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# “Many have Spoken for us, Now we Speak for Ourselves:” Decolonizing Natures Through Ecotestimonies in *Olosho*

*“Testimonies...are a means through which oral evidence is presented... Indigenous testimonies are a way of talking about an extremely painful event or series of events” (Smith 145).*

*“For a colonized people, the most essential value, because it is the most meaningful, is first and foremost the land: the land, which must provide bread and, naturally, dignity” (Fanon 9).*

## Introduction

“Many have spoken for us, now we speak for ourselves” are the opening words of the Maasai film *Olosho*,<sup>1</sup> which was produced in 2015 through a participatory workshop with Maasai communities from Loliondo (Tanzania) and the UK-based community development organization *InsightShare*.<sup>2</sup> It was screened during the 11th Native Spirit Indigenous Film Festival 2017 at SOAS University of London.

*Olosho* is an approximately 16-minute long film which features six community members (four women and two men) from five

villages, representing three different Maasai clans, in Loliondo. Loliondo is an area adjacent to the Kenyan border, the Serengeti National Park, and the Ngorongoro Conservation area. The film discusses and contextualizes the ongoing struggle for land by the Maasai of Loliondo against the Ortello Business Corporation (OBC), a tourism and wildlife hunting company from the UAE which has cooperated with Tanzanian government bodies to seize Maasai land for its business operations through evictions, displacement, and overt violence. Although *Olosho* addresses specifically the 2007 and 2009 evictions by OBC and government forces, OBC has recently launched new attempts to occupy Loliondo and displace Maasai communities, continuing the long history of land grabbing, ecological degradation, and displacement of Maasai people from their lands. In August 2017, local police and park rangers burned 185 *bomas* (Maasai homesteads), rendering 6,800 people homeless. These evictions included harassments, threats, and caused the loss of thousands of livestock while people were forced to pay fines (Lang). In December 2018, two Maasai activists, Supuk Maoi and Clinton Kairung, were detained without bail and after being released a few days later, they were arrested again in January 2019 (IWGIA). These are contemporary snapshots of a history of violence and displacement experienced by the Maasai of Loliondo.

*Olosho*, which is filmed and directed by the Maasai themselves and narrated in their native Maa language, engages a broad audience by addressing other Maasai communities, Tanzanian citizens, the Tanzanian government, and viewers around the globe. The film begins with a scene featuring the six Maasai standing together and facing the camera, whereas one of the women in the front opens the film with the words “Many have spoken for us, now we speak for ourselves. Please listen to our story.” Afterwards, the film employs a variety of scenes showing Maasai narrators reporting and testifying on land grabs in different settings as follows: underneath trees, in front of bomas, or alongside cattle and wider grassland landscapes. In an interview-style manner, the Maasai representatives speak about historical and contemporary land grabs, the experiences of violence and its effects on social and economic systems, aspects of Maasai culture, education, knowledge, and craftsmanship, as well as the need to defend and recover land (see fig. 1). At times, these scenes also show the (Maasai) “interviewer” and “camera(wo)man” by switching to a third



**Figure 1:** Interview Scene.

camera which documents the very process itself of capturing testimonies. In addition to these interview scenes, the camera sometimes captures the grassland ecology of Loliondo and roaming livestock while the Maasai narrate in the background. Around minute seven, the film is interrupted for approximately 45 seconds by written text which provides empirical information on the history of land grabs in Loliondo. Another short interruption occurs just before minute 14, this time reminding the audience that violent evictions are occurring at this very moment. After this second interruption, the film features more shots of the landscape and Maasai community members (see [fig. 2](#)), whereas the Maasai sing



**Figure 2:** Maasai and Maasailand.

in the background, mourning the loss of land and reasserting their commitment to defend it. Ending the film, the camera switches to the six singing Maasai narrators who now stand in unison facing the camera.

My analysis of *Olosho* relies on an interdisciplinary approach that combines decolonial theory and indigenous ecomedia, and their concepts of the coloniality of nature and indigenous ecotestimonies, respectively. Specifically, I understand the film as a collection of ecotestimonies which challenge the coloniality of nature in Loliondo. As such, *Olosho* has radical implications for a decolonized Maasailand, Maasai cosmovisions, social systems, and land sovereignty. Surely, this is not the only way to interpret *Olosho*, and my own reading of the film focuses specifically on its political–ecological dimensions understood through the prism of the coloniality of nature and against the background of Maasai cosmovision. Although *Olosho* is a film specific to the conflict in Loliondo and produced by representatives from this area, the struggle against land grabs by tourism, hunting, conservation, and extractive projects applies to Maasai communities elsewhere (Neumann; Hodgson “Being Maasai”; Homewood). Acknowledging the film’s general insights into Maasai struggles beyond its immediate (spatial and temporal) context for analytical and strategic reasons does not, however, mean that case-specific idiosyncrasies can be overlooked. I begin my analysis by discussing the interconnections of the coloniality of nature and ecotestimonies in the specific context of historical and contemporary colonial projects in Maasailand. I then use this theoretical framework to analyze the ecotestimonies in *Olosho* through three key aspects and interventions. These are as follows: (1) place-based, decolonial, and feminist narration; (2) Maasai cosmovisions and land relations; and (3) decolonizing natures. I then end with a short conclusion.

