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Maasai ploughing a field. Image: Wikimedia Commons

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INTERVIEW

The Maasai Strife Against Green Grabbing In Tanzania

Daniele Rossi-Doria · January 6, 2025 · 14 mins read

In 2022, the Tanzanian government initiated the forced relocation of Indigenous Maasai pastoralists from their ancestral lands within and near the Ngorongoro Conservation Area —



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UNESCO World Heritage Site located in Northern Tanzania. Officials claim the

evictions aim to protect wildlife by converting 1,500 sq km of village land into a game reserve and another 8,292 sq km affecting 25 villages into a protected area.

The decision was, however, met with widespread outcry, and the evictions sparked protests, with tens of thousands of Maasai people rallying to defend their land and way of life. Critics argue that these displacements, which prioritize conservation and tourism, threaten the survival of Maasai culture and represent a continuation of historical injustices in the name of preserving a pristine wilderness for outsiders. The affected Maasai communities report being forcibly evicted, denied access to grazing areas, and further stripped of basic rights like healthcare, education, and voting. International rights bodies including [Human Rights Watch](#), [Amnesty International](#) and others have documented abusive tactics, including [beatings, shootings](#), and [arbitrary arrests](#), since the policy was enforced in June 2022.

This interview with Joseph Moses Oleshangay, a Maasai lawyer and human rights activist, explores the Maasai struggle for justice and reflects on conservation policies and land rights.

In conversation with the magazine's editor, Daniele Rossi-Doria, the Maasai rights campaigner illuminates the Maasai's history, their profound connection to their ancestral lands, and the role this bond plays in shaping their identity and cultural resilience. Oleshangay denounces the structural violence that the Maasai are experiencing and reflects on how conservation conversation policies are driven by several contrasting interests.



Joseph Moses Oleshangay

Could you provide historical context on the Maasai and their connection to the land, and explain how that relationship plays its role in shaping Maasai identity and culture?

The Maasai people, an indigenous community in East Africa, maintain a profound bond with their ancestral lands, deeply entwined with our identity, spiritual practices, and pastoralist economy. Maasai history traces back to migrations from northern Africa, likely through or near Sudan or Ethiopia, settled in regions like the Serengeti and Ngorongoro between the 15th and 17th centuries. Early explorers such as [Joseph Thompson](#) and Charles New, along



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with missionaries and colonial administrators, documented their presence across territories in modern-day Kenya and Tanzania. These lands have long been central to the Maasai's nomadic pastoralist lifestyle and spiritual practices, for centuries.

How have the colonial and post-colonial land policies impacted the Maasai community?

The Maasai have been fighting to protect their land and culture for centuries, especially during and after colonial rule. In what became Tanganyika (now Tanzania) and Kenya, their struggles were affected by epidemics like smallpox, which wiped out 70% of the population, and rinderpest, which killed up to 90% of cattle by the end of the 19th century. These crises left the Maasai unable to resist colonial pressures, forcing them into smaller, less fertile areas that affected their traditional nomadic lifestyle and cattle-based economy.

In Kenya, the Anglo-Maasai agreements of 1903 and 1911 were imposed by British authorities, taking away nearly half of the Maasai's land. They were moved from fertile areas in the Rift Valley to reserves like Kajiado and Narok, while prime agricultural and grazing lands went to European settlers. This land loss massively affected the Maasai socio-economic stability.

In Tanganyika, the Maasai faced a similar fate, although the process unfolded differently. Under German and later British rule, the 1923 Land Ordinance declared all land as crown property, leaving the Maasai without legal claims to their ancestral territories. They were further marginalized when key grazing areas, like the Serengeti and Ngorongoro, were taken for conservation in the mid-20th century. The Serengeti was made a game reserve in the 1940s and a national park in 1951, pushing the Maasai off lands they had sustainably used for generations. Ultimately, the Maasai were excluded from the Serengeti, marking the first large-scale eviction of indigenous communities in East Africa under the guise of conservation.

Conservation policies escalated in the mid-20th century, with major displacements occurring. For example, in Serengeti in 1958 and Ngorongoro and its three Craters, a crucial grazing area, was turned into a conservation area in 1959. While Maasai were allowed to remain in Ngorongoro, their grazing rights were restricted in the later years. This "multiple land use" idea came under pressure from conservation organizations demanding wilderness areas free from human activity.

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boundaries between Kenya and Tanzania added another layer of complexity, splitting and disrupting their migratory routes. After independence, these artificial borders

became rigid, and policies in both countries continued to exclude the Maasai from ownership. In Kenya, the reserve system persisted, while Tanzania centralized land control and expanded conservation areas.

