) from Cultural Survival and I had the opportunity to visit Tanzania. During our visit, we observed the situation of Indigenous Peoples and interacted with them on the ground. We witnessed a powerful story of resilience, resistance, and an urgent need for justice.

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*Photo by Mathias Tooko.*

## Land Crisis: Evictions Under the Guise of Conservation

The ancestral lands of the Maasai, located in some of Tanzania's most fertile and biodiverse regions, serve as a means of livelihood and the foundation of their cultural and spiritual identity. However, these lands face increasing threats from "exclusionary fortress conservation," a model that prioritizes the protection of wildlife and biodiversity over human rights. This often leads to the eviction of local and Indigenous communities.

Fortress conservation, a colonial model, has proven

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activists and human rights defenders work tirelessly to resist these evictions. As one activist said, “The biodiversity on this land exists because the Maasai have preserved and conserved it for generations. Removing them under the guise of conservation is a contradiction.”

However, their activism comes at a significant personal cost. Many activists have been arrested multiple times for defending Maasai land rights and, due to government pressure, have been forced into exile in neighboring countries. There are numerous cases of disappearances, intimidation, and threats faced by these defenders. During our visit, activists shared their experiences and multiple cases of such violations, highlighting the risks of advocating for Indigenous rights in Tanzania. They chose to remain anonymous, as it is evident that the government is cracking down on its critics, including the press and civil society, especially with the general election in Tanzania due in October 2025.

During our visit, we met with several civil society organizations, from grassroots to national levels, forming a critical and dedicated coalition to raise awareness of Indigenous communities’ rights, advocate for their legal recognition, and document land rights violations.

More than ever, civil society organizations must actively advocate for Indigenous Peoples’ rights

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document and report land invasions. We saw communities using cameras and GPS machines to precisely map areas where land violations occur. Such information is crucial for raising awareness and mobilizing local and international support.

There are also instances where coalitions of civil society organizations have been instrumental in challenging high-profile land grabs. These organizations consolidated their advocacy and contacted different UN Special Rapporteurs to express their concerns and demands to the Tanzanian government and the World Bank. In January 2025, the World Bank halted funding for a regrow project in southern Tanzania. This project would have expanded Ruaha National Park, resulting in the eviction of 44 Indigenous villages and the displacement of over 84,000 people.

In 2024, civil society organizations united Maasai living near the Ngorongoro Crater and Serengeti to protest the deregistration of 25 villages in the Ngorongoro Crater and Serengeti, leading the government to reverse its decision. On August 2, 2024, the Arusha High Court ordered suspending further evictions. These are just a few examples of the many movements undertaken by civil society organizations that have reversed government decisions regarding the grabbing of Indigenous Peoples' land. One example is the halting of a project that would have annexed over 70 percent of Maasai

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The Maasai's fight against evictions has garnered international attention, thanks partly to the Maasai International Solidarity Alliance (MISA), a coalition of organizations abroad advocating for Maasai rights. MISA's efforts have been instrumental in international advocacy, leading to resolutions from the European Parliament condemning the evictions and pressuring the Tanzanian government to halt its actions.

International advocacy has been crucial in achieving key victories, such as halting evictions, and has brought greater visibility to the Maasai struggle. However, it has yet to translate into full legal recognition of their rights. However, international advocacy carries weight when the United Nations or the European Union Parliament tells the Tanzanian government to stop.

In a significant development, Tanzanian President Samia Suluhu Hassan recently met with 150 Maasai leaders and community members from Ngorongoro, Loliondo, and Sale at the State House in Arusha on December 1, 2024. She acknowledged past human rights violations and promised to establish two task forces to address land disputes in the country's northern Ngorongoro district, renowned for its wildlife. She also ordered her generals to stop the evictions immediately. This is a win-win situation for the government, investors, and the community.

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*Photo by Dev Kumar Sunuwar.*

## Tourism: A Double-Edged Sword

Tourism is a cornerstone of Tanzania's economy, contributing significantly to the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). However, for the Maasai, tourism has become a double-edged sword. Many of Tanzania's most famous national parks, wildlife, and conservation areas, including the Serengeti, Ngorongoro Crater, and Tarangire, are on traditional Maasai lands. While these parks attract millions of tourists annually, the Maasai see little of the economic benefits.