## The Coloniality of Nature and Ecotestimonies

### The Coloniality of Nature

Decolonial theory (Figuroa-Helland and Lindgren; Grosfoguel “World-Systems”; Lugones; Maldonado-Torres “Outline”; Quijano “Coloniality and”) asserts that Euro-modernity and its championed so-called developments, advancements, progress, and civilization, were only possible due to European colonialism. Euro-modernity is therefore inseparable from the global colonizing project which was inaugurated in 1492 by the conquest of Abya Yala<sup>3</sup> and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. These events have been marked and followed by genocide, ecocide, epistemicide, rape, enslavement, and apartheid. Presently, we

have moved from global colonialism to global coloniality, which describes those colonial systems of oppression, marginalization, and exploitation that have survived the (partial) “decolonization” movements in the Global South and are able to function without formal empires. As such, global coloniality continues to shape and permeate global relations of power, knowledge, and being. It follows that modernity and coloniality are two sides of the same coin and that the “post-colonial world is a myth (Figueroa-Helland and Lindgren).

One dimension of global coloniality is the “coloniality of nature.” It describes the colonial dynamics of knowledge and power contributing to global ecological crises, ecocides, the capitalist re-ordering and appropriation of natures, and the eradication of indigenous<sup>4</sup> cosmovisions that offer alternative relations to the more-than-human (Escobar “Territories,” Ndlovu-Gatsheni “Decolonial”). The coloniality of nature perspective agrees with postcolonial ecocriticism that Eurocentrism and anthropocentrism are inseparable in the context of colonization and that the very concept of “humanity” as well as other Enlightenment and Cartesian dualistic concepts are based on a nonhuman colonial Other (DeLoughrey and Handley; Huggan and Tiffin). To decolonize natures, Escobar (“Territories”) calls for the two-fold project of (1) unveiling the coloniality of nature and its role within Euro-modernity and (2) revitalizing place-based socioecological practices, knowledges, ontologies, and indigenous cosmologies. My analysis of *Olosho* therefore gives particular attention to Maasai cosmovision and spirituality.<sup>5</sup>

In Loliondo, we have a specific manifestation of the coloniality of nature. On the one hand, capitalist pressures to exhaust and destabilize ecologies for a profit are manifested in the tourist occupation which consumes the produced colonial Natures and “pure” esthetics of “primitive” Africa. On the other, these pressures merge with a Global North conservationism which operates on a white liberal environmentalism unable to break with its deep-rooted colonial and racist history, or the Cartesian Nature/Human dualism (Benjaminsen et al., Neumann). This is rooted in the British preservationist movement and its colonial designs, which produced Tanzanian ecologies as “pristine,” “humanless,” “wild,” and “Eden-like” spaces (Neumann). This led to the establishment of “protected areas” such as the Serengeti National Park from which the Maasai in Loliondo were originally displaced (Neumann). Coinciding with this idea of “Primitive Nature” was that of “Primitive Society,” characterized by the British attempt to produce clear and static tribal lines that harmonized with their perception of Nature by undermining the fluidity and “intermixing” of indigenous peoples in the region. Neumann thus concludes that British colonial

preservationism was “at heart [a] [racist] attempt[t] to recast society–nature relations in Africa to fulfill the commercial and esthetic dreams of the European colonizers” (153).

Today, the coloniality of nature in Loliondo manifests itself (among others) through the presence of OBC, which started operating in the region in 1992 when it acquired a hunting license for 400,000 ha of land inhabited by 50,000 Maasai. OBC is connected to the UAE’s royal family, which even has an airstrip in Loliondo for its exclusive use (Oakland Institute). Throughout OBC’s operations and with the help of government forces, the Maasai have witnessed a general lack of consultation, the violation of both formal and informal land rights, widespread killing and abduction of animals, intimidation, detention, and torture, as well as the demolition of villages and displacement of community members (Benjaminsen et al.). Simultaneously, OBC recycles colonial conservation discourses of being “100% for wildlife conservation” and promoting “ethical” and “sustainable” trophy hunting,<sup>6</sup> strikingly illustrating the materiality of the coloniality of nature in Loliondo. Nonetheless, this land encroachment has been met by resistance from Loliondo’s Maasai, who were able to reduce OBC’s official hunting ground to 150,000 ha (Oakland Institute). Moreover, following the most recent wave of violence and displacement during August 2017, Tanzania’s Natural Resource Minister terminated OBC’s contract (Oakland Institute). However, most recent reports suggest that OBC continues to operate in Loliondo<sup>7</sup> (ZephaniaUbwani).