Today, the Maasai are still navigating these challenges. Their ancestral lands are increasingly shaped by competing interests—tourism, agriculture, and international conservation projects. Despite this, they remain resilient, mobilizing through legal actions and grassroots movements to reclaim land and protect their heritage. Their fight reflects not just their struggle but the broader challenges indigenous communities face worldwide.

In what manner were the Maasai displaced from the Serengeti to Ngorongoro?

The displacement of the Maasai involved significant pressure and instances of coercion, though it was not entirely violent. One method used was the threat of taxation for those who remained in Serengeti. The Maasai were told that if they stayed, they would face livestock taxes, which led many to leave the area. Some Maasai, however, resisted the relocation and stayed until 1959. In these cases, there were reports of violent actions taken to enforce the removal.

The decision to establish a conservation area in Ngorongoro in 1959 was also tied to the Maasai's relocation. The government negotiated with a few Maasai elders, with the promise that the Maasai would remain in Ngorongoro as long as they adhered to a balance between conservation, tourism, and pastoral life. The law introduced to formalize the Ngorongoro Conservation Area emphasized preserving the Maasai's pastoralist interests while promoting conservation and tourism. The Maasai were thus allowed to stay in Ngorongoro, but under the condition that they would support the new conservation goals. After Tanzania gained independence, many people believed that the country would become a land of prosperity and peace. They thought that once the colonial rulers were gone, the land would belong to the people and the country would flourish. Even the colonial governor feared independent Tanganyika would return the Serengeti land to the Maasai as it was unjustly taken. But that wasn't the reality. Although the faces of the leaders changed, the system remained largely the same.

One of the first changes after independence was in the law. The power over land, which used to be in the hands of the crown under the colonial governor, was transferred to the president. But

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he leadership changed, the people didn't actually gain control of the land. The land was declared as "public land," and Maasai only had user rights, not ownership. This was

how colonialists alienated land from natives in the colonies. This left the government in a position where they could manipulate land use based on what they called “public interest,” a term that was very subjective. The Maasai and other local communities were left with the constant threat of being displaced since they did not own in law but were tenants in the land they lived on.



Maasai protests against their eviction in Tanzania. Image: Joseph Moses Oleshagay

In 1975, farming was banned in the Ngorongoro Conservation Area, and the conservator, who was appointed by the government, gained more power than the local authorities. This meant that even when the government wanted to build schools or basic infrastructure, the conservator could say no. The Maasai needs and interests were always secondary to the interests of the government and the conservation area.

The Maasai land rights were further complicated by overlapping laws. While national parks, like Serengeti and Ngorongoro, prohibited hunting, there were also game-controlled areas where hunting was allowed. In Loliondo, the Maasai lived under constant pressure from



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side interests that engaged in illegal hunting concessions and pushed for the Maasai's expulsion from their ancestral lands for exclusive access.

In fact, from 2008, such interest groups pushed the government to change the wildlife laws to force the Maasai out of Loliondo. The government and even the courts believed Maasai had no legal ownership of the land—they were just lessees. This complicated situation left us vulnerable, as the government continued to prioritize these outside interests over our rights and way of life and they call it public interest.

How have recent legislative changes impacted the Maasai's land rights?

Since the early 2000s, the Tanzanian government has pursued a policy to remove the Maasai people from their ancestral lands, particularly in the Ngorongoro District, under the guise of conservation. Initially, villages unlike those in Loliondo, Maasai people and wildlife coexisted. While these areas were later declared game control zones, the law did not strip the Maasai of their rights to live on these lands. This began to change around 2009 with the influence of powerful non-local entities, through their local holding, pushed for changes to the law to make it illegal for people to live in-game control areas. This shift marked the beginning of widespread evictions.

The Maasai's ancestral land, including Loliondo, was targeted by the government for conservation purposes, mainly for hunting activities. After the 2009 law amendment, the government gave the Maasai a notice to vacate the land. The law gave the government a 12-month deadline to assess areas that qualify under the new law for continued control with a condition no village land should be continued as a controlled area. In an attempt to qualify Loliondo as a pristine, unoccupied area, the government issued a notice to Maasai to vacate 14 villages. The law did not give the government a mandate to evict people to create a wilderness but required only unoccupied land to be protected. Between 2009 and 2017, the government made repeated attempts to displace the Maasai by force. In 2022, these efforts reached a peak, resulting in the violent eviction of Maasai families. Forty-one Maasai were shot with live ammunition, over 150 were arrested, and dozens of leaders were falsely accused of crimes like murder or immigration. I witnessed these events firsthand, as authorities detained 27 Maasai leaders, accusing them of murder even though they had been arrested before the supposed crime occurred.

