

**Cosmopolitics, Neoliberalism, and the State:  
The Indigenous Rights Movement in Africa**

Dr. Dorothy L. Hodgson  
Associate Professor  
Department of Anthropology  
Rutgers University  
131 George Street  
New Brunswick, NJ 08904  
dhodgson@rci.rutgers.edu

Paper for “Rights and Cosmopolitan Movements,” plenary session for “Cosmopolitanism and Anthropology,” Diamond Jubilee of the Association of Social Anthropologists of the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth, Staffordshire, UK. April 11, 2006. *Presented in absentia*

*\*This is a very early and incomplete draft, designed to be read as a presentation. Please do not cite or quote without author’s permission.\**

Indigenous rights, which derive from international human rights legislation, are premised on cosmopolitan values of equality, shared rights and responsibilities as citizens, and the recognition and respect of cultural diversity (cf. Appiah 1997, 2005; Breckenridge et al 2002; Cheah & Robbins 1998). Indigenous activists from across the globe have been extraordinarily successful at having their economic, political and cultural rights recognized and affirmed by the United Nations, transnational advocacy groups, and donors. But some, especially African activists, have been far less successful at leveraging the international recognition of indigenous rights in their national struggles for recognition, resources, and rights. Tensions between indigenous activists and their respective states have in fact escalated in recent years, as states in Africa, as elsewhere, have been radically transformed by neoliberal political, economic and social policies, further undermining the precarious livelihoods of historically marginalized citizens.

In this paper, I argue that cosmopolitics, of which indigenous activism is one form, must therefore take seriously the mediating role of the state and the pressures of neoliberalism in shaping political positionings and possibilities. The paper uses an ethnohistorical case study of Maasai activists in Tanzania to explore the centrality of the state to both indigenous rights and neoliberalism, and the consequent challenges to the political struggles of historically marginalized peoples. It traces and explains three phases of the relationship between Maasai and the Tanzanian state: 1) a deeply modernist, paternalist postcolonial state that treated Maasai as “subjects” rather than “citizens,” and left little space for Maasai political engagement; 2) the emergence and embrace of indigenous rights and transnational advocacy by Maasai activists in the 1990s, and 3) a recent shift by Maasai activists from discourses of indigeneity to discourses

of livelihoods, and from international to national advocacy. These shifting political strategies and positionings within international and national debates inform, challenge, and complicate ongoing theoretical and political debates about the struggles of transnational social movements, the contours of cosmopolitics, and the enduring political salience of the state.

### **Paternal Politics: Citizens and Subjects under Socialism**

The relationship between Maasai and the Tanzanian nation-state can be roughly divided into three phases. The first period, from the early 1960s to the late 1980s, corresponds to independence and Nyerere's forceful efforts to build a Tanzanian nation premised on the socialist principles of *ujamaa*. After decades of ambivalent relationships with British colonial administrators – who veered between deeply protectionist policies designed to control, contain and conserve Maasai “culture” (most notably in the formation of the Maasai Reserve and lack of investment in education), to fierce demands for rapid change and progress (as in the Masai Development Project of the 1950s),<sup>1</sup> Maasai were marked, mocked and dismissed by the African elites who took power as vestiges of “savage” Africa to either be left behind or forced to change in the interests of modern progress. As a result, government officials alienated and redistributed the most fertile areas of Maasai territory to more economically “productive” people and enterprises, launched a multi-million dollar project to rapidly increase the “productivity” of Maasai livestock, promoted Maasai as icons of “traditional” “primitive” Africa in order to expand the increasingly lucrative tourist industry, and conducted national campaigns to force Maasai men to wear trousers in towns and forbid the application of ochre on Maasai bodies (Hodgson 2001).

Since “civil society” as such was virtually non-existent in Tanzania at this time,<sup>2</sup> there were few avenues available for Maasai to protest state actions and to demand change. On occasion, elder men made public speeches to protest specific actions, and Maasai women launched collective strikes against certain Maasai and non-Maasai leaders. But a lack of education prohibited most Maasai from any meaningful political participation beyond the village level. As a result, few considered themselves as “citizens” of Tanzania; rather, they thought of themselves as “subjects” of unjust rule by postcolonial elites.