The coloniality of nature centers the gendered dimensions of socioecological degradation and the devaluation, dispossession, and oppression of women. As ecofeminist, indigenous, and decolonial scholars have shown, the mastery of nature and domination of women have gone hand in hand throughout the history of heteropatriarchal capitalism and colonialism and continue to be at the core of global coloniality (Federici; Lugones; Plumwood; Shiva; Wane “Indigenous,” “Mapping”). As Federici observes, “women became the main enemies of colonial rule” (230) and successive colonial, capitalist, and patriarchal projects have systematically undermined women’s social status in indigenous societies in Africa and elsewhere (Wane; Lugones; Federici; Shiva). This status was often one where women occupied central roles as spiritual and political leaders, food producers, and knowledge keepers and was intimately tied to women’s access to land (Federici; Shiva; Simpson; Wane “Indigenous,” “Mapping”). Hodgson (“Once Intrepid”) describes how traditional gender roles for the Maasai were eroded through the British colonial depiction of the Maasai as a bloodthirsty and masculine warrior tribe, which monopolized political power on men. Simultaneously, women were effectively marginalized

and alienated from “Maasai-hood.” The (ongoing) attacks on women’s bodies and social status launched by colonial and capitalist projects also constitute a form of epistemicide that undermines indigenous knowledges and relations to land (Federici; Shiva; L. Simpson; Wane “Indigenous”, “Mapping”). This land–knowledge–gender nexus is pinned down by Leanne Simpson’s assertion that “by far the largest attack on Indigenous Knowledge systems. . . is land dispossession” (21).

### Ecotestimonies

I argue that one strategy to decolonize natures is through indigenous ecotestimonies. According to Finzer, testimonial literature “can be found throughout the world as subaltern texts that contest official versions of oppression, atrocities, and abuse” (3). Questioning hegemonic narratives and their underlying power structures through artistic and creative works can thus generate spaces of witnessing between the narrator(s)/artist(s) and the audience (Finzer). Indigenous testimonies are employed to advance decolonization and indigenous struggles whenever hegemonic accounts of history, truth, and justice are in question (Monani). In Loliondo, testimonies can help to lift the veil of secrecy and uncertainty created by the Tanzanian state and OBC. Although the Tanzanian government has verbally confirmed its support of Loliondo’s Maasai (as discussed in *Olosho*) and officially revoked OBC’s hunting license, it has continuously assisted OBC’s land grabs. Furthermore, reports suggest that OBC still operates in Loliondo today. Testimonial literature can then be a tool toward justice by empowering the storyteller and supporting the processing and expression of traumatic experiences inflicted through colonial, social, and environmental violence. In the case of Loliondo, it also provides a track-record of dominant actors and identifies primary culprits of oppression from an indigenous perspective (Finzer; Monani). Smith identifies “testimonies” as a crucial set of projects within indigenous which promote indigenous goals “such as cultural survival, self-determination, healing, restoration, and social justice” (143). Finzer identifies two waves of literary testimony and ecotestimonies. The first reached its height during the armed conflicts in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s. The second is currently in its early stages and addresses political, systemic, and environmental violence in the Global South more broadly. Speaking on the potential of this second wave, Finzer asserts that

[b]y eulogizing threatened or lost loved ones, land, well-being, and opportunity, ecotestimonies tell a different story about what human communities value. . . [T]hese

stories form a constellation of empowerment and resistance to denial and inaction, connecting otherwise alienated populations to each other. (6)

Hence, ecotestimonies are directed against the colonial dimensions of knowledge and power and the coloniality of nature (Finzer). Ecotestimonies thus bring together the decolonizing natures project demanded by Escobar (“Territories”) and indigenous ecomedia studies which has committed itself to understanding indigenous activism in defense of ecologies, indigenous culture, and land as explicit testimonies (Monani). Here I use indigenous ecomedia studies, building on the work of Adamson, Monani, and Wilson and Stewart, as the study of those nonprint media artifacts which challenge colonial projects and narratives on natures, environments, and ecologies by decisively advancing indigenous politics of survival, healing, recovery, revitalization, sovereignty, autonomy, self-determination, and decolonization/ decoloniality with respect to land, culture, food systems, spirituality, language, and political and economic systems.

