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Echoes of Eden: How Colonial Conservation Rhetoric Impacted the Maasai of Serengeti National Park

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ABSTRACT

Ethnocentric conceptions of nature dominated British colonial perspectives in British East Africa- present-day Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. Between 1895 and 1920, British colonizers romanticized East African landscapes as a Pristine Wilderness: an "untouched Eden" devoid of modernity and, critically, of the humans who had inhabited the region for centuries. This narrative relied on the idea of the "noble savage", which simplified existing native peoples such as the Maasai as living cohesively with nature whilst simultaneously requiring guidance from a more "advanced" civilization. Together, these ideas laid the foundation for the British colonial conservation agenda in Tanzania.

The Serengeti, with its iconic wildlife, became emblematic of this Pristine Wilderness. When British colonizers discovered existing indigenous Maasai communities, they blamed them for wrecking a nature that had never truly existed. The British then pushed to protect "Eden" from the traditional practices of local populations, justifying the subjugation of native peoples with the goal of restricting or removing them from the landscape entirely

This analysis dissects how rhetorical strategies within colonial conservation discourse framed Maasai pastoralism as inherently incompatible with British ecological preservation in the Serengeti. It focuses on W. H. Pearsall's Ecological Survey that informed the 1959 National Parks Act, which would come to define the Serengeti National Park.

Ultimately, this paper argues that colonial conservation in the Serengeti was not a neutral act of preservation but a powerful instrument of control. Consequently, this condemned the Maasai people by stripping indigenous agency in a way that demands critical assessment in contemporary practices.

Introduction

One dominant concept of nature existed in British colonial perspectives: a romanticized East African landscape, pure and devoid of modernity's influence—a Pristine Wilderness. Similarly, they invented the notion of an 'untouched Eden' that only white colonial powers could protect the interests of Africa (Munro, 2021, p. 9). The abundance and diversity of wildlife in areas like the Serengeti in northern Tanzania reinforced this image; in reality, Indigenous groups such as the Maasai inhabited and managed it for centuries, developing sophisticated systems of land use and resource management that were integral to the ecological system of the region.

Simultaneously, the colonial view of this same land as being perfectly untouched and unoccupied neglected the land's actual history, portraying Indigenous people as either absent or having a negligible impact on the landscape. As colonial administrations took control of this land, they sought to protect their notion of 'Eden' from the practices of local populations, in an attempt to construct the depiction of nature they had failed to find. Colonial powers couldn't find that vision of nature because it had never truly existed: "the idea of nature as a pristine, empty African wilderness was largely mythical and could only become a reality by relocating thousands of Africans whose agency had in fact shaped the landscape for millenia" (Neumann, 1995, p. 150). As Roderick Neumann has established, the cost of the ensuing construction was the natural right of the Maasai to remain in the land they had maintained for centuries prior to European intervention.

The present study builds on Neumann's Findings by analyzing colonial policy rhetoric and how it percolated into contemporary policy governing Serengeti National Park. Although contemporary park policies now incorporate Maasai participation, the colonial rhetoric from centuries prior added barriers to the implementation of these practices.

From the 16th to 20th century, as the British colonial Empire grew, groups such as the Society for the Preservation of the Fauna of the Empire (SPFE) positioned themselves as advisors to colonial administrators. In the area that would become Serengeti National Park, recommendations were made by the SPFE for the construction of nature, which involved restricting native populations in a way that limited their capacity to produce and develop, ultimately resulting in significant loss of ancestral lands and traditional practices (Smith, 1984). These colonial conservation recommendations were informed by the colonial assumptions held by the SPFE and its associates and communicated back to the British Government in policy rhetoric that involved racialized, idealized, and isolationist

perceptions of wilderness, excluding or suppressing traditional ways of life in the Serengeti under the guise of conservation for future generations.

The issue lies not only in the consequences of these policies but also in the rhetoric employed to justify the policy, to be examined in this study. Existing scholarship explores colonial conceptions of African nature in art and action, but the following analysis will examine the rhetoric of colonial conservation policies and discourse to understand how colonial depictions of nature informed conservation policy recommendation through rhetoric.

The erasure of Indigenous populations from the prevailing colonial narrative created a fundamental disconnect between expectation and reality. This disconnect led to policies constructed on misleading premises and justified by arguments that are presented as scientific or objective when they were based on a devaluing of a Maasai way of life, with dire consequences for native communities.

