

Maasai resistance to eviction and repression

Joseph Moses Oleshangay is a human rights lawyer and advocate from Ngorongoro who has become a central figure in defending the rights of the Maasai. Nkasiogi Lekakeny and Naipanoi Ntutu (names changed) are Maasai representatives and activists for communities affected by violent evictions and other oppressive policies that the Tanzanian government has been carrying out in Loliondo, Serengeti and Ngorongoro. Oleshangay, Lekakeny and Ntutu are part of the Maasai International Solidarity Alliance (MISA), through which they coordinate regional and international advocacy. Fighting against a colonial system of land use and conservation, they demand justice is served to the affected peoples and land, rights, and community survival of the Maasai guaranteed.

What challenges are the Maasai facing in today's Tanzania?

Oleshangay:

So in some of the areas it's actual violence, deploying the army and then wounding the people, shooting the people, confiscating livestock. Several times the circumstances were violent, but not covered in the media. I have spoken to some people who said some of the Maasai elders actually had a gun put on them because they were resisting to be displaced. In other areas they're targeting the heart of people's existence: the health service, anyone who dreams to get education... You have to think, can I really continue living here, or should I get out?

If you are in Serengeti they also impose livestock taxes. For every cow that enters, you have to pay 45 USD. You know, the Maasai sometimes have 150 to 200 cows. But Maasai and other Indigenous peoples are not always in the mainstream system of economy. There are also hunting communities like Hadzabe, who historically have lived completely dependent on the nature. Nowadays, if they hunt, they will be arrested, being told "you have hunted illegally". Why? Because he did not have capital to pay the government, so he did not have a paper to justify his hunting. But if another hunter comes from the Middle East and pays a lot of money to the government, everyone celebrates him as a stakeholder who is conserving our land. So one person, because he's poor, is becoming a criminal, he will be taken to court and go to jail forever, for being poor. Another person we celebrate for being rich and we give him a mandate to take care of all nature by killing animals. They're saying animals are increasing, thanks to the guy who has a gun?

In Loliondo, the Maasai were displaced in 2022. The land was entrusted to a royal family from Dubai to come with guns to hunt the animals. The argument of the government is a very crazy idea: they said that Tanzania has the largest number of lions thanks to hunting. You are telling me, the more hunting happens, the more lions there are? ... conservation is founded on a lie.

How do you fight against these systems of oppression?

Oleshangay:

There are two options: either to run away, like any other refugees of this world, or to say no.

We try to challenge the situation. So if it is an issue that involves violence, we try to go to court. For example, if they ground social services, we go to court, demanding that if all people have access to service, then we should to, because we are also human beings.

But it is very difficult to use legal processes to challenge the oppression because we own land in a different way. The legal system has been crafted through colonialism and through post-independent Tanzania. It understands property rights differently. We as Maasai, we own land collectively, we coexist as people. But we are often told that unless we prove all the Maasai have sent us, we cannot lead the case on their behalf.

We try to go to court, but we also expose our struggle to the society, because you cannot fight this injustice in the dark. The government in Tanzania controls most of the narrative, because they control the media. And the media can do both things: They can enlighten people, they can disinform, they can misinform. So in order to expose our struggle, we also try to reach the international media.

Ntutu:

We also planned demonstrations in Ngorongoro last year which were impactful. It was the first time the government came to listen to the people. After the demonstrations, although they promised several things and did not implement everything, at least people were allowed to vote. We have also tried to create a close collaboration with other Maasai people from Kenya and now have a small movement. We share with them what is happening in Ngorongoro or Loliondo and we always collaborate to find ways together.

You mentioned that conservation is a colonial heritage. Could you outline this history for us? How were Maasai treated during German and British colonisation?

