Respatializing culture, recasting gender in peri-urban sub-Saharan Africa: Maasai ethnicity and the 'cash economy' at the rural-urban interface, Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

This article spotlights Maasai ethnic identity in Tanzania as a site of social, cultural, and political transformations triggered by urbanization and market liberalization. Important social and cultural changes have occurred among east African pastoralists as they have entered the 'cash economy'. Research done since the 1980's on the integration between the rural, pastoral economy and urban, 'cash' economy has depicted these changes largely as *loss*, e.g. of tradition and culture expressed as a weakening of traditional institutions. This article calls into question the narrative of change as loss. It eschews value judgment about 'tradition' and 'modernity' in relation to 'being Maasai' by recognizing Maasai ethnic identity, culture and gender roles as a blend of old and new meanings continually reshuffled as the Maasai partake in different social spheres, in and out of the 'cash economy', at the rural-urban interface. The article employs the theoretical framework of social, cultural, and rural geography, and is grounded in ethnographic analysis to unearth the negotiations and contestations over what it means to be Maasai today, including gender-based meanings connected to being Maasai *men* and being Maasai *women*.

1. Introduction

The analysis in this article avails itself of the analytical tools that are peculiar of geography (human and cultural) to rethink the question of ethnicity in sub-Saharan Africa, specifically the case of the Maasai pastoral group of Northern Tanzania. Departing from geography's emphasis on the performative, everyday construction of identity (Benwell, 2014; Lahiri, 2003; Noble, 2009; Sullivan, 2012; Zhang, 2014), this article argues that 'being Maasai' today in Tanzania materializes as a blend of old meanings connected to rurality and new meanings associated to the urban. New meanings may at times emerge in continuity with old ones but may at times create tensions as to ideas and experiences of 'being Maasai'. One instance in which tensions arise concerns gender roles: being Maasai *men* and Maasai *women* depend on the complex interplay between the rural and the urban with urban-based economic activities and commoditization (e.g. of food) being at the core of gender-based opposing ideas as to what is deemed to belong to the 'traditional' domain (i.e. carrying 'Maasai' values).

The article focuses on the socio-cultural aspects involved in the integration between the livestock-based economy and the cash economy departing from the critique of the quite extensive research that so far has been conducted on the intersection of these two

economic spheres among pastoralists. Overall, the recent clashing of different economic spheres in Africa has interested not only East African pastoralists. Rather, it has involved most of sub-Saharan Africa as a consequence of neoliberal policies starting in the 1980's and 1990's, and leading to 'deagrarization', 'depeasantization' (Bryceson, 2005, p. 44) as well as stronger interdependencies between rural and urban areas (Baker and Pedersen, 1992; Baker and Wallevik, 2003; Jamal, 2001), and a recrafting of gender-based relationships, e.g. division of labour (Bryceson, 2005, p. 49; Francis, 2002; O'Laughlin, 1998). In the next section I will touch on the specificities of East African pastoralism with respect to the clash of different economic spheres as well as the way the geography frame can help reach alternative conclusions from those that have become mainstream.

The analysis of closer and shorter interplays between rural and urban areas constitutes the second main contribution of this paper (the first being the rethinking of Maasai ethnicity). The 'urban' as opposed to the 'rural' has been a relatively recent and rediscovered preoccupation within rural geography (Cloke, 2006a; Cloke and Little, 1997; Jackson, 2005). Shortened distances, actual and theoretical, between the rural and the urban have led to a new terminology that refers to the impossibility of handling the two spatial domains separately. Cloke (2006a) refers to the two parallel and co-existent processes of

'urbanization of the rural' and 'ruralization of the urban' (p. 18) as well as to 'urban villages' (Cloke, 2006b, p. 381), Woods (2007) reframes the rural as an 'hybrid', and McCarthy (2008) mentions the necessity of 'globalizing the countryside'. All these current theoretical cogitations call for the necessity to 'name neglected spatialities, and to invent new ones' (Cloke, 2006a, p. 25).

Nowhere more than Africa these spatialities have been neglected: large African cities have been looked at from the perspective of organization of space and networks (Abrahams, 2016; Fabiyi, 2008; Ibrahim and Omer, 2014), 'clashes' of identities (Lindell, 2010; Lindell and Utas, 2012), and urban informal and home-based economies (Gough et al., 2003; Rogerson, 2016) to name a few. What has remained unexplored are the processes occurring away from large cities, where the rural has met with the urban creating new interstices where questions of identity, including of an ethnic kind, can become rather compelling.

The history of the Maasai is a history of boundary-making in relation to ethnicity with a series of interventions for the creation and dissolution of territorial boundaries (Hodgson, 2001). This is a common characteristic that the Maasai share with many other peoples within and outside Africa, especially in conjunction with British colonialism (Peters and Andersen, 2013). In this article, I will show that connections between the rural and the urban are both culturally enriching and unsettling for groups used to be 'contained' within spatial boundaries. As for the case of indigenous peoples throughout the world (Peters and Andersen, 2013), identity of an ethnic (or racial) nature for the Maasai (and other Africans) living at the rural-urban interface can no longer be solely determined by the type of natural resources and place-based 'rural' livelihood one depends on (e.g. herding, farming, fishing). Identity becomes multi-faceted, multi-layered, being determined by a multiplicity of value registers which develop in a situation of economic diversification across different social and physical spaces.