Method

This review conducts a rhetorical analysis of colonial reports that instructed colonial orders to shape conservation policies within the Serengeti and situates them within the broader context of British colonialism, conceptions and productions of nature, and conservation. Rhetorical interpretation of justifications for conservation policy speaks to nature conceptions embedded within the policies by critical actors such as the SPFE. The scope of this analysis spans from the late 19th century, marking the onset of colonial influence in East Africa, and continues through the 1950s, encompassing the formal establishment of Serengeti National Park in 1951. That given, the documents selected for primary source analysis are from the first half of the 20th Century because the focus of this argument is the rhetorical justification of colonial policies that informed the later creation of Serengeti National Park. The analysis terminates before policy enactment because the purpose is to trace rhetorical justifications leading to the parks creation rather than to evaluate policy enforcement or long-term outcomes. Examining enactment and legacy would require empirical methods, such as archival research on park administration or ethnographic studies with affected communities, which lie beyond this project's scope but represent important directions for future work.

The impacts of exemplified rhetoric are traced up to the creation of Serengeti National Park, included to provide relevance to analyzing the rhetoric itself. The source base was limited to digitized archival materials and published documents accessible remotely, with only English-language sources included. This centers the perspectives of British colonial officials and institutions[1]. Documents were selected for their relevance to conservation policy and its rhetorical justification, as well as their authorship by individuals or groups who acted directly in shaping or influencing conservation policy. While this study incorporates a limited set of Maasai oral histories, most of the corpus consists of sources authored by colonial officials and institutions. This imbalance means the analysis primarily reflects British colonial perspectives, with Maasai perspectives present though not proportionally represented. This selection bias narrows the interpretive scope of the study and centers colonial rhetoric more than indigenous experience.

Beginning with Roderick Neumann's framework, I employed a deductive coding approach to identify how colonial documents deployed specific metaphors including "Pristine Nature" and "Unprotected Eden", and how these perspectives framed land and Maasai peoples in ways that justified displacement for conservation. I also began with Adams and McShane's analysis of science and technology and apply that foundation to analyzing the Pearsall report. Neumann discusses the British conceptions of nature as visual representations whereas this analysis focuses on how colonial rhetoric purporting to be scientific while being based on these mythical definitions of nature was used to justify imposing limitations on the Maasai in Serengeti National Park. This rhetorical reading builds on the work of Neumann (1998), who traced visual and discursive constructions of African landscapes, and Brockington (2002), who analyzed how conservation policies enacted exclusions on the ground. While both emphasize the broader political and material consequences of colonial conservation, this paper contributes a close textual analysis of the persuasive language itself, demonstrating how rhetorical metaphors migrated into statutory language. By

[1] Other works center Maasai perspectives and the lived effects of conservation policy being analyzed here, including Neumann and works based on Maasai oral history, such as *Decolonizing Maasai History: A Path to Indigenous African Futures* by Meitamei Olol Dapash and Mary Poole, or Dr. Shetler's *Imagining Serengeti: A History of Landscape Memory in Tanzania from Earliest Times to the Present*. Works like these explain the true impact of conservation policy language on the people it targeted, which provides relevance to the analysis here. Other lanes of further study are valuable, including recent scholarship on community-based conservation in East Africa, the effects of colonial rhetoric on present-day issues such as tourism, and indigenous agency in conservation at large, though those topics are beyond the scope of this study.

doing so, the analysis highlights how rhetorical framings shaped legal instruments that changed land use in the Serengeti.

This study is based on a single-coder deductive process and therefore lacks inter-coder reliability which may introduce confirmation bias. To support consistency, I revisited documents and compared coding decisions against definitions drawn from Neumann and Adams and McShane's frameworks. Future research should broaden the source base and employ multiple coders or alternative methodologies to build on these findings. Before delving into this analysis, it is essential to establish the historical background that fostered these colonial interventions.

Background

The SPFE was established in 1903 amid growing elite concern about wildlife populations, particularly stemming from the interests of elite British hunters and colonial administrators. Within Britain's vast colonial holdings existed a growing concern from colonial officials and conservationists about the decline of wildlife populations due to increased hunting by elite British hunters and resulting habitat loss. Simultaneously, European conservation ideologies emphasizing the preservation of wilderness gained traction at the turn of the 20th century, specifically the protection of large mammals and pristine landscapes.

However, as Roderick Neumann describes in *Ways of Seeing Africa: Colonial Recasting of African Society and Landscape in Serengeti National Park*, this interest came from British colonial attempts to "impose a particular way of seeing the landscape and to reshape African ways of being" (1995). In accordance with this imposition, the Serengeti became of interest to conservationists because of its abundant wildlife. New landscapes of pristine wilderness were created by Britain's hunting elite, which became the image of Africa in European paintings and literature (Kay, 2009, p. 146). That media popularized the constructed nature, including the Serengeti, which could fit into the British colonial narrative of pristine landscapes, if not for the presence of the Maasai people, who had been largely left out of that media. Moreover, the sheer scale of the Serengeti ecosystem and its biodiversity made it unique within Britain's colonial holdings.