### **Neoliberalism, Civil Society and Indigenous Rights**

By the early 1990s, after the retirement of Nyerere, the introduction of multiple political parties, and the imposition of neoliberal economic policies in the shape of structural adjustment, much had changed in Tanzania. Democratization, in its efforts to “strengthen” civil society, created the space for grassroots organizing and thus the formation of pastoralist non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Neumann 1995; Igoe 2000, 2003, 2004). Economic liberalization encouraged the privatization of key industries, state disinvestments from social services such as education and health, and investment by international capital. One result was to intensify economic inequalities and political discontent among already marginalized peoples. For pastoralists and hunter-gatherers in Tanzania, one of the most alarming effects of liberalization was the tremendous acceleration of illegal and quasi-legal incursions on to and alienation of their lands for large-scale commercial farms, mining, game parks, wildlife reserves, and other revenue-generating endeavors by the state, elites, and international capital (Hodgson 2001, Hodgson & Schroeder 2002, Lane 1996, Madzen 2000). These neoliberal “reforms” were deeply contradictory for pastoralists; simultaneously opening the political space for their mobilization

through the formation of NGOs and shrinking the economic space on which their livelihoods depended by further alienating their lands (Hodgson 2002b).<sup>3</sup>

In the context of these changes, several Maasai leaders found the possibilities of linking their struggles with those of the transnational indigenous rights movement compelling. In 1989, Moringe ole Parkipuny, a long-time Maasai activist and former member of the Tanzanian Parliament, was the first African to address the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP) in Geneva, Switzerland. Shortly before his trip to Geneva, Parkipuny and seven other Maasai men had founded one of the first Maasai NGOs, called KIPOC. Although KIPOC's formal constitution (KIPOC 1990) made no mention anywhere of the term "indigenous," the word appeared 38 times in the initial 22 page project document written to publicize KIPOC's program and funding needs to international donors (KIPOC 1991). The project document was full of the language and logic of the sanctity of the "cultural identity" of "indigenous" peoples, and their "basic human rights" to choose the form, content and pace of changes in their lives. According to KIPOC, the Maasai struggle was "part of the global struggle of indigenous peoples to restore respect to their rights, cultural identity and to the land of their birth" (KIPOC 1991:7).<sup>4</sup>

Since the formation of KIPOC, over one hundred non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have emerged in predominantly Maasai areas in northern Tanzania. Initially, most were organized around diverse claims of a common "indigenous" identity based on ethnicity (such as "being Maasai"), mode of production (being a pastoralist or hunter-gatherer) and/or a long history of political and economic disenfranchisement by first the colonial and now the postcolonial nation-state. Moreover, these Maasai activists and NGOs tried, with mixed success, to link with each other and with other groups on the continent to form a series of national,

regional, and continent-wide networks to pressure African states to recognize the presence and rights of indigenous peoples within their borders, to support and coordinate the activities of African NGOs within the UN process, and to promote the United Nations Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations 1994; see Hodgson 2002a more generally).<sup>5</sup>

By reframing their long-standing demands and grievances against the Tanzanian state in the language of indigenous rights, Maasai NGOs like KIPOC turned the cultural politics of their treatment by the colonial and postcolonial states on its head. Rather than continue to challenge enduring stereotypes of Maasai as culturally (and even, at times, racially) distinct, inferior, backward, and primitive, these NGOs appropriated and reconfigured these fixed, ahistorical images in order to appeal to global indigenous rights advocates and initiatives.<sup>6</sup>

Maasai were remarkably successful in establishing themselves as key players in the transnational indigenous rights movement. Maasai activists from Tanzania and Kenya regularly attended the annual meetings of the United Nations WGIP and Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (PFII); built sustained ties with advocacy organizations like the International Working Group on Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) in Denmark; participated in exchange programs with aboriginal activists in Australia and elsewhere; and frequently attended international workshops, conferences and meetings where they met with other indigenous rights activists to share their experiences, learn new strategies, and build an international coalition. Moreover, international recognition enabled them to circumvent the Tanzanian state to access millions of dollars from international donors to support social and economic development initiatives such as water, education, health services, and livestock restocking.