A central point of convergence between decolonial theory and indigenous ecomedia studies (and embodied by ecotestimonies) are indigenous cosmovisions. Central to cosmovisions is the idea of a cosmos with interdependent and interconnected living agents and persons (Adamson and Monani). As Adamson and Monani highlight, cosmovisions and cosmopolitics are inseparable from “specific histories, geographies, and contemporary contexts, they are an active means to negotiate the practice of daily survival” (8). Thus, cosmovisions are always “dynamic epistemologies. . . in the process of being interpreted” (8). This constant renegotiation and reinterpretation is grounded in the experiences of historical events, disruptions, and developments and present well-informed and refined strategies for the protection and regeneration of specific natures. The narrators in *Olosho* employ and testify to Maasai cosmovisions in the context of ongoing land grabs and colonial violence. To do justice to this contextualization, my analysis will elaborate on Maasai cosmology in connection with the explicit testimonies of *Olosho*.

### Decolonizing Natures: Ecotestimonies in *Olosho*

In *Olosho*, I identify three interconnected themes that constitute a critique of the coloniality of nature as it is entangled with the capitalist tourism industry, colonial conservationism, and other colonial projects that pose a threat to Maasai land, society, and cosmovision. Conveyed through ecotestimonies which build on the Maasai’s colonial experiences, ancestral practices, and resistance, these themes are as follows: (1)

place-based narration that challenges colonial epistemologies and esthetics; (2) the remembering and practicing of Maasai indigenous cosmopolitanism and land relations which undermines coloniality; and (3) explicit attempts and strategies to decolonize natures.

### Place-based Narration

I argue that the esthetics of *Olosho* challenge various facets of the ongoing colonial projects, including unequal gender relations institutionalized by Christianity, British colonial policies, and the colonial ordering of the Maasai and their ecologies. As such, I find the film's esthetics can be read as "decolonial esthetics" which "acknowledg[e] and subver[t] the presence of colonial power and control in the realm of the senses" (Badger 1).

*Olosho* begins and ends with the images of four Maasai women—one Maasai man joins the opening scene in the background—standing together and addressing the audience. In the opening scene, one of the women introduces the viewer in Maa with the words "Many have spoken for us, now we speak for ourselves. Please listen to our story." In presenting the Maasai women as a united front and as narrators who provide structure and space for the film, this scene challenges the disenfranchisement of women in Maasai society institutionalized through British colonialism. The centering of women in *Olosho* reestablishes women's central status within Maasai society as one of active participation, narration, and the production of knowledge. According to Hodgson ("Once Intrepid" 126), gender relations within Maasai pastoral economies were characterized by distinct responsibilities between men and women, "premised on mutual autonomy and respect" (Hodgson "Once Intrepid" 126). Men and women were equally important for the well-being of the household. For instance, women were often in charge of the production, distribution, and trading of milk and other livestock products such as hides. Additionally, they were responsible for spiritual tasks through prayers and songs (Hodgson "Once Intrepid").<sup>8</sup> The British colonial administration and its quest to (re)order its colonial subjects undermined these gender relations and deteriorated the role of women in Maasai society by (mis)identifying Maasai men as "household heads," "taxpayers," and sole decision-makers in Maasai society. This (mis)identification was based on colonial imaginaries that essentialized and romanticized "wild" and "barbaric" Maasai masculinities, (male) pastoralism, and warriorhood, which effectively denied and excluded women from what it meant to "be Maasai" (Hodgson "Once Intrepid").

The display of Maasai femininity at the beginning of *Olosho* further mirrors Maasai cosmology and origin stories. According to Floyd (78), in Maasai spirituality the primary deity, *Eng'ai*, represents the divine “mythical bipolar historical focus.” This means that Maasai stories either convey the notion of two oppositional gods or one single god personifying both anger and malevolence (associated with the color red) or kindness and lovingness (associated with black) as well as femaleness and maleness. Hodgson (“Maasai”) however observes that *Eng'ai* is usually identified with the feminine and seen primarily as a feminine entity, as the creator and nurturer of life on Earth, the beginning of everything, and associated with rain, sky, wetness, darkness, motherhood, growth, femaleness, and fertility: for instance, “*Noompees*, (‘She of the growing grasses’) and *Yieyio nashal inkilani* (‘My mother with the wet clothes’)” (Hodgson “Maasai” 1016). It follows that although male ritual leaders exist, the mediation between *Eng'ai* and the Maasai is primarily the responsibility of Maasai women (Hodgson “Maasai”).<sup>9</sup> Beginning (and ending) *Olosho* with the women in the foreground thus not only reinforces Maasai cosmologies and remembers the central role and spiritual significance of femininity, but also counters Eurocentric narrations and knowledge production, which usually hides its (male) locus of enunciation under the guise of “objectivity” and “universality.” In contrast, through *Olosho*’s use of direct shots of the narrators, we can see who speaks, from where, and with what intention.

In the closing scene, where the same (mostly) women perform a Maasai song/dance which addresses the significance of land for the Maasai from Loliondo and the threats posed by foreign land grabs, femininity as bearer of knowledge is centered as well. This dance/song performance gains further significance when considering that songs in Maasai culture are usually employed to particular ends, adjusted to specific experiences and struggles, and used to address something or someone who is communally valued (Floyd). Together, the opening and closing scenes thus frame the testimonies and stories of *Olosho* within femininity and women as narrators, knowledge producers, and overall mediators of Maasai spirituality and human–land relations.

