



Decolonising Conservation: It Is About the Land, Stupid!

By Mordecai Ogada



I was among the small number of people fortunate enough to attend the meeting of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) in New York City in April. I approached it with an open mind eager to learn all sorts of new lessons from the proceedings and realized that the most valuable lessons I learned were actually outside the packed meeting agenda.

A typical encounter on my first day at the UN Headquarters often followed these lines - "Hello, where are you from?"

"I'm from Kenya".

"Really? What community? Maasai? Ogiek? Sengwer?"

I hasten to remind my compatriots at this point that the ethnic origins of the name 'Ogada' aren't as obvious to someone from Russia or the Far East as they are to us! For an 'outsider', the UNPFII meeting is like a trip back to elementary school, where the first step in everything you do is to establish your identity. On that score, we need to understand who the 'insiders' are:- They are representatives of indigenous (by UN definition) people from all over the world who have been involved in this meeting and its processes for a few years. They are distinguished by their colourful attire and adornments, the familiar banter with other delegates and for the confident manner in

which they move around the extraordinarily complicated layout of the UN conference building. As an African attending this meeting in a technical capacity, I was a member of a very small minority

I was invited to this meeting in New York by the UN rapporteur on indigenous issues to give a technical assessment of the negative impacts of conservation on the rights and livelihoods of indigenous peoples. This invitation was extended after I gave a harsh indictment of conservation organizations working in Kenya and the scant attention they pay to the rights of local communities in the areas where they work during the EGM (experts' group meeting) on these issues held in Nairobi in January 2019. This initial invitation was a pleasant surprise to me, and I felt like an outsider in the rarefied atmosphere of the UN offices in Nairobi, and approached my presentation in the same uninhibited manner in which uninvited guests approach food at a banquet, not expecting a repeat invitation.

It is sad that in 2019, speaking out against injustices and corruption perpetrated by conservation interests is still anathema in Kenya and many parts of Africa. Whereas indigenous African people have taken their rightful place in all fields of human endeavor, conservation is still the one arena where we still consider ourselves subservient to any outsider and get treated accordingly. A search for experts and world authorities on any species or issues on African wildlife will invariably yield the name of a person of Caucasian extraction. A number of these 'Africa experts' were seated in the room as I spoke in Nairobi, and judging from the audience reactions, some of them did appreciate my candour although I admit that some looked like they were suffering aneurysms. The depth of our problem as a country was revealed when an indigenous Kenyan participant (dressed in traditional regalia to boot) referred to my presentation as 'controversial and racist'.

Indigenous People' Rights

Three months later in April, I was a participant at the UN headquarters New York. Overall, the meeting of the UN Permanent Forum on indigenous issues is an eye-opener to anyone who isn't part of the 'system' and wonders why peoples' resource rights are flouted with such ease in our country and other parts of Africa. I noticed that the presence of affected nations/societies is in the form of 'indigenous people' - This is a term loosely applied to many peoples who are marginalized or oppressed in one way or another all over the world.

In Africa, and Kenya in particular, this term refers to some ethnic groups and not others, despite the fact that (in my view) all locals are indigenous to this country and are affected by resource injustices. The upshot of this is that many countries (Kenya included) end up represented by individuals chosen because of who they are or where they come from, rather than how well they can address the issues at hand.

Appearances are emphasised, and an outsider can see the weight placed on presence and attire rather than substance. As a Kenyan, I see the most harmful impact of this approach as the marginalization of views coming from people who are perceived as coming from ethnic communities who do not 'live with wildlife'. This fits perfectly into the 'divide and rule' colonial narrative that pervades our entire conservation sector. Indeed, we have foreign agents and agencies in conservation trying to categorize our citizenry into groups that should or should not have opinions on conservation practice, regardless of their technical expertise (or lack thereof). From my personal experience, the only people in Kenya who have directly opposed my views about conservation practice from this ethnic perspective have been those of foreign extraction and their acolytes.

Conservation challenges vis-à-vis the rights of indigenous peoples is an exceedingly complex arena where success will most likely visit those who are best able to 'step back' and put the entire picture into perspective. It is not immediately apparent to the layperson why this is important, given that

our media is awash with captivating stories of how millions of dollars, tens of years, indeed entire lives have been 'dedicated' or 'given' to saving a particular species in a given place. We are in a place where myths and legends sell, since the truth tends to be intellectually burdensome.

Reclaiming Indigenous Knowledge

I was however gratified to see that the UNPFII has a specific session on indigenous languages, and present at this session was a delegation from Kajiado county in Kenya discussing preservation and documentation of Maa language. There were the typical thoughts about the need to document traditions and culture. I raised a query; how are we going to preserve Maasai culture and language while as a country we are fighting pastoralism incessantly. We are killing Kenya Meat Commission, we are blocking stock routes, we are annexing and privatizing rangelands for tourism. Is there a part of Maa language or heritage that is separate from livestock rearing? Is there a part of any vernacular language that can live when separated from the homeland that gave life to it? I am glad to report that those queries changed their line of thought.