## **Re-Positionings: From Indigenous Rights to Pastoralist Livelihoods**

Despite their success at attaining visibility in the international indigenous rights movement and the lucrative attention of international donors in the 1990s, most Maasai activists have consciously distanced themselves from the movement over the past few years. Instead, they have opted to focus their advocacy efforts at the national level, and shift the discursive terms of engagement from “indigenous rights” to “pastoralist livelihoods.” Five key reasons for this shift are:

First, as a response to the vehement hostility of the Tanzanian government over the widespread international recognition and acceptance of Maasai claims of “being indigenous.” The government of Tanzania, like almost all African governments, refused to recognize the existence of “indigenous peoples” within its borders, claiming instead that all Africans were indigenous. The government was suspicious of the very terms of their mobilization, especially the unsettling fusion of assertions of cultural difference with demands for collective rights. By organizing around the identity claims of “being indigenous,” premised in part on ethnicity, Maasai NGOs revitalized ethnic identifications and challenged democratic liberalism’s championing of the individual rights and responsibilities of “citizens” with their claims of collective grievances and rights. The government, however, was wary of appearing to endorse “ethnic favoritism,” equated political organizing along ethnic lines with “tribalism,” and feared that such ethnic mobilization could strengthen political opposition, produce economic and political instability, or even foster violence. In the face of active government hostility to political claims based on indigenous rights, Maasai and other pastoralist activists had to resort to increasingly confrontational strategies.

Thus a second, related reason for shifting to discourses about pastoralist livelihoods was to seek less confrontational approaches to influence government policies and practices. “Before, we had lots of court cases against the government...but they were not very fruitful.” As another activist explained, “the language of indigenous has strong political connotations, while the language of pastoralism is about development.” Given its strong rhetorical commitment in national policies such as Vision 2025 and MKUKUTA to reducing poverty and promoting development, the government had to pay attention pleas for development, however much its vision of “livestock development” differed from pastoralist visions of “livelihood security and development.”

Third, not all the activists found the UN meetings and other international workshops and conferences productive. As one Maasai woman commented to me over coffee at the 2004 Permanent Forum, “I find that nothing real takes place here. It is a waste of time. These people come as representatives, but I wonder who they really represent. Probably just a few people. They come here; say a few words, but what really happens?” Both experienced and first-time delegates expressed deep frustration over the formalistic procedures at the UN; the limited spaces for dialogue, debate and discussion with other activists; and the glacial pace and byzantine processes for instituting changes in international and national policies. As another Maasai activist complained to me in response to a question about her experience at a workshop the night before sponsored by IFAD, WIPO and the ILO; “It was OK. There was lots of writing. I wonder what all that writing accomplishes? There are lots of policies, but what really happens on the ground?”

Fourth, pastoralist organizations were maturing, in part because of their international experiences, opportunities, and affiliations, but also because of increasing self-awareness and



acknowledgment about their own failures and weaknesses. Many were concerned about competition and jealousies among themselves, a lack of accountability to their constituencies, their ongoing inability to inform and influence government policies and programs, and their unhealthy dependence on donor funds and agendas (Hodgson 2002b). Moreover, they were frustrated by the limited impact of their international involvement on their national struggles. Drawing on lessons learned about advocacy, alliance-building, and strategies for political engagement from the international indigenous rights movement, they debated how to reform themselves and build a “more positive relationship” with the Tanzanian government.

Finally, the Tanzanian government has also changed in recent years. Now it slowly and somewhat grudgingly encourages the “participation” of its citizens in policy-making, under pressure from a strengthening coalition of progressive civil society organizations and the watchful gaze of international proponents of “democracy.” Guided by Tanzania Vision 2025, which outlines a “new economic and social vision for Tanzania,” including good, quality lives for all; good governance; and a competitive, neoliberal economy, the government launched efforts to solicit public input in new and revised policies such as the MKUKUTA, the latest Poverty Reduction Strategy Proposal, and build up its relationship with civil society organizations (CSOs).