Throughout *Olosho*, all interviews and stories take place on Maasai territory, including grasslands, water points, villages, and huts, and in the presence of nonhuman animals and other Maasai community members. The emphasis here is put on the interconnection of the Maasai and land. In other words, storytelling, knowledge production, and narration cannot happen separately from the land, which confirms DeLoughrey and Handley’s assertion that “histories embedded in the land... have always provided vital and dynamic methodologies for

understanding the transformative impact of empire and the anticolonial epistemologies it tries to suppress" (4). It is this land-centered methodology based on which the Maasai testify against colonial land grabs. Against the historical background of invasion, displacement, occupation, and encroachment, depicting the Maasai as the sole presence on Maasailand subverts the various colonial projects that sought to extract from, conserve, or develop Maasai ecologies.

Moreover, many of the film scenes include microphones and video cameras as tools to record the testimonies. Using these tools, which are usually associated with modernity or "Western-ness," and employing them for the Maasai cause, does two things. Firstly, it transcends the colonial binary of the "modern" and the "primitive," a central ordering theme of modernity/coloniality. Repeatedly, the Maasai have been forced to fit colonial imaginaries that attempted to either push them toward a fabricated "hyper-traditionalism" or "develop" and "modernize" them (Neumann). The esthetics of *Olosho* disrupt these categorizations and ordering systems by featuring "modern" tools in tandem with "Maasai-ness." Monani points out that this is part of a broader theme within indigenous ecomedia that seeks to decolonize colonial perceptions of the "static" and "hypertraditionalized" native: "As a variety of Indigenous media scholars have written, using modernity's tools while respecting traditional ways speaks powerfully to the dynamism of Indigenous culture" (288). Second, this self-created transmodern space is used by the Maasai to address and communicate socioecological, anticolonial, and indigenous struggles.

Furthermore, the way in which the camera and microphones are used as part of *Olosho's* esthetics indicates a clear break with the "god-eyed point zero" of Eurocentric narration. Specifically, in addition to landscape images or shots of the Maasai within the landscape during narration, some scenes are shot from a third camera, depicting the Maasai camera(wo)man filming the interviewee. Other scenes show two Maasai (women) asking each other questions about land grabs and Maasai relations to land, which reestablishes them as legitimate holders of ecological (and political) knowledge. These two types of scenes explicitly show who is creating the images and structuring the conversation. The decoloniality of these practices cannot be overstated, especially since the Maasai have been historically neglected or excluded both from speaking for and about themselves, and from engaging in critical discussions. On a broader level, the explicit locus of enunciation does not try to aspire to the approved patterns and frames of knowledge production that value perceived "objectivity" and "universality," but places itself within a specific socioecological context.

From this context, the Maasai narrators explicitly demand solidarity and project their struggle onto a global platform where it joins the multiple other indigenous challenges to the modern/colonial world-system. This also has the effect that the relations of power and responsibility between the narrators and the audience are made explicit. As such, the Maasai prompt other Tanzanians, the Tanzanian state, and the global community to take action:

*[scene showing two women sitting on rocks on the ground]*  
 (Maasai) woman I<sup>10</sup>: *What message do you have for the government, given we have struggled for so long?*  
 (Maasai) woman II: *The message I would give all Tanzanians is: Stand with us. Ask the president to secure our land rights.*

*[scene showing a woman inside a Maasai village]*  
 Woman: *I am asking the government to acknowledge us as Tanzanians. We have not migrated from anywhere else.*

*[scene showing a woman and a man in the landscape]*  
 (Maasai) man responding to the Tanzanian President's tweet promising to protect Maasai land: *Writing on machines is not enough. It must be in a visible, binding document. . . Our fingers helped put you in power, don't use that power to oppress us.*

*[scene showing two women sitting on rocks on the ground]*  
 Woman: *I am appealing to the whole world: If our land is taken, our culture will be threatened and confused. We cannot lose our culture. Our culture is what makes us Maasai. I ask the whole world to stand with us: Push our government to guarantee our land, livelihood, and culture.*