The SPFE, a colonial actor, operated as a lobby group, building relationships with colonial officials, scientists, and influential conservationists in Britain and abroad (Prendergast et al., 2003). The Society used its journal and meetings to discuss developments, raise awareness, and advocate for conservation-first responses. In volume IV of the SPFE's journal, they outline their mission:

> "We of the Society attach material, as well as sentimental, importance to the reasonable protection and preservation of the wild fauna— particularly the larger big game—in all British possessions. They not only add to the interest and attraction of our outlying portions of the Empire for sportsmen, naturalists, and travellers, but they also contribute to the material wealth and revenue thereof "(SPFE, 1908, p. 26)

The group ultimately aimed to position itself as an independent expert organization, providing specialist wildlife knowledge necessary to inform colonial policy, particularly in Africa. The SPFE published journals and reports that were circulated within colonial networks, but ultimate authority rested with British colonial administrators. The Society promoted the establishment of game reserves and national parks, including the Serengeti, supporting their cause by evaluating the impact of colonial development on wildlife.

Coexisting with the SPFE's agenda was an existing British colonial perception of African natives that was fundamental to how colonial policies in East Africa were created, especially regarding conservation. The perspective of colonizers is perhaps best explained through the romanticized "noble savage" (Neumann, 1995, p. 151). Neumann points out a critical but contradictory view held by the British administration that non-Western peoples lived in a pure, uncorrupted state cohesive with nature, but also needed guidance from a more "advanced" civilization.

Romanticization perpetuated the belief that native peoples, particularly in Africa and including the Maasai of the Serengeti region, were "primitive" and backward in comparison to Western civilization. This belief system justified the need for white colonizers to 'fix' the traditional life in the Serengeti and across Africa, including their use of the land. To promote the belief that the Maasai were intrinsically at odds with nature and that conservation would therefore only be effective by removing native populations or limiting their development, the SPFE made policy recommendations that will be examined in the following analysis.

Eden Rhetoric

Over the course of the 20th century, the Serengeti, with its vast plains and abundant wildlife, became a prime example of the pristine wilderness ideal. In the early 1900s, British colonial leaders, guided in part by the SPFE, regularly characterized local native populations as responsible for degrading what they imagined to be a pristine natural landscape, an "Eden" that existed in the colonial imagination.

This perspective contributed to efforts to shape the land according to colonial ideals by restricting pre-existing Maasai populations, "the most important feature of this conservationist nature is that it is ostensibly external to human society" (Garland, 2008, p. 63). The colonial desire to create 'natural' spaces that excluded most humans laid the foundation for future colonial practices (Munro, 2021, p. 4). The colonial construction of the 'untouched Eden' in East Africa, and specifically within the Serengeti, was a tool to justify colonial control while simultaneously disregarding the historical presence and sustainable practices of native populations like the Maasai.

The SPFE emerged in 1903 as a response to perceived threats to African wildlife, primarily driven by the concerns of elite British hunters and colonial administrators. Led by Edward North Buxton, a prominent hunter-conservationist, the SPFE aimed to influence colonial policy regarding colonial land management. Hunting, in his view, would preserve the British Empire by maintaining the morale of officers in remote areas (Adams & McShane, 1996, p. 46). The SPFE's formation was catalyzed by the proposed re-designation of the White Nile Reserve in Sudan, which threatened to undermine an existing wildlife sanctuary. Buxton, alarmed by the depletion of game, sought to promote "true sportsman[ship]" by ensuring the continued availability of game for future hunting (SPFE, 1908, p. 26). The group was formed by a group of elite aristocrats, hunters, and former government officials (Munro, 2021, p. 1).

Initially, European hunting in East Africa was driven by commercial interests in ivory, and recreational sport. This sport was a status symbol of the British and American elite, drawing the likes of Teddy Roosevelt to Africa for hunting. Though Roosevelt was not formally affiliated with the SPFE, his widely publicized expeditions epitomized the elite hunting culture celebrated in the *Journal of the SPFE*: **"**Your true sportsman is always a real lover of nature. He kills, it is true, but only in sweet reasonableness and moderation, for food if necessary, but mainly for trophies" (SPFE, 1908, p. 26). Many public conservationists themselves were avid hunters, their conservational investment stemming from their interest in preserving the longevity of their sport by way of maintaining populations of large game animals (Munro, 2021, p. 1). This interest led to the creation of early national parks in the form of game reserves, which laid the foundation of intention in preserving idyllic East African landscapes.