For these and other reasons, according to one pastoralist activist, “now we focus on building alliances with the nation, not with international actors.” As he explained, “one problem with ‘indigenous’ is that everyone who hears it thinks ‘Maasai,’ so it worked at the national level to limit rather than expand our possible alliances and collaborations.” Emphasizing “pastoralist” livelihoods enables organizations to link with non-Maasai pastoralist communities such as Barabaig, and increasingly agro-pastoralist communities as well. Although Maasai leaders still

dominate the movement, most are careful to reach out to and include non-Maasai pastoralists in their organizations, deliberations, and advocacy. Hunter-gatherers, however, now occupy an even more liminal position – while their histories of marginalization were acknowledged in the discourse of indigeneity, their issues are generally side-lined in debates over pastoralist livelihoods. Nonetheless, almost all agree that the government has been much more willing to listen to claims made in the interests of “pastoralist livelihoods” than “indigenous rights.”

But not everyone supports a complete abandonment of involvement in international campaigns for indigenous rights, however. A few activists continue to attend the UN Working Group and Permanent Forum meetings, court indigenous rights advocacy groups, and mourn what they see as a neglect of cultural and social issues in the “pastoralist livelihoods” debates.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, like all such discourses and positionings, “pastoralist livelihoods” raises challenges and concerns of its own. Who, at a time of increasing diversification into agriculture, mining, and wage employment, is really a “pastoralist” any more? Is there a shared, positive vision of “pastoralist livelihoods” that activists can articulate to government to counter the enduring negative stereotypes that still inform state policies and interventions? Is pastoralism even viable as a secure livelihood any more, given the rapid neoliberal economic transformations (land alienation; formalization of privatized, individual land tenure; state encouragement of commercial rather than small-holder investment and production, etc...) currently underway?

### **Cosmopolitics and the Nation-State**

So what does this overview of shifting Maasai political strategies tell us about cosmopolitics?

First, in contrast to those who portend the demise of the nation-state, the Maasai case points to the continuing relevance of the nation-state in shaping political possibilities and positionings, at least in indigenous cosmopolitics. International recognition of the merits of a people's struggle for rights and resources does not necessarily, or even easily, translate into national recognition. It can, on occasion, even backfire, buttressing rather than bridging government hostility. Faced with a series of failed confrontations, the rapid imposition of neoliberal reforms, and the seeming ineffectiveness of international recognition of their plight for their national struggles, pastoralist activists decided to change the terms of political debate. Repositioning themselves from "indigenous peoples" to "pastoralists," and from a demand for "rights" to a demand for secure "livelihoods" has enabled them to establish a more productive working relationship with the state. One activist described the change as moving from a "reactive" to a more "proactive" position.

Second, despite their recent decision to distance themselves from the international indigenous peoples' movement, Maasai and other pastoralist activists benefited in significant ways from their involvement. Many were able to see and learn from the larger patterns of structural similarities between their situation and that of aborigines, Native Americans, and other indigenous peoples, especially about the range of relationships between indigenous peoples and nation-states. As Niezen (2003) argues, adopting the term "indigenous" itself marks a transcendence over the narrow concerns of "ethnicity," at the same time that it is predicated on those same ethnic concerns. By imagining a different kind of community that was at once located within states but connected beyond states, a bifurcated belonging that articulated the local and global, Maasai also learned new ways to belong to and act within the nation.<sup>8</sup> One could argue, in fact, that their success and support from the international indigenous peoples'

movement helped them to transform themselves from “subjects” to “citizens” within their state; instead of withdrawing in frustrated anger, they now draw on their “rights” as citizens to demand justice and change. They learned from the comparative experiences of other indigenous peoples how to lobby and advocate the state and how to build strategic alliances among themselves and with other Tanzanians.