Taking into account the Maasai experiences with different colonial administrations (German and British), these demands signify more than a request of support and goodwill, but an implicit shift of responsibility and reparations to the dominant forces in Loliondo, both past and present. Therefore, by envisioning a multilevel understanding of change and decolonization, and a broad and diverse audience which is structurally interconnected with and tied to the Loliondo struggle, *Olosho* demands a response by those who watch it. This response must challenge global colonial power relations on multiple levels and through diverse means. Here, the ecotestimonies create a space of witnessing for the audience where new forms of evidence and remembering are presented, while also highlighting the urgency and call for

action inherent to literary testimony (Finzer). Once again, as these demands are made primarily by Maasai women, the audience witnesses that those testifying and remembering on behalf of Maasai culture, identity, and land (i.e., representatives of Maasai indigeneity) are not primarily Maasai men as suggested by colonial imaginaries of Maasai society. This global space of witnessing is generated through the film's English subtitles which translate the testimonies from Maa to English. Although translation has been used historically in service of colonial projects, I suggest that in *Olosho* the subtitles become what Vázquez calls *translations as struggle*: a struggle that aims at tearing down modernity's epistemic borders and monopoly over meaning-making, and a struggle to communicate truths and experiences which challenge modernity's epistemic universe. Translation in *Olosho* might thus be better understood along the lines of Subcomandante Marcos' proposal for an intercontinental network of resistance and communication which "attempt[s] to create channels so that words may flow to all paths that resist" (117). Put differently, the translation in *Olosho* is aimed at mobilizing leftist sectors of civil society globally in support of the Maasai struggle in Loliondo.

In summary, the esthetics and ecotestimonies in *Olosho* become decolonial because they offer an alternative form of storytelling and knowledge production by subverting colonial relations of knowledge and power. Moreover, *Olosho's* form of narration is inseparably tied to the land from which the Maasai speak and from which they refuse to be evicted. Resisting colonial evictions, *Olosho* also remembers noncolonial gender relations and Maasai cosmovision by centering Maasai women and femininity. *Olosho's* esthetics and ecotestimonies therefore highlight that decolonizing knowledge, power, nature, and gender go hand in hand. Put differently, although women in Maasai culture are central to the production of knowledge and the caretaking and interacting with the more-than-human world, decolonized natures are essential to (re-)establish decolonial gender relations and prosperous ecosystems through appropriate, place-based epistemologies.

### Maasai Cosmovision and Relations to Land

I find that the defense of Maasai spirituality and cosmovision constitutes a second theme expressed through the ecotestimonies and the specific acts of remembering, which serve as tools to address epistemic injustices as well as the colonial land grabs, invasions, and ecological degradation witnessed on Maasai territory. According to Hodgson ("Maasai"), in Maasai spirituality *Eng'ai* resides and is one with the sky and cosmos, while forming unity with *enkop* (land or Earth). This

relationship is reciprocal and emphasizes dependency: “Together, Eng’ai and humans, the Sky and Earth, created and nurtured life; there was a necessary unity and complementarity between them” (1016). Central to Maasai cosmivision is thus the relation to land as expressed through spiritual practices as well as political and economic systems that have been maintained and upheld despite colonial interventions: “Nature and its elements have been and remain central to Maasai religion, even as Maasai lives and livelihoods have changed in response to colonialism, nationalism, development interventions, Christian evangelization, education and other processes” (Hodgson “Maasai” 1016). To be clear, this does in no way mean that Maasai cosmivision have somehow remained “pure” or “untouched” by modernity or colonialism. Instead, following Escobar’s (“Beyond”) analysis of coloniality, Maasai cosmivisions are part of modernity’s produced exteriority, identified and rendered as part of modernity’s nonmodern Other. From this otherized position, Maasai cosmivisions can be engaged with as a potentially disruptive force to modernity/coloniality.

In Maasai cosmivision, the realms of culture, animals, humans, life, and “everything” are interconnected and inseparable. A disturbance in one realm inevitably effects the quality and well-being of the others. This interconnectedness is testified and remembered in *Olosho*:

*[scene showing Loliondo landscape, livestock and Maasai community members]*

*Man: “In our lives, three things are inseparable: land, animals, and people.”*

*[scene showing woman standing in front of a boma]*

*Woman: “In our culture, three things are inseparable: land, animals, and people.”*

*[scene showing Loliondo landscape]*

*Man: “The land is carrying everything; trees, rocks, water-everything. Land is the foundation of life, it holds everything together, animals, people, and culture. Losing the land would mean losing everything. We would rather die than have our land taken.”*

*[scene showing Loliondo landscape and livestock]*

*Man: “We are pastoralists, our way of life depends on the land.”*

These ecotestimonies represent acts of subversion to the coloniality of nature that is embodied within the Tanzanian tourist industry in Loliondo. They resist the epistemicidal tendencies of the coloniality of nature which abides by a Eurocentric scientific epistemology, the Cartesian dualisms, and the mastery of nonhuman natures by offering alternative understandings of human–land relations. This resistance extends to the realm of power as well since they challenge the multiple oppressive land grabs and tourist invasions that destabilize Maasai cosmovision and culture.