While colonizers applauded each other's hunting trophies, they considered African hunters cruel and deemed their practice of hunting unnecessary for the African way of life (Adams & McShane, 1996, p. 31). This contradiction aligned with the popularized white man's burden as Jan Bender-Shetler explains, "'Evoking a racist orientation, European hunters viewed themselves as uniquely able to protect the animals against what they saw as the cruel and indiscriminate slaughter carried out by Africans'" (Munro, 2021, p. 3). So, a goal of the SPFE was to eliminate hunting by Africans, using misrepresented information to justify this restriction of actual Maasai practice. SPFE Member Frederick Selous claimed that of every 1,000 hunted elephants, 997 were killed by Africans. Selous had no evidence for this, but his claim served to preserve game for elite hunters by excluding Africans (Adams & McShane, 1996, p. 46). Methods such as this were used to ultimately justify Maasai exclusion in what would become Serengeti National Park.

Although the SPFE presented a unified front in their pursuit of African wildlife conservation and practices, underlying ideologies were not without dissent and criticism. At large, the exploitative nature of colonialism and its "civilizing mission" has been criticized by works like J.A. Hobson's *Imperialism: A Study.* This vision of indiscriminate slaughter at the hands of Africans simplified their ways of life, allowing for the belief that native peoples can't help but harm their environment, which qualified the need for external control to ensure the longevity of the African landscape. This simplification can create global support for misrepresented political stances that don't align with the Maasai's own,

> "For example, David Western has argued for decades that Maasai society hunts and eats wildlife in times of drought, considering them to be "second cattle." He based this claim on an anomalous, uncited, and individual example. [33] The practice is in fact generally unknown throughout Maasailand and offensive to Maasai common sense, but Maasai people have not been present at the academic conferences where this claim has been made, nor have they been aware of its dissemination through English language journals. Western's work has been used to dismiss the universal Maasai resistance to a proposed reintroduction of commercial hunting in Maasailand, while Western himself, a British Kenyan raised to hunt African wildlife, actively promotes such a reintroduction of hunting to fund 'conservation.'" (Dapash & Poole, 2024, p. 16-17)

The SPFE made recommendations to conservation and colonial officials that reinforced the idea that Indigenous African hunting practices were destructive, while the sport hunting of elite Europeans was acceptable, if properly regulated (Prendergast et al., 2003). Though the SPFE policies allowed the continued hunting of those wild animals under the condition that it was done by the correct people, and in the correct way. In this way, the Society's actions reflected the complex and often contradictory nature of early colonial conservation, which was intertwined

with the interests of elite hunters. As they lobbied for Serengeti to be a national park, they claimed, "The functions of a National Park organization as it is conceived in Tanganyika appear to be, firstly the provision of amenities which will serve to attract tourists, and secondly the preservation of the game and the prevention of poaching" (Pearsall, 1957, p. 119). Clearly stated is the SPFE's concern about profitability from tourists, and then the secondary concern about the preservation of game in Serengeti, implicating priorities that would later show up in policy surrounding native populations (Prendergast et al., 2003).

Mechanisms of Maasai Exclusion

A critical component of colonizing ideology serving as a purpose and justification is the civilizing mission. This ideology, rooted in paternalism and the belief in Western superiority, framed colonial intervention as a benevolent act of "saving" the African wilderness from the dangerous non-white natives. This method underlies colonization as a whole and was embellished in conservation efforts so that the conservation of nature may permit the force of one people over another.

Colonial actors presented a belief that Africans, particularly Indigenous groups like the Maasai, lacked the capacity to steward their own lands and required the "rational" intervention of white European expertise. This belief is captured by Adams and McShane,

> "Science and technology are the most powerful tools that the West has at its disposal. The inhabitants of the primeval African wilderness cannot protect it, many people outside of Africa believe, so it follows that the West must take on this task, and must send in its finest troops, the scientific foot soldiers" (1996, p. 90).

Casting the colonizing mission in this way allows for its exploitative nature to be gilded in an argument for the protection of nature and Africa's animals, excluding the people who have lived there historically such as the Maasai.

Exclusionary conservation practices have a historical impact. Garland observes, "It is their (white) faces that most readily spring to mind when audiences worldwide think about the study and conservation of African Animals" (2008, p. 59). The erasure of Indigenous contributions to conservation by complete exclusion from the narrative reinforces European expertise to ensure the survival of African wildlife, "Narrative coexistence in Maasai history is necessary because the alternative has led to silencing, and the erasure of a people's history is a form of violence that enables and masks other more tangible violence" (Dapash & Poole, 2024, p. 21). Ignoring community-led conservation in East Africa centers a narrative in which white European people are the sole keepers of nature in a land that was not theirs to begin with.