2. (Re)Spatializing Maasai ethnicity

Rethinking Maasai ethnicity from a geographical perspective assumes relevance in the light of historical developments that are specific of Tanganyika/Tanzania. The spatial character of Maasai ethnicity closely linked to the geographical expression of 'Maasailand' is a product of historical conditions started during German and British rule in Tanganyika which assigned every 'ethnic' group its own 'place' or 'homeland' through the formation of districts and Native Authorities (Hodgson, 2001). As Ranger has argued (1983), ethnic differences based on supposedly distinct traditions and cultures were fictitiously 'invented' but nevertheless contributed to the emergence of collective sentiments of an ethnic nature among the people of Tanganyika, including the Maasai (Hodgson, 2001).

This dual character of Maasai ethnicity, between a 'real' sentiment of ethnic belonging and a historically determined product, is reflected in the different academic theoretical positions taken by anthropologists and other researchers. Classic studies of Maasai society (Spencer, 1988; Rigby, 1985) grounded on structural analysis have described and underlined the strength of Maasai cultural institutions such as for instance warriorhood and age-set social organization. Independent of this tradition, historical analysis of pre-colonial East Africa added a further layer to the analysis of Maasai ethnicity by highlighting the relational character of ethnicity as determined by environmental circumstances that produced 'ethnic shifters' (Galaty, 1982) between supposedly fixed categories such as pastoralists, agriculturalists and hunter-gatherers (Waller, 1985).

With the economic and physical changes occurred in sub-Saharan Africa since 1980's mentioned in the introduction, studies of integration of the pastoral with 'cash economy' and with urban-based income generating activities grounded on a political-economy approach (Homewood, 2008, p. 228–229) have come to dominate the research agenda for researchers interested in East African pastoralism. References to the 'traditional' institutions of elderhood, warriorhood, and

egalitarianism abound in studies of economic diversification. Zaal (1999), for instance, refers to the weakened authority of elders that occurs in conjunction with privatization of land on the basis of the eroded elders' function to oversee 'traditional' (i.e. communal) land arrangements. Likewise, the institution of warriorhood is equally threatened according to Zaal (1999), echoed by Coast (2002), as a consequence of younger Maasai's involvement in urban-based income generating activities leading to rural-urban migration. Finally, the so-called 'egalitarianism' as a supposedly inherent characteristic of East African pastoral societies is considered undermined with processes of social stratification that occurs as a result of appropriation of formerly shared resources (e.g. land) (Little, 1985).

My own criticism towards this trend of research concerns the narrative of 'change' proposed by these studies. Perhaps due to the specific approach (i.e. political economy), which focuses on the implications of growing unequal distribution of resources (Homewood, 2008, p. 228), 'change' occurs as an ongoing aggravation and deterioration of Maasai traditional institutions. This narrative is proposed at times with overt references to classic functionalist studies as terms of comparison that were grounded on the assumption of a 'pre-capitalist' 'equilibrium'. This is the case, for instance, of the Nilotic Maa-speaking Ariaal and Rendile groups of Northern Kenya (Smith, 1999) and the 'challenges to order' (Smith, 1999, p. 1) brought about by farming, where the 'order' referred to by the author is that illustrated by Paul Spencer in his functionalist study of the Samburu (another pastoral group of Kenya) (1965). In the end, a mismatch, I argue, clearly emerges, that is, between the intention to depict situations of evolution or change and the use of concepts that were devised to depict situations of equilibrium and social reproduction.

The kind of narrative connecting market involvement to the 'loss' of 'traditional ways of life' (Fratkin, 2001, p. 2), I argue, runs against at the same time historical analysis (Galaty, 1982; Hodgson, 2001; Waller, 1985) mentioned in the previous section that questions the fixed nature of ethnic identity as well as other recent debates on the complex negotiations around Maasai identity and culture. Hodgson (2001), for instance, finely illustrated the historically produced nature of 'tradition' and Maasai ethnic identity as an outcome of colonial and state interventions implemented on the assumption of the Maasai as a homogeneous and spatially bounded group (hence the creation of the 'Maasai district'). Even more importantly, the association between 'loss of culture' and market engagement seems to have lost traction recently as 'traditional' institutions can even be valuable capital in the market (Allegretti, 2017) and traditional practices (e.g. communal livestock ownership, marriage practices) can certainly co-exist with market involvement, when this occurs on favourable terms for the Maasai (Gardner, 2012, p. 381).

The geographical frame opens up a number of innovative possibilities to overcome the limitations embedded in the existing analysis of the integration between the pastoral and 'cash economy'. In the first instance, the idea of culture that has developed in cultural geography since the so-called 'post-cultural turn' and that emphasizes culture's relational, political and performative character against the causative, 'superorganic' and ontological status of the notion of culture devised under the Berkeley school (Cosgrove, 1983; Duncan, 1980; Mitchell, 1995; Valentine, 2010). In this article I show that Maasai cultural distinctiveness continues to be determined by long-dated rural-based practices of mobility and of food consumption, but these practices assume new forms and relevance when they are put in opposition with the 'non-Maasai' way which is connected to the urban. In addition, these dichotomies are not static and stable but subject to constant negotiations. As the subsistence and 'traditional' livestock-based economy encounters urban-based economic networks, the idea of what is 'Maasai' when referring to norms and practices can change, and new and co-existing forms of 'being Maasai' emerge, including gender-based differences between being Maasai *men* and being Maasai *women*.

Closely linked to these dynamics is the novel approach of