These lessons affirm the dynamic relationship between cosmopolitan political projects such as the indigenous peoples’ movement and the nation-states in which participants are inevitably located. “Cosmopolitics,” according to Robbins (1998:12), points to a “domain of contested politics” located “both within and beyond the nation...that is inhabited by a variety of cosmopolitanisms.” Grounding our analysis of “this newly dynamic space of gushingly unrestrained sentiments, pieties, and urgencies” (Robbins 1998:9) in the specific social and historical dynamics of its emergence at a certain time, in a certain place, for certain reasons, helps us to understand its appeal, possible dangers, and consequences. Given the enduring centrality of the nation-state to neoliberal economic transformations, which must “reform” the entire state apparatus to make it welcoming for capitalist investment, increased productivity and profit-making, and individual initiative and success, it should come as little surprise that states like Tanzania forcefully oppose the demands for collective rights and restitution for historical grievances made by indigenous peoples within its borders. The resulting shift to a discourse of “pastoralist livelihoods” could perhaps be understood as a “sell-out” of sorts to government pressure, a concession to neoliberal demands to talk only in the terms of development and economics. Perhaps. But it might be more useful to think about it as a politically pragmatic decision made in light of perceived risks and benefits. The irony, of course, is that Maasai and other pastoralists in Tanzania have abandoned their demand for recognition as indigenous

peoples at the same time that the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights has now recognized the viability and legitimacy of such claims for certain African peoples.<sup>9</sup> Thus the shift from "indigenous rights" to "pastoralist livelihoods" is only the latest move in an ongoing dynamic of political struggle set within complex, shifting fields of power within and beyond the nation-state.

---

<sup>1</sup> The history of Maasai relationships with the colonial state are documented in Hodgson (2001).

<sup>2</sup> The one political party, Chama Cha Mapinduzi, controlled the political system, economic structure, and media. They enforced strict restrictions on meetings within the country, travel outside the country, and criticism of government policies. Only religious institutions and leaders were able to challenge government actions. [unions & professional associations like TAMWA?]

<sup>3</sup> Moreover, there were also radical changes in the priorities and practices of multilateral institutions and other development donors. During the 1990s, most shifted resources away from nation-states in favor of "local" NGOs and community-based organizations that were presumed to be more effective in reaching the "grassroots" (Bebbington & Riddell 1997; Edwards and Hulme 1992, 1995; Fowler 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Maasai claims to being indigenous, like those of most other African and Asian groups, are not based on claims about being "first peoples" as such. Rather, they argue that there are significant structural similarities between their treatment by colonial and postcolonial states and those of indigenous peoples in former settler colonies like North America and New Zealand (Hodgson 2002a).

<sup>5</sup> Within Tanzania, there is the Pastoralist Indigenous Non-Governmental Organisation Forum (PINGOs Forum) and Tanzania Pastoralists and Hunters and Gatherers Organization (TAPHGO) and within East Africa there is the Maa Council. The broader pan-African networks include the Indigenous Peoples of Africa Coordinating Committee (IPACC), Indigenous Peoples of Africa (OIPA), and the African Indigenous Women's Organisation (AIWO).

<sup>6</sup> As KIPOC (1991) argued in their project document, the dominant "national culture" conceives the "modern Tanzanian" to be a Kiswahili speaker and either an active farmer or of "peasant origin." In contrast, the few "indigenous minority nationalities" in Tanzania are defined by KIPOC as either pastoralists or hunter-gatherers, who have "maintained the fabric of their culture": "They are conspicuously distinct from the rest of the population in dress, language, transhumance systems of resource utilization and relationship to the environment. Pastoral and hunter-gatherer peoples persevered, through passive resistance, to hold on to their indigenous lifestyles, traditions and cultures" (KIPOC 1991:5).

---

<sup>7</sup> The case of Maasai in Kenya provides an interesting contrast that I cannot explore here. They have continued to maintain active involvement with the international indigenous rights movement, and convert that recognition into some national political leverage and gains. But they also lack the strong coalition of pastoralist organizations present in Tanzania.