In colonial efforts to create and maintain national parks like Serengeti, policies were created by colonial officials to guide administrative action, such as the National Parks Act of 1959, which defined Serengeti National Park. Such policies relied on reporting done by the SPFE and the scientists they employed. However, this scientific research regularly occurred in a vacuum, with little representation of the Africans that were so important to the ecology of the region (Adams & McShane, 1996, p. 86).

The reports generated because of this research employed rhetoric that conveys information about how colonizers and members of the SPFE saw the need for conservation in the Serengeti region and how they perceived the impact of the Maasai upon the landscape. In doing so, the reports carry over SPFE assumptions and conceptions of pristine nature, rarely questioning the validity of those beliefs with scientific analysis.

The disruption to colonizer's perceptions of Pristine Nature and an Untouched Eden was the existence of not only native populations in the Serengeti of the Maasai, but also their traditional use of the land. Understanding Maasai historical land use is important in framing how colonizers perceived conservation issues related to the Maasai, which then informed the rhetoric in their policy.

The Maasai are primarily pastoralists, so their land use is intrinsically linked to the movement of their herds in search of water and grazing with the seasons. This nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyle allows the Maasai to utilize vast areas of land, sharing space communally. This communal land ensured that all members had access to essential resources, in contrast to the ideas of privatized land ownership that British colonizers brought to East Africa and Serengeti. In contradiction to the colonial "noble savage" narrative,

> "None of this evidence necessarily means that western Serengeti peoples were natural conservationists who never had an adverse effect on the environment. Their purpose was to use the land's resources for their own benefit rather than for the sake of the land itself" (Shetler, 2007, p.39).

Evidently, the Maasai used the land as humans do and framing that use as inherently destructive was an explicit method of Maasai exclusion. For example, a rotational grazing system was used by the Maasai to maintain the health and productivity of the grasslands they depended on,

> "Shared use of land is necessary for the survival of pastoralism, which is a form of coexistence with cattle rather than of commodification.[12] Maasailand's economy and its primary management strategy depend

> upon deferred grazing, which involves strategically migrating around landscapes, and are not possible under relations of private property" (Dapash & Poole, 2024, p. 8)

Within that shared landscape, the Maasai also historically used fire as a land management tool, to promote new grass growth, control pests like the tsetse fly, and prevent more destructive and uncontrollable wildfires.

The Maasai have also traditionally utilized controlled burning to manage grasslands with the purpose of promoting new growth, controlling bush encroachment, and reducing the risk of uncontrolled wildfires (Neumann, 1995, p. 160). Evidently, the Maasai did not live in a complete harmony with their environment - an idea perpetuated by the "noble savage" narrative - and instead altered their environment to meet their needs (Adams & McShane, 1996, p. 34, p. 43). For example, "Ecological evidence demonstrates that humans have had a profound effect in both creating and maintaining the unique Serengeti ecosystem largely through the deliberate and controlled use of fire" (Shetler, 2007, p.33). The idyllic African landscape that colonizing actors were trying to conserve by removing the Maasai was the very same landscape that had been shaped by the Maasai pastoral way of life for centuries.

In conflict with Maasai pastoralism, land from a British perspective was heavily influenced by the Enclosure Movement, the privatization of common lands. This movement began in the British Isles and highlighted the importance of private property and the division and sale of previously public spaces. Land conceptions that were then exported to foreign colonies and communicated the idea that land should be controlled and access should be limited. However, as Adams and McShane note in *The Myth of Wild Africa: Conservation Without Illusion*, "privatization is incompatible with pastoralism", because the ability to share resources is destroyed (1996, p. 55).

Land was viewed as having two purposes, "land that was for practical (productive) uses and practices and land that was for aesthetic (consumptive observations and practices)" (Neumann, 1995, p. 152). This belief starkly conflicted with traditional Maasai land use, of sharing public spaces and grazing communally, becoming a point of conflict and corridor of control in conservation policy as parks were outlined. Furthermore, the role of human activity had been so crucial to the actual landscape of the Serengeti that, from its inception, the national park has required continual intervention by park managers, who use fire, brush-clearing, and other techniques to manipulate the landscape to correspond to the images held by conservationists, television audiences, and safari-goers of a 'natural' African savanna (Garland, 2008, p. 64).

Pearsall Report Analysis

The Report on an Ecological Survey of Serengeti National Park, Tanganyika, prepared for the SPFE by W. H. Pearsall in 1956, explicitly outlined recommendations to colonial governments for conservation policy and how to enforce said policies. The report's main concerns are game movement, game population control, water resources, and soil maintenance. The report analyzes these factors to demonstrate effects of Maasai practice, ultimately making recommendations for the national park's organization and development of the reserved area going forward. Analyzing the report itself exposes the SPFE's evidence and reasoning to reach the conclusions reflected in the National Parks Act of 1959 regarding the role of the Maasai within the context of conservation in what would become Serengeti National Park.