Oleshangay:

Conservation has a very clear heritage of colonialism. Conservation was brought, it was an imported experiment: some people invented the idea of a wilderness, of creating spaces, and they called it terra nullius. It proclaimed that there were no people on the land, which justified occupying it. The first conservation scheme in Tanzania was started by the Germans. What is now Ngorongoro and Serengeti, was declared a hunting area for the German colonisers. The Maasai were of course living there, but some people came, enacting their law, and saying that all land now belongs to their colony.

German colonialism ended after the First World War and the British took over. They made all land public land under the crown, so that someone in the UK, a king or queen, had control over what was then called Tanganyika. It was a colony, and so there is always colonial racism in that context. There is always a person colonizing and a person without rights. White people own land, but the rest are just subjects of the process, they don't own their land. The British ended up separating the two areas, so they could now legalize people's existence in Ngorongoro and exclude human rights in Serengeti. Of course everything was being discussed without the Maasai.

Now the actual colonialism left, but the people have lost their land. The same people who were colonialists have shifted to being either tourists or investors. They still have the space. So to me, some of the land, Serengeti for example, is still occupied, maybe in another form. They don't say it's domination or occupation. They say they are raising the income of the whole country. That's the kind of economy that colonialism brought. We conserve because there is money coming in, not because it is right. This violence has been the modus operandi of our protected system. You have to exclude

certain people, in this particular case, the poor, the pastoralists, the Africans. The poor have to get out and pay with their life to create space for others to enjoy it.

Ntutu:

I think conservation to us is like neocolonialism, because even the word conservation itself does not exist in our local languages. So it's something created, it's new to us, and it has now become like a monster which we are trying to fight.

In 1979, the Ngorongoro Conservation Area became a world heritage site under UNESCO. What were the implications thereof?

Lekakeny:

We have UNESCO, the United Nations body that deals with educational, scientific and cultural things, but at the same time, we have the United Nation Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). These two bodies should compliment each other but they actually contradict each other. According to UNDRIP, I think in article eight, an Indigenous person should not be forcefully assimilated into another culture. On the other hand, we have the UNESCO Geopark that takes away your praying ground. It forces you out of your culture of praying in the mountain, into the church. Then they force you to leave your traditional grazing system and follow another narrative of conservation. Things of the same legal framework made from one body contradict each other by violating our human rights.

Oleshangay:

It is actually a scam, conservation. Because when they say humans are not allowed in conservation areas, that doesn't mean all humans. It means the original people who were inhabiting this area, not the investor, tourist or government official. There are ignorant people around the world who are funding conservation as if they were saviours adding value to the ecology in Africa. It's not ecology, they are financing displacement and dispossession. We don't conserve because of morality, we conserve because there is money. I went to the western part of Serengeti before I came here to Berlin, and I was counting the hotels visible on the roads... It was more than 30. That's not wilderness. Serena hotel, for example, the government's spokesperson was saying it was designed in an environmentally friendly way. If you go and see the Maasai homes, they are just small huts that women can make in a day with their own hands. They can recover in nature like they were never inhibited.

Looking at this (neo-)colonial system you just explained, what are your demands?

Oleshangay:

Some people say there must be a price tag for every single inch of the land. But for the Maasai coexisting is fine, we think we should not commercialize and commoditize land. This land has certain values and many purposes. It is also where our religious institutions are. So when we say respect our land rights, we are also saying, respect our religious institutions. The guy who is hunting in Loliondo, from the United Arab Emirates, his camp is in a place which is the prayer area to the Maasai.

Ntutu:

They're also buying our traditions. We have medicines, our traditional herbs, we know where they are located in our areas. So the areas that are demarcated by UNESCO are where we used to get our medicines. It's where we used to do our traditions. So it's like they now want to abandon everything about the Maasai. Countering this, I believe they should adapt to our lifestyle, and not expect us to adapt to their lifestyle.

Lekakeny:

We have created a way. We as the Maasai have developed our conservation mission. So if we have to conserve the environment, then let's conserve by using the guidelines that have been put down by the Maasai community.

Interview conducted by Hannah Page

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