Herein lies a solution to the seemingly intractable conservation challenges we in Kenya face every day. Our system is designed to perpetuate the primitive, militarized western 'fortress conservation' approach that defines local people as enemies. This system was developed in the West nearly 200 years ago, and we in Kenya still follow it slavishly, down to the recent appointment of a senior military officer to head the state wildlife authority KWS (Kenya Wildlife Service). Our best option is to urgently institute a sophisticated approach that taps into indigenous African knowledge(s) of the environment on which their lives and livelihoods depended on. This is an approach that requires inputs from sociologists, economists, historians, artists, traditional leaders, amongst others. Most importantly, it requires the investment of time chiefly because the intellectual resources required to take this approach are finite, old, and battered from generations of physical and psychological neglect and suppression. How many of us in Kenya, or the rest of Africa today have the courage take this up?

Time is also the reason why this option becomes difficult for a country like Kenya to pursue. If we are honest, we will know that there is a limit to how long African peoples' connection to their homelands can survive the relentless denigration, violence, miseducation and geographical displacement therefrom. When allowed to fester for long enough, these factors result in a culture in which self-loathing cloaks itself with puny short-term gains and masquerades as 'success'. Anyone who doubts the potency of this violent displacement and continuous mis-education can examine its effect on recent immigrants to the West from Africa, who in a few short years, lose complete touch with the realities they grew up in. This mis-education has everything to do with conservation.

The Myth of Conservation

The perpetual colonial project has miseducated us that conservation is about wildlife, while it is actually about our land, our heritage, our culture, our languages, our beliefs...it is about US. The colonial project has taught us that conservation is about the protection of a few larger species that the foreign tourists regard as beautiful, 'cute', majestic, or otherwise charismatic. We (the miseducated) then take up arms and kill our brethren to 'protect' the beautiful places the colonists chose as venues for land and resource grabbing. I must grudgingly acknowledge the success of the perpetual colonial project, because in 2019, the Kenya Government still believes that the objective of their conservation agenda is to satisfy the needs of tourists. We still have a Ministry of 'Tourism and Wildlife' (headed by a minister with a tourism background) and Kenya Wildlife Service has a tourism department that dwarfs its education department because it is more important to please visitors than to educate Kenyan citizens about our heritage.

The colonial project has moved out of the formally protected areas and created new monsters called 'wildlife conservancies', where success is measured by the number of locals who can be persuaded, coerced or bribed with donor subsidies to give up their livelihoods, birthrights, and other forms of identity. This miasma of disenfranchisement around conservancies can be seen in a thousand tourism brochures; The picture of a *moran* from any of the Maa-speaking communities clad in full traditional regalia (sword included) serving drinks to scantily-clad foreign tourists lounging in a pool set in splendid isolation in the middle of his (arid) homeland against a backdrop of a conservancy from which his people and their livestock have been removed.

Let's get back to Kajiado for a moment- One of the key issues that the Kajiado delegation had brought to the table at the UNPFII is the matter of the land occupied by Tata Chemicals Factory (otherwise known to most Kenyans as Magadi Soda Company). Since 1924, this factory was established to mine trona (soda ash) as a result of a clause in the 1911 Anglo-Maasai agreement between representatives of the two parties. I won't get into the details of those colonial agreements, but the crux of the matter here is that trona is mined from Lake Magadi (which has an area approximately 35,000 acres), but the agreement granted these charlatans exclusive use of 225,000 acres. This basically means that they are only using 15.5% of the land they annexed from the Kajiado Maasai nearly a century ago, and there is no visible utilization of the other 84.5%. In practical terms, this means that the local population must seek permission from a foreign company to graze their animals on a vast area of their ancestral land.

The Land Question

Can the preservation of the Maasai cultural identity and indigenous language be done without restitution of the lands from which they were uprooted? Indeed, this question can be applied to any other ethnic group in the world living on indigenous land. From my experience, language (and to some extent culture) is a living medium of communication that draws from shared experiences and resources amongst a people. In Africa, we use a lot of natural resources *in situ* and many aspects of idioms and nuances in our vernacular languages were drawn from particular features, resources and even geographical locations. When I impressed upon my compatriots from Kajiado in New York that matters of culture, natural resources and heritage should not be pursued separately but as a whole, I was deeply gratified when they embraced this line of thought.

It therefore is a far-fetched thought that one can presume to celebrate, conserve, and value any culture or heritage while uprooting or otherwise dislodging people from their ancestral origins. It is a patent lie that these strange externally-funded and conceived creatures called 'wildlife conservancies' can claim to be celebrating Maa culture in the form of beadwork (which they never stop crowing about being some form of 'empowerment') while actively suppressing the pastoralist livestock production system in every way they can, including by force of arms. They are strangling livelihood, identity, and dignity and replacing it with penury and indentured labour. They are creating arbitrary borders across landscapes and between communities, instantly creating 'others' where there were none. These sorts of actions are well-documented, not in conservation literature, but in the history of Africa's colonisation in the 19th Century.