The Pearsall Report employed survey data to conclude that "The pastoral mode of life of the Masai is inevitably, if locally, harder on the grasslands than the presence of a similar number of game" (Pearsall, 1957, p. 85). The word "inevitably" creates a sense of unquestionable truth, removing room for nuance in the broad impacts of the Maasai pastoral way of life. This line frames Maasai pastoralism as inherently destructive, regardless of specific practice, location, or context, which is a charged assumption rather than a fact. This disregards that the Maasai had historically succeeded in the semi-arid environment of East-Africa with those very same pastoral modes of life. Additionally, the comparison of the impact of the Maasai to the impact of the same size of animal populations presents a false dichotomy, asserting blankly that wild animals are inherently less destructive than Maasai on the land and using the same rubric to compare the land effects of humans and animals. Pearsall lends,

> "It is noticeable that while the Masai are accused by some of causing serious overgrazing and soil erosion, others even commend them for employing proper methods of land-use, moving their cattle towards a water-hole on one day and away from it on the subsequent one" (Pearsall, 1957, p. 85)

This line acknowledges that some scientists disagree with the assertion that the Maasai are abusing their native lands. However, Pearsall quickly amends, "The Masai, like most other experienced graziers, have learnt to spread the grazing effect a little but are…indifferent to any but the most immediate results of grazing." (Pearsall, 1957, p.85).

This contradiction within Pearsall's own work alludes to a larger conservational debate ongoing at the time of his writing. Although Pearsall argues that the pastoralism practiced by the Maasai was inherently harmful on the

land, that argument was contested to the point that acknowledging nuance was important to the validity of his own argument.

Continuing in this line of reasoning, Pearsall concludes, "any further increases in the numbers of the Masai and their stock is likely to introduce further and finally destructive deterioration and that remedial measures are generally desirable even at the present level of occupation" (1957, p. 86). This line simply frames the Maasai as a threat to the ecosystem, stating that their population growth is unsustainable and implying that the land may never recover from the historical Maasai presence. This language calls for action by stating that even the current Maasai population is problematic, and intervention should be made immediately. The basis of this assertion is assumption but presented as scientific fact to persuade. This rhetoric "others" Maasai land management and implies that there is no solution involving sustainable or collaborative Maasai land management outside of their explicit removal from the land.

Pearsall's report evaluates specific Maasai practices in a broad context:

> "Freedom from fire and from continuous grazing is required at least for a time in order to enable regeneration of the damaged woodlands and reconstitution of the soil surface. No doubt this could be accom-plished by extending southwards the stock boundary limiting the westward movement of Masai until regeneration had taken place" (1957, p. 115).

Stock boundary refers to an imposed administrative boundary for livestock owned by the Maasai, suggested by Pearsall to facilitate the proposed break from grazing. Reconstitution refers to the restoration of the soil on which the woodlands depend on. That given, Pearsall presents the absence of fire and grazing as an absolute necessity. Maasai practices with fire were limited and controlled burning to prevent more hazardous future flames and limit harmful tsetse fly populations, but this nuance is left out of policy suggestion (Lankester & Davis, 2016, p. 5).

The grazing of the Maasai's animals, while continuous, was cyclical, moving from pasture to pasture for the very sake of the soil surface,

> "As pastoralists, the life of a Maasai person, even today under changing times, revolves around finding sufficient grasses for the community's cattle, goats, and sheep, which has historically involved moving around a dry landscape following rain and the grasses it brings" (Dapash & Poole, 2024, p. 2).

This Indigenous narrative is left unstated Pearsall's analysis. The practices of fire use and grazing are represented as simplistic, irrational Maasai measures, framing traditional practices as inherently destructive, without reckoning with the fact that the Maasai had sustainably been living there for upwards of two centuries prior to British colonization. The language of "damaged" and "reconstitution" again portray the landscape as completely marred by Maasai presence in need of eradication by white colonizers. Pearsall's language creates a temporary guise and broad scientific justification for Maasai displacement, but because there is no acknowledgment of realized Maasai fire and grazing practice, the argument rests on assumption.