This was part of a broader government plan to confiscate 1,500 sq km of Maasai land for an exclusive hunting reserve. In 2022, it was reported that over 97,000 Maasai depended on the



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livelihoods, many of whom practiced pastoralism. These evictions had

devastating impacts. Over 150 people were arrested, and many Maasai were left destitute after losing their homes and livestock.

The government's strategy also involved systematic livestock confiscation. Between January 2023 and April 2024, the government reported the confiscation of 36,000 livestock from the Maasai. The Maasai rely on their livestock for their livelihoods, and without it, they face immense hardships, including the inability to send children to school or access healthcare. This was a deliberate attempt to weaken the Maasai's resistance by stripping them of their primary means of subsistence.

Despite claims of a population explosion in Ngorongoro, official government data from 2022 shows that the region is sparsely populated, with just 11 people per sq km, much lower than the national average of 75. These figures contradict the government's rhetoric that the Maasai are overburdening the land, which they claim is causing damage to wildlife conservation efforts.

In addition to land and livestock confiscations, the government has launched attacks on essential community services. In 2021, notices were issued threatening the demolition of homes and facilities, including schools, hospitals, and dispensaries. The authorities claimed that many of these structures had been built without permission, even though several had been constructed by the government itself. In particular, schools and healthcare centers, including a Catholic-run hospital operating since 1974, were targeted. The government further cut down essential services by downgrading healthcare facilities, stripping them of specialized care, and grounding medical evacuation flights, making it harder for people to access life-saving services.

The Maasai fought back against these policies, arguing that the government's real intention was not conservation but the forced removal of an indigenous community to make way for lucrative projects such as luxury hunting. Despite international pressure, the government persisted in its evictions, with plans to weaken the Maasai through the destruction of their homes and the depletion of their resources. By September 2023, the situation had escalated, as over 9,000 people were unable to receive urgent medical care.

The government's actions are part of a broader, systematic effort to erase the Maasai's presence in Ngorongoro, cloaking it in the language of conservation but ultimately aiming to repurpose Maasai lands for the economic benefit of elite interests. The Maasai are left without recourse.

In what ways do Loliondo and Ngorongoro cases reveal the strategies used to evict the Maasai from their land?

In Loliondo, violence often involves paramilitary groups operating in gray areas outside formal police or military control, complicating accountability. In contrast, Ngorongoro sees indirect strategies like cutting social services to pressure vulnerable groups into leaving, as open violence could harm the tourism industry, which accounts for 52% of the country's tourism revenue.

While the government frames evictions as necessary for conservation, the reality points to land and resource control for activities like hunting and hotel development. Narratives about unsustainable populations and poverty are undermined by actions that weaken schools and healthcare. Ultimately, these evictions are less about conservation and more about maximizing economic gains from tourism and land exploitation.

How have modern conservation efforts impacted the Maasai's culture and rights?

When the British held power, they proposed a compromise allowing conservation and Maasai life to coexist in three areas, South Serengeti (Moru) and Ngorongoro while central and northern Serengeti including Sironet became a complete National Park. Conservation groups opposed this arrangement and continue to push against it. The Nature Conservancy, Frankfurt Zoological Society, International Union Conservation of Nature and Kenya Wildlife Society lead a campaign against a compromise that will allow Maasai to retain both Ngorongoro and Southern Serengeti. The British colonial regime ended with an unfavorable compromise with the whole Serengeti becoming a National park and Ngorongoro being made a multiple land use. Seventy years down, all these conservation organizations with the exception of Kenyan Wildlife Society retained enormous control over Tanzania's conservation narratives. International conservation bodies have become another significant force in this struggle, amplifying challenges.

The government justifies displacing the Maasai often citing livestock overpopulation as harmful to the environment. However, an [analysis](#) of livestock data from 1957 to 2018 reveals no significant increase, contradicting this narrative. The argument that livestock caused ecological damage was debunked as early as 1985 by Swedish scholar Kaj Arhem, who demonstrated that livestock numbers naturally fluctuate with environmental conditions.



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findings alongside government data confirmed this. Modern satellite assessments also reveal that the least degraded areas are excluded from conservation efforts and research,

raising questions about the government's motives. These areas, critical for understanding environmental changes, remain inaccessible for research.

For the Maasai, land is not merely a resource but a vital cultural and spiritual entity. Sacred sites like Oldoinyo Lengai hold deep spiritual significance. Yet, the government's approach commodifies the land, disregarding its profound importance to Maasai identity and spirituality. Economic interests dominate, reducing the land's value to its tourist appeal, and ignoring its cultural and ecological complexities. This ongoing issue, rooted in economic motives and false narratives, jeopardizes both ecological balance and the Maasai way of life.