This alternative understanding of human-land relations is exemplified by the association of trees, mountains, shrubs, and grasses with *Eng'ai* and their embeddedness within Maasai cosmovision as they served as spiritual and educational sites and as sources of food and medicine. The voices in *Olosho* reinforce this interconnectedness by discussing how specific sacred sites are used for cultural education and youth training. For example, certain mountains are seen as inhabited by *Eng'ai* including *Oldoinyo Orok* (the “Black Mountain” — now Mt. Meru), which is identified as her home (Hodgson “Maasai”). Furthermore, grass symbolizes peace and welcome, whereas milk and cattle are associated with fertility and femininity (Hodgson “Maasai”). Both cattle and the grasslands of Loliondo are frequently depicted in *Olosho* (and often shown together) while the narrators report in the background. These depictions represent the land as a peaceful and welcoming place that is hospitable to life, contrasting this sacredness with the exploitative land grabs of OBC and the violence committed by private security guards and government forces. Further, the depiction of grasslands, which often stretch into the horizon, can be interpreted as the re-assertion of the connection between Loliondo’s Maasai and their original homelands, the Serengeti (National Park), which in Maa language translates to “the place where the land runs on forever” or “endless plains” (Oakland Institute).

Spiritual meaning was also embedded within the Maasai color systems and tied to nonhuman elements and weather phenomena (Hodgson “Maasai”). As part of *Eng'ai*’s creation, especially domesticated animals were to be treated with respect. Although nondomesticated animals such as the great herds of wildebeest and zebra were not to be hunted, it was especially domesticated animals who were often seen as persons and distinguished by name (Hodgson “Maasai”). In *Olosho*, this relation between domesticated animals and humans is emphasized frequently by discussing the centrality of animals in Maasai culture beyond their value as a food source. Cattle and goats are frequently depicted grazing in herds on the grasslands, around waterholes, and in villages as well as with the Maasai, who are mostly

engaging in herding activities. In one scene, we see a goat being held in the arms of a Maasai man standing in front of the camera. In addition to illustrating and discussing the relation between Maasai culture and domesticated animals, *Olosho* also challenges the coloniality of nature in Loliondo based on Eurocentric conservationist and preservationist narratives which often portray the Maasai as potential threats to the aesthetic value of wildlife. Undomesticated animals such as giraffes and ostriches are shown throughout the film and complemented by explicit testimonies:

*[scenes showing Maasai herders and livestock as well as giraffes]*

“For generations we have protected all of the animals in our territory.”

*[scene showing man sitting in front of bushes]*

Man: “The companies are now trying to divide us with their money. They want to conquer us completely. We are not the ones killing wild animals, we don’t endanger the environment. That is why tourists flock to our territories.”

Here, the Maasai testify against the misleading discourses promoted by Tanzania’s tourism industry and in favor of their ancestral practices of animal stewardship and interconnectedness embedded within Maasai cosmivision. As such, the Maasai’s relationship with *Eng’ai* was mediated through nonhuman natures and the focus of spiritual life is on nurturing the complementary relationship between *Eng’ai* and humans (Cosmos/Sky and Earth) in the present: “[s]ince Maasai had no concept of the afterlife, they focused on leading good and holy (*sinnyati*) lives in the present so that *Eng’ai* would be pleased and bless them with good health, children and cattle” (Hodgson “Maasai” 1018). However, this relationship is undermined by the land encroachments, land grabs, ecological degradation, and occupation promoted by colonial projects. As a result, the Maasai cosmivision is increasingly losing its physical and more-than-human spaces and therefore struggles to survive (Hodgson “Maasai”).

### **Decolonizing Natures**

Defending their land against these processes and projects, the Maasai have employed different strategies and tactics of resistance and survival over time, which vary across specific cases. For instance, as German and British colonialism, Maasai used defiance, through the irregular crossing of the Tanzania–Kenya border to access different

grazing areas and favorable market conditions (Homewood). Throughout their struggles to access these ancestral lands, there have been several, sometimes deadly, physical confrontations with state authorities. Another mode of resistance employed by some Maasai communities, including those residing in and around the Amboseli National Park (Kenya), is the killing of wildlife in national parks and conservation areas, which represent forms of disruption and sabotage against the tourist industry which is responsible for land grabs as well as the colonial conservationism that underpins its presence (Homewood). These strategies can be interpreted as direct attacks against lasting colonial imaginaries of natures in Maasailand and their erosion of Maasai autonomy and self-determination.

More specific to the Maasai in Loliondo, global publicity, communication, and media campaigns such as *Olosho* has been a primary strategy. Although this is useful to mobilize international support and increase pressure on the Tanzanian state, it can also contribute to the recovery, remembering, and revitalization of indigenous practices, spiritualities, and value systems, and testify to resistance and resilience. This is also the case with *Olosho* which demonstrates Maasai practices and land relations that differ fundamentally from the coloniality of nature and thus contributes to their survival<sup>11</sup>. These signify practices of defiance toward colonial relations to nature and form the historical base from which Maasai ecologies can be decolonized:

*[scene showing a woman standing in the landscape]*

“We are not moving from this land because it is ours.”