<sup>8</sup> Similar in some ways to the “cosmopolitan ethnicity” described by Werbner (2002) for Kalanga elites in Botswana.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, the *Report of the African Commission’s Working Group of Experts on Indigenous Populations/Communities*, which was commissioned by, submitted to and adopted by the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights, in accordance with the “Resolution on the Rights of Indigenous Populations/Communities in Africa.”

### Partial Bibliography

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. 1997. “Cosmopolitan Patriots.” *Critical Inquiry* 23: 617-639.

-----, 2005. *The Ethics of Identity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bebbington, Anthony and Roger Riddell. 1997. “Heavy Hands, Hidden Hands, Holding Hands? Donors, Intermediary NGOs and Civil Society Organisations.” In David Hulme and Michael Edwards, eds., *NGOs, States and Donors: Too Close for Comfort?*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, pps. 107-127.

Breckenridge, Carol A., Sheldon Pollock, Homi K. Bhabha, Dipesh Chakrabarty, eds. 2002. *Cosmopolitanism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Cheah, Pheng and Bruce Robbins, eds. 1998. *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Edwards, Michael and David Hulme. 1992. *Making a Difference: NGOs and Development in a Changing World*. London: Earthscan.

-----, eds. 1995. *NGO Performance and Accountability: Beyond the Magic Bullet*. London: Earthscan.

Fowler, Alan. 1995. “NGOs and the Globalization of Social Welfare: Perspectives from East Africa.” In Joseph Semboja and Ole Therkildsen, eds. *Service Provision Under Stress in East Africa*. Copenhagen: Centre for Development Research., pps. 51-69.

- Harvey, David. 2005. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hodgson, Dorothy L. 2001. *Once Intrepid Warriors: Gender, Ethnicity and the Cultural Politics of Maasai Development*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- , 2002a. "Introduction: Comparative Perspectives on the Indigenous Rights Movement in Africa and the Americas." *American Anthropologist* 104(4):1037-1049.
- , 2002b. "Precarious Alliances: The Cultural Politics and Structural Predicaments of the Indigenous Rights Movement in Tanzania." *American Anthropologist* 104(4):1086-1097.
- Hodgson, Dorothy L. and Richard Schroeder. 2002. Dilemmas of Countermapping Community Resources in Tanzania. *Development and Change* 33(1): 79-100.
- Igoe, Jim. 2000. "Ethnicity, Civil Society, and the Tanzanian Pastoral NGO Movement: The Continuities and Discontinuities of Liberalized Development." Ph.D. Thesis, Department of Anthropology, Boston University.
- , 2003. "Scaling up Civil Society: Donor Money, NGOs and the Pastoralist Land Rights Movement in Tanzania." *Development and Change* 34(5): 863-885.
- , 2004. *Conservation and Globalization: A Study of National Parks and Indigenous Communities from East Africa to South Dakota*. Belmont, CA: Thomson/Wadsworth.
- KIPOC. 1990. The Constitution. Document no. 1. Photocopy, Tanzania.
- , 1991. The Foundational Program: Background, Profile of Activities and Budget. Principal Document no.2. Photocopy, Tanzania.
- Lane, Charles. R. 1996. *Pastures Lost: Barabaig Economy, Resource Tenure, and the Alienation of their Land in Tanzania*. Nairobi, Kenya: Initiatives Publishers.
- Madsen, Andrew. 2000. *The Hadzabe of Tanzania. Land and Human Rights for a Hunter-Gatherer Community*. IWGIA Document 98. Copenhagen: IWGIA.
- Neumann, Roderick P. 1995. "Local Challenges to Global Agendas: Conservation, Economic Liberalization and the Pastoralists' Rights Movement in Tanzania." *Antipode* 27(4): 363-382.
- Niezen, Ronald. 2003. *The Origins of Indigenism: Human Rights and the Politics of Identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Robbins, Bruce. "Introduction Part I: Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism." In *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation*, edited by Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- United Nations. 1994. Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. United Nations Document E/CN.4/Sub.2/1994/2/Add.1.

Werbner, Richard. 2002. "Cosmopolitan Ethnicity, Entrepreneurship and the Nation: Minority Elites in Botswana." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 28(4): 731-753.