Pearsall is ultimately advocating for Maasai removal following strict limitation of pastoral movement. The cause-and-effect fallacy creates a direct and simple link between Maasai practices and environmental damage, ultimately to justify colonial control of native peoples in the name of saving the land. Colonial uncertainty around actually controlling Maasai populations is clear in a recommendation for land-ownership policy,

> "It will be necessary, if Masai are to graze in such reserve areas, to vest the grazing rights in individuals (such as the head of the family or tribe) who can be held responsible for damage. The creation of personal rights in this way could satisfy the legal position, limit possible further encroachment and allow of ultimate financial compensation if a modification of the reserve status were necessary" (Pearsall, 1957, p. 87).

The heart of this proposal is a fundamental shift in community organization imposed from the outside in - from communal grazing rights to individual ownership. The notion of holding an individual liable frames the Maasai as inherently prone to causing harm, with an individual needing to make amends for that assumed harm.

This imposition of private ownership illustrates colonial concern for legal justification and exemplifies the imposition of Western legal frameworks over Indigenous systems. The "Financial compensation" element suggests that the Maasai can and should treat the land as a commodity as the colonizers do, to be bought and sold. The imposed individualism on a fundamentally communal group is a method of control to grapple with organizational structure foreign to them. Maasai social systems are foundationally built upon communal land,

> "Shared use of un-partitioned land and other resources requires a strong and flexible social system to manage grazing rights and thus all other aspects of decision-making. The culture itself is a product of shared land use. Its layers of governance and dense social scaffolding web individuals to thousands of other specific individuals, creating a structural basis for consensus decision-making" (Dapash & Poole, 2024, p. 9)

Dividing that land disrupts the entire social structure of the Maasai community and therefore way of life. This argument has the effect of undermining Maasai communal land tenure and facilitating land alienation, by framing communal practices as environmentally threatening.

Pearsall's underlying recommendation for the SPFE in what would become Serengeti National Park is written,

> "If the area thus defined is to be treated as National Park, it will be necessary ultimately for the Masai pastoralists to be excluded. On this question there is much to be said for regarding the provincial boundary as the border of Masai-land. If the existing pastoralists are for the present to continue to use the park grazing, they should do so under licence as suggested earlier (see Section 3) and dependent on good behaviour" (1957, p. 128).

Pearsall's recommendation is that the Maasai will need to be excluded from their traditional lands, and if these groups must remain, they will require a license that may be stripped if 'bad behavior' occurs. This positioned Maasai presence as temporary and conditional, constrained by bureaucratic permits that undermined Maasai autonomy. The establishment of game reserves and licensing systems were a way to effectively control native populations (Munro, 2021, p. 4). Furthermore, the "dependent on good behaviour" term of the one-sided agreement infantilizes the Maasai, portraying them as needing external control and discipline, and further applies Western standards of what is considered "good behavior" to the native population.

Policy Outcomes & Language

Pearsall's recommendations culminated in The National Parks Act of 1959, which defined the area of the Serengeti National Park and subsequent "Effect of proclamation and extinguishment of rights" and "Compensation for extinguishment of rights" (p. 5). Within that policy, the decision to exclude the Maasai from Serengeti National Park and place significant restrictions on their use of the Ngorongoro Conservation Area, which was originally a part of Serengeti National Park, was justified by the subjective evidence provided in Pearsall's report (Lissu, 2000, p. 8).

Recommended policies assumed that Maasai pastoralists were exhibiting the 'tragedy of the commons' theory, which was applied to subtly degrade the foresight of Maasai populations. As argued by Lankester and Davis, "Outside observers assumed…that pastoral people were, in accordance with the 'tragedy of the commons' theory, individually exploiting resources for personal short-term gain at the expense of long-term stability" (2016, p. 475). This belief pervades Pearsall's report in his assessment of Maasai's impact on water use and soil degradation although the Maasai had managed communal resources for centuries.

Colonizing actors presented similar conservationist ideas as based on scientific evidence when many relied on assumption to support the recommended action. A key example is the application of environmental determinism, which asserts that climate and environment dictate human behavior and development. Interpreting Pearsall's midcentury report, Lankester and Davis posit,

> "Pastoralists of East Africa were considered to suffer from a 'cattle complex', in which large herds of cattle were irrationally kept for reasons of wealth and culture in numbers that were assumed to exceed the 'ecological carrying capacity' of the land" (2016, p. 475).

Ecological carrying capacity is the maximum population size of a species that the given environment can sustainably support with available resources, which Pearsall is using to support the determination of cattle complex traits within the Maasai population. This "cattle complex" is a term that qualifies Maasai possession of cattle as irrational and a product of their supposedly "primitive" environment, disregarding any possibility of Indigenous understanding of resource management. Qualifying the Maasai as in need of external management in this way serves to justify European intervention, and the language used portrays Africans as less capable of rational thought and therefore incapable of employing sustainable conservation practices.