How do the government's policies and media narrative influence the struggle for Maasai rights?

In 2019, the Tanzanian government issued a report to justify its actions against the Maasai. The report claimed that the Maasai have too many livestock and are poor, but this argument overlooks a key point: livestock is our economy, and if we have many, it means we are not poor. The real reason for our poverty is the government's policies that have undermined our economy over the years. The government then uses this poverty to argue for more assistance.

The report recommended that the Maasai be relocated or that only a few remain for cultural tourism exploitation. It highlighted that 72% of tourists visit our area, contributing 52% of tourism earnings, despite Tanzania having 22 national parks and 21 game reserves. While the government acknowledged that the Maasai presence boosts tourism, they saw it merely as a resource for exploitation through cultural tourism. Their proposal allowed only a few Maasai to remain, but this was a form of exploitation.

The report also identified threats, such as international human rights organizations and media attention. In 2021, the government launched a media campaign portraying the Maasai as poor and ignorant, claiming our customs needed to be "civilized." By March 2022, the pressure intensified, and the President warned the media and NGOs to stop supporting us. With the media silence, the government proceeded with its plans. However, we acted by lobbying internationally to raise awareness of how conservation funds were being used to displace us.

In 2023, I spoke at the EU Parliament alongside Maasai representatives, where the Tanzanian  **EN** was also present. Through these efforts, we shifted the narrative and made our internationally.

What do you see as the most critical action needed to protect Maasai land rights and ensure justice for your community?

We, as Maasai, have always defended our people's rights. And while we value nature deeply, we understand it more intimately than many others because our way of life is directly tied to the land. Our ecosystem and its balance are crucial to our pastoral lifestyle, which is our main economy. If the environment is destroyed, our way of life will perish along with it.

The current conservation approach in Tanzania is deeply rooted in colonial thinking, focusing more on expansion and profit than on preserving the land and protecting the people who live on it. The existing conservation model draws heavily from examples like Yosemite and Yellowstone in the U.S., which led to the displacement of indigenous peoples, the loss of their lands, and the exploitation of their cultures. This has created a colonial relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, continuing to undermine the very people who were subjected to colonial rule. The conservation model in practice today remains entrenched in this same mindset.

This approach stems from a Western perspective, which doesn't fit the reality of Maasai land. The Maasai are likely the best stewards of their own land, able to balance tradition, livelihoods, and biodiversity in a way that aligns with both cultural practices and environmental preservation.

The real issue is that what's being called "conservation" isn't truly conservation. It doesn't focus on nature in its purest sense. I often challenge conservation NGOs by asking, "Have you ever planted a tree?" The conservation practices we see today are focused on excluding people, not nurturing the land. Protection, in their view, means driving people away, but protection is not the same as care. Protection can be enforced with force, but what's needed is the right mindset—a mindset driven by moral responsibility, not financial incentives, to care for nature.

Conservation must respect different ways of life. People who pray to the mountain or river, also deserve their spiritual beliefs to be respected. Despite all the challenges, I believe that even in the darkest times, there is hope. Ultimately, we need to end this kind of exploitative conservation model. It's not sustainable.

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The second element is the commercialization of conservation. In Tanzania, conservation is treated as a business. Money drives it, and it's tourism that funds it. For Maasai, conservation is a moral obligation, not a business. We conserve because it is necessary for the land to take care of us, just as we take care of the land. But the current model is driven by profit, with tourism as the primary source of funding. If tourists stopped coming, the government wouldn't care about conservation because it relies on money.

The third issue is the constant expansion of protected areas through violence and profit-driven motives. And the fourth is the propaganda surrounding conservation. There's a lot of talk about the potential extinction of species, and the narrative is often exaggerated. We're told that some species can no longer be found anywhere. But these narratives don't reflect the reality of what's happening on the ground.

So, what do we need? We need a new conservation model—one that places human rights at its core. Conservation should be about protecting the land and its people. The animals in places like Serengeti and Ngorongoro are there because the Maasai have taken care of them for generations. For this to happen, we need to redirect the funding into more human-centered conservation efforts.

Furthermore, for the Maasai to survive, we need the rule of law and functioning democratic institutions. The system is broken, and without proper legal institutions, it's difficult to see how we can make progress.



Colonial Policies	Colonialism	Conservation	Forced Displacement	Green Grabbing
Indigenous Communities	Kenya	Land Rights	Loliondo	Maasai
	Serengeti	Tanzania	Tourism	Ngorongoro



Daniele Rossi-Doria

Daniele is a researcher at the International Institute of Social Studies. He has a degree in History from the University of Napoli and an MA in Development Studies from the ISS. His work focuses on water management, agricultural development, and climate change adaptation.



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