Observers who don't understand the complex social systems in Kenya's rangelands will only fathom the removal of livestock in the context of intellectually and morally bankrupt tourism interests that deem these animals somehow 'unsightly' to tourists. This is a serious problem but let's stick with land, which the more astute observers will realize is the issue. Resource use patterns and associated skill sets are the glue that hold African societies to their ancestral lands. For instance, as a Kenyan of Luo heritage let us for a moment imagine that our ancestral lands bordering Lake Victoria, Homa Bay, Mbita, Kisumu, Karachuonyo, Asembo, Uyoma were turned into a conservancy 'core area' for exclusive use by a tourism lessee. The society would face imminent collapse economically, culturally,

and socially if the locals would be prohibited from exploiting the waters of Lake Victoria through fishing or sailing. In a similar vein, the rangelands are places where livestock production is not a mere livelihood that can be replaced with serving drinks at a lodge.

It is a form of identity, dignity and most of all these animals are the glue that holds pastoralist societies together and binds them to their homelands. If he didn't have any livestock there, what would a Samburu man be doing in Kalama or Sere Olipi? What would a Maasai man be doing in Naikarra or Narosura, or Nguruman? What would a Borana man be doing in Logologo or Karare if he didn't have any animals grazing there? The contemporary colonial project knows this, and that is why they will invest millions of dollars to dupe, threaten, coerce or otherwise convince pastoralists to give up livestock.

There is historical precedent to this strategy. I refer to one of the greatest recorded genocides that befell the Native American Nations with the arrival of the European immigrants. A crucial cog in the wheels of that machine was the complete destruction of the millions-strong herds of bison that roamed the plains. These were the Native Americans' "livestock" on which they depended for food, clothing, fuel (from the fat) and building materials (housing units built from hides) to survive the harsh temperate winters. With the bison gone, they didn't stand a chance. Those who survived the bullets remained in penury, stripped of their identity, power, and dignity. It isn't vastly different in Africa today, where we face assault from heavily funded foreign pirates 'in love' with our country and wildlife, guns placed in the hands of our foolish brethren called 'game scouts' and [local law enforcers](#) being trained by foreign special forces on how best to kill us.

Conservancy Pirates

For the privateers who have the funding but cannot access sovereign state militaries, this dubious service is also offered by mercenary groups like [51 degrees](#), [VETPAW](#) and [Trojan Group](#) based in Kenya, the United States and the United Kingdom, respectively. Most of all, the loss of our dignity and heritage is driven by the numerous local people, conservation officers, government officials and local leaders who see these problems, but still collaborate so as to enjoy some morsels from the table of donor largesse.

I have often been asked to propose ways in which we can address these ethical and existential challenges we face from this monster of prejudice and colonialism hiding under the hallowed cloak of conservation. There are a wide variety of workable approaches depending on circumstances but there are a few absolutes; Firstly, it must involve every single one of us, because it is about us, the people, not about animals, or parks, but our heritage so we must reject any labels (especially the ethnic ones) that seek to divide us for ease of control by the pirates. These labels also dehumanize our communities and reduce their rights to levels below universally accepted human rights. The State also has a part to play here- we should immediately put a stop to all armed wildlife law enforcement activities outside the structure of the two statutory organs KWS and KFS (Kenya Forest Service). These extraneous operatives are inhabiting a legal twilight zone where nothing is what it seems, or should be. The ethical and legal pitfalls are so stark and numerous, that if the State cannot see them, one would question the thinking behind defining Kenya as a sovereign state. Grant funding for wildlife law enforcement should go to KWS and anyone unwilling to channel such funding to the state agency should keep their money.

A Case for Policy Change

Next is the hardest pill to swallow. We must dismantle and discard the model of conservation developed in the West, and funded by the west to conserve for the West. This requires a radical shift from where we are. KWS at present has no policy department, cultural liaison department, no

anthropologists, and sociologists- basically has no tools to deal with humans, except guns and bullets. Whenever they need to deal with the human dimensions detailed above, they have to run to the NGO pirates to lead them down the garden path. This is the door through which the colonial project is taking our homelands. The colonists driving this project are hidden in plain sight. They call themselves the Coalition for Private Investment in Conservation (<http://cpicfinance.com>) take time to learn the names of your interlopers. The first step in this policy direction for Kenya would be to totally and permanently remove any tourism interests from the table at which conservation policy is being discussed. They should come in and sell the products of that finished policy with the firm knowledge that it was made to serve the Kenyan people, not the tourists.

Finally, we must stop this runaway train called 'conservancies' until we can legally and logically define it and define its direction. Currently, it is just a well-funded train hurtling at high speed down a railway that is being built as it moves. I am calling for definition, because I know for sure that there are good ones, and the ecological, social, cultural, economic and edaphic factors surrounding these conservancies vary greatly. The NGO pirate conservancies hide behind the good ones like the fabled dog with wooden horns at the meeting of antelopes.

I'll conclude with an update on the Magadi Soda story. The local Maasai community led by the Kajiado County Governor are aggressively demanding the restitution of their birthright and payment of outstanding land rates. Meanwhile, the pastoralist development network (PDNK) led by Michael Tiampati have petitioned the UN rapporteur on the rights of indigenous people about it. The lessees are looking increasingly cornered, so in order to escape returning the land to its original owners, they are now frantically trying to turn it into wildlife conservancies. I rest my case.

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