Tanzania, with its vast natural, cultural, and biodiversity resources. However, tourism has fueled conflicts between Indigenous Peoples and the government. The economic gains generated are not reaching the pockets of the Maasai, despite almost 70 percent of tourism destinations being located on Maasai Indigenous Peoples' lands and territories.

Most safari companies, lodges, and luxury accommodations are owned and operated by non-Maasai Tanzanians or foreign private companies. As a result, Maasai communities do not benefit from the economic profits generated on their land under the guise of the tourism industry and national parks.

In 2022, the Tanzanian government demarcated 1,500 square kilometers of land on the eastern side of the Serengeti, a critical grazing area for the Maasai, and handed it over to foreign hunting and photography companies. These moves sparked outrage and protests from the Maasai community, who viewed the land as their ancestral home. The government claims this land is undiscovered and uninhabited, but it is the home of Maasai grasslands, their land, and territories.

The tourism industry has minimized the presence and representation of the Maasai in policymaking on conservation and tourism. Because the Maasai own no lodges or tour companies, they are excluded from decision-making. Thus, they demand inclusive,

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selling points. The image of Maasai warriors, adorned in their distinctive red shukas and intricate beadwork, is frequently used to market Tanzania as an exotic and culturally rich destination.



Some good initiatives also have been undertaken to promote responsible tourism in Tanzania. Naona Maasai Tour is one such example. “Our aim is that our guests can get to know Tanzania and the Maasai Indigenous culture, as well as their way of living up close. They can witness Maasai traditions, visit Maasai villages, and engage in cultural exchanges. We also ensure that the Maasai people benefit from the wealth generated by the tourism industry,” said Shengena Killel, Founder and Director of Naona Maasai Tours Ltd. He is a Maasai son who was born and lives in Loliondo-Northern Tanzania. He is a professional safari guide conservationist and Maasai culture activist.

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*Photo by Mathias Tooko.*



## Spiritual and Cultural Connection to the Land

For the Maasai, land is more than an economic resource—it is a spiritual and cultural lifeline. “Land has a spiritual connection for us. This is where our prayer areas, burial sites, and traditional medicines are found,” Metui Oletipap, a 65-year-old Maasai Elder, shared during our visit, further adding, “When you remove Maasai from their land, you are not only killing their livelihood but also denying them their cultural rights and right to live with dignity.”

Pastoralism, the Maasai’s traditional way of life, relies on large tracts of land for rotational grazing. Evictions disrupt this practice, threatening both their economic stability and cultural heritage. Metui Oletipap, a Maasai Elder, noted, “You cannot talk about women’s economic empowerment when a woman is being evicted from her land; she doesn’t know how to do business in a new place.”

Climate change has further exacerbated the struggles of the Maasai communities, leading to prolonged droughts, drying up water resources, and invasive species encroaching on pasturelands. In response, the **Pastoral Women’s Council** (PWC), a Tanzanian membership organization, has done commendable work supporting the government and bringing its

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women and girls (predominantly from the Maasai and Sonjo communities). It has 7,000 members across the Ngorongoro, Longido, and Monduli Districts.



The PWC has developed innovative village-level Community Climate Action Plans (CAPs), empowering communities to develop/create contextually appropriate climate change adaptation plans and fundraise for their adaptation strategies. “We have facilitated 42 village-level plans, which district governments have adopted,” said Ruth Kihui-Mollel, Head of Programmes at PWC. This grassroots approach earned the PWC an award at the Conference of Parties (COP) 28th meeting in Dubai in 2023, highlighting the importance of localizing climate solutions.

Indigenous Knowledge is crucial for climate change adaptation. During our visit, it became evident that Maasai women possess a wealth of knowledge, particularly in traditional medicine, environmental management, and disaster risk reduction. This knowledge passed down through generations, is vital for adapting to climate change and ensuring the sustainable use of natural resources. However, this knowledge is often overlooked or undervalued.