Finally, *The Journal of the SPFE* 1904 publication simply states, "A reservation should not have any settlers or natives on it" (p. 43). This recorded belief predates the formation of the reservations and disregards the importance of historical presence and rights of Indigenous populations. The statement indicates the desire for a Pristine Nature as an ornament to an expansive empire. Policy recommendations promote the removal of Indigenous populations by suggesting the creation of artificial boundaries and the imposition of Western standards and legal frameworks on a fundamentally different social structure.

The colonial agenda to create landscapes devoid of Indigenous presence was justified by the dehumanization of those Indigenous people, to create pristine nature for elites (Brockington, D, 2002). The language of recommended conservation policies, whether explicitly or implicitly stating tragedy of the commons and cattle complex theories, represent the intention behind the policies themselves. This language looks scientific, but without

evidence, it's not. However, this type of language had enough power to have impacts on the Maasai in which indigenous land and lifestyle was restricted for the benefit of the Empire.

In reviewing the archival corpus, no documents were found that substantially challenged or complicated this exclusionary narrative. The consistency of rhetoric suggests an absence of alternative framings that might have legitimized Maasai land use practices. This absence underscores how colonial conservation discourse systematically excluded Indigenous perspectives and foreclosed possibilities for more inclusive policy design. Future research drawing on Maasai-authored and non-English archival records with expanded oral histories may help recover perspectives omitted from these colonial archives.

Conclusion

The relationship between pre-colonial British wilderness perceptions, the early conservation agenda of the Empire, and the mid-twentieth-century displacement of the Maasai in east Africa intersects in conservation policy. That relationship and its underlying nuances are present in policy recommendations supported with colonial rhetoric to justify action in Serengeti National Park. The demonstrated colonial understandings, often based on an idealized and incorrect understanding of ecology in the Serengeti region, profoundly shaped policies that disrupted the Maasai's traditional way of life without room for advocacy and with the purpose of constructing Pristine Nature.

This analysis demonstrates how the formation of conservation policies within the Serengeti were critically rooted in the application of colonial rationalizations. The resulting displacement of the Maasai was a consequence of cumulative misunderstandings of ecology in the region and of traditional Maasai land practices. These misunderstandings, combined with a lack of Maasai representation in decision-making, resulted in the geographic restriction of the Maasai in ways that served imperial economic interests. The British construction of nature, based on the erasure of Indigenous presence, was a central rationale that British colonial administrators and the SPFE used as justification for colonial intervention. The idealized version of landscape present in conservation rhetoric left out the historical realities of Maasai land use, and the discovery of that truth facilitated the portrayal of Indigenous communities as harmful to the conservation of the Serengeti.

An important aspect of this narrative is understanding the colonial perception and agenda that framed the way scientific data was interpreted by scientists in the region. To legitimize the control and exclusion of the Maasai, the SPFE outlined environmental determinism, the "tragedy of the commons" theory, and racialized notions about African land management. These assumptions led to an overwhelming dismissal of Indigenous ecological knowledge and provided the justification for continued colonization of the region in which the construction of nature required the elimination of that nature's Indigenous peoples.

Examination of the rheto(rical strategies within colonial documents, particularly Pearsall's report, reveals a consistent pattern of depicting Maasai practices as unanimously opposed to conservation. This narrative employed terms like 'irrational cattle complex' to justify restrictions on Maasai movement and land use in their traditional region. Euphemisms, like 'stock boundary' and 'reconstitution', obscured the ultimate intention of land alienation and control. This rhetoric in the context of Western science's 'civilizing mission' created a moral framework that reframed dispossession as an unfortunate but necessary act of environmental preservation.

Analysis of the SPFE and its influence on policy reveals that conservation efforts were inextricably linked to colonial power structures and economic interests. The Society's advocacy for game reserves and national parks, while explicitly for the protection of big game, implicitly served to facilitate resource exploitation. Their policies were not isolated acts of environmentalism, the SPFE's original goal was to maintain game populations for recreational benefit - simultaneously casting the hunting practices of the Maasai as unnecessary and detrimental.

The conservation policies enacted in the Serengeti were not neutral acts of environmental stewardship. The acts were deeply entwined in a system of colonial power, driven by racial biases and a desire to impose a European vision of nature upon the African landscape. The displacement of the Maasai, therefore, represents not only a loss of ancestral lands and practices, but also an erasure of Indigenous agency.

Future research could examine the legacy of these colonial-era policies beyond the mid-twentieth century through decolonization, examining how more recent policies in the Serengeti address historical displacement of native populations. A part of this research could examine successful Indigenous-led conservation efforts to document Indigenous agency in environmentalism following a period of colonial oppression.

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