“Women in the Maasai Indigenous community know much about different things, from addressing health challenges to natural disasters,” said Nailejileji Tipap (Maasai), Founder and Director of **Indigenous Women**

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Indigenous Women Development Affairs is working to document and promote Indigenous knowledge, particularly that women hold. They use media and social media to showcase this knowledge and advocate for its recognition and integration into development and conservation initiatives. Similarly, they actively advocate for their rights and raise awareness about their challenges, addressing issues such as female genital mutilation, access to land and leadership, and the documentation of Indigenous knowledge.

“We document this knowledge, we use the media to showcase it, and we use social media to showcase all that we are saying,” said Nailejileji Tipap. “We also network with other organizations and help them understand the importance and roles of women and their responsibility in different realms.”

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*Photo by Dev Kumar Sunuwar.*

## Press Freedom Under Threat: Navigating Media Censorship

During our visit, it also became evident that advocating for Indigenous Peoples' rights in Tanzania is challenging due to shrinking civic space and media censorship. It is difficult to discuss the rights of Indigenous Peoples in Tanzania at the moment, as the media is largely closed to discussing these issues due to intimidation and harassment. This censorship, coupled with the government's ongoing efforts to dispossess Indigenous communities of their land, has prompted the creation of innovative media initiatives.

As the saying goes, "There is a bright spot in every


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empower marginalized groups through media and communication tools. MAIPAC aims to amplify the voices of Indigenous communities, promote their rights, and address the challenges they face, including land rights violations, environmental degradation, and harmful cultural practices like Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and child forced marriages.

“We educate the Indigenous community of Maasai, Hadzabe, and other marginalized communities to stop FGM and child forced marriages,” said Mussa Juma Siwayombe, Executive Director of MAIPAC. “This initiative came after conducting investigations and news reporting in Longido District in Arusha, Northern Tanzania, and finding that these communities still mutilate children under the age of 2 by sending them away from the district town to remote areas to avoid the law, which prohibits such cultural activities.”

MAIPAC also focuses on building the capacity of community members to effectively use various forms of media, including radio, television, social media, and community journalism. “MAIPAC focuses on building the capacity of community members to use various forms of media effectively to communicate their perspectives and concerns, share their stories, advocate for their rights, and participate in public discourse,” said Mussa Juma Siwayombe. This work is critical in a context where Indigenous communities have historically been excluded from mainstream

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training and resources to empower these communities to tell their stories and advocate for their rights.



Alongside MAIPAC, community radios like Loliando FM and Orkonerei FM are also amplifying the voices of Indigenous communities through impactful radio documentaries, meaningful media dialogues, and investigative reporting on critical issues such as women's equality, land rights, and economic empowerment.

Indigenous Peoples' organizations and their allies work hard to support their communities, even when they face censorship and intimidation. They build skills within Indigenous groups, document human rights issues, and push for change at local and global levels. Their commitment shows how strong and determined they are in seeking justice, even in tough times.

Talking about the rights of Indigenous Peoples in Tanzania can be difficult. However, Indigenous communities are speaking out and demanding recognition. They focus on justice and use creative media and advocacy to make their voices heard. Their fight is for themselves and future generations, ensuring that their cultures prosper and their lands stay connected to life and heritage.

This struggle for survival highlights the resilient spirit

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taking charge of their futures and inspiring others to stand in solidarity with their cause. As the world observes, the stories of the Maasai serve as a powerful reminder of the significance of land, culture, and the relentless pursuit of justice in the face of adversity.



*Top photo by Mathias Tooko.*

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**Massachusetts land**, in Cambridge, MA, and we thank the past, current, and future Indigenous stewards of this territory.



## Our Mission

Cultural Survival advocates for Indigenous Peoples' rights and supports Indigenous communities' self-determination, cultures and political resilience, since 1972.

## Our Vision

Cultural Survival envisions a future that respects and honors Indigenous Peoples' inherent rights and dynamic cultures, deeply and richly interwoven in lands, languages, spiritual traditions, and artistic expression, rooted in self-determination and self-governance.

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