*[scene showing two women sitting on rocks on the ground]*

Woman I: “Why do you have to defend this land?”

Woman II: “We defend it because we know it is the foundation of everything. Our ancestors lived and were buried here. Our settlements, schools, water sources are all here. The land is everything we own.”

*[shot of man standing in landscape]*

Man: “People have given their lives to protect it [the land], yet we still cannot find peace. We have sought help at different times, in vain. Now we have no choice but to fight.”

In light of this ongoing struggle across Maasailand, Goldman calls for the acknowledgement of the Maasai’s historical accounts of colonialism and land grabbing: “History matters, but what gets considered legitimate history also matters” (67). The esthetics and ecotestimonies in

*Olosho* are significant pieces of evidence and witnessing of the ongoing colonial projects in Loliondo as well as the challenge posed by the Maasai against the coloniality of nature. The testimonies in *Olosho* remember the land grabs and displacement processes by British colonial conservationism and its Eurocentric vision of African natures. Moreover, they connect to the current wave of land dispossession by the tourism industry, forming an overall narrative that allows the viewer to witness the ongoing dimensions of coloniality:

*[multiple scenes showing Maasai herders, livestock, and landscape]*

Man: "We, the Maasai of Loliondo, were evicted from our ancestral land in what is now known as Serengeti National Park. Since that time, we have struggled for our land rights."

*[scenes showing a waterhole with livestock and children]*

Woman: "We are denied access to our clean water by the foreign companies. This is a man-made dam and as you can see, the water is dirty and unfit for human consumption. We cannot get clean water anymore. Now it's only the so-called 'investors' who have access to our clean water. This is the way we are forced to live here in Loliondo."

*[scene showing man sitting in front of bushes]*

Man: "The Maasai are not against investors, but we will not tolerate companies stealing our land."

Based on this decolonial testifying, the Maasai in *Olosho* propose and call for several strategies of indigenous and anticolonial resistance and solutions to the planetary ecological crises. Specifically, they discuss the cultural and ecological significance of their ancestral houses, which the Tanzanian government does not recognize as legitimate settlements. I argue that this discussion offers an alternative discourse on the role of the Maasai and their construction skills and knowledges within environmental protection that opposes colonial ideals of conservation, wildlife protection, and ecotourism:

*[scene showing three women sitting and talking inside a boma, then camera switches to show women building a boma]*

Woman I: "Outsiders say our houses are low-quality, but what do you think is the environmental impact of our traditional houses?"

Woman II: "Our houses are vital to our culture, but they have no environmental impact. Others cut the whole tree to make a house whilst we use only branches. Others cut many trees to fire house bricks. . . This house is made by women's hands only."

Woman I: "These are the houses we build which represent our culture. We build by hand and without nails."  
*[scene showing woman inside a Maasai village]*

Woman: "These are the Maasai houses that our government refuses to recognize."

These ecotestimonies highlight that the Maasai are active agents in environmental protection themselves by rejecting the intervention of colonial understandings of conservation. This mode of environmental caretaking explicitly undermines Eurocentric strategies by putting into question colonial perceptions of the "primitive" and "underdeveloped" Maasai that have "low-quality" houses. Moreover, given that the above testimonies are provided exclusively by Maasai women, they also contain a challenge against patriarchal dominance in top-down environmental movements and colonial administrations and interventions. The protector of land and nature in *Olosho* is not the European conservationist, nor the international tourist, nor the Tanzanian state, but the Maasai woman who acts through Maasai traditional systems to address the global ecological crises. This illustrates how decolonizing gender and ecologies go hand in hand through the revitalization of indigenous social and political systems. On an esthetic level, the Maasai houses also suggest a resistance against the displacement and land dispossession through colonial projects as they represent a claiming of place and grounding of the Maasai in their land.

In sum, the scenes that center on the traditional Maasai houses challenge (1) perceptions of primitivism, underdevelopment, and environmental destructiveness of the Maasai; (2) top-down strategies of development and conservationism based on the coloniality of nature; (3) patriarchal gender norms and the ecological crises; and (4) the history of land grabs, eviction, and displacement of the Maasai. Once again, together these challenges place Maasai remembering, narration, and knowledge front and center of decolonization and decoloniality.

As part of this decolonizing project, the narrators draw attention to the divide-and-rule strategies of the tourist companies that threaten to undermine Maasai solidarity and resistance. These strategies, whereby colonial forces seek collaboration with and “consent” from easily corrupted “community representatives” to legitimize their occupying presences are not new. Instead, they are old conquering tactics that have been used to steal land from indigenous peoples around the globe. In *Olosho*, the calls for unity and solidarity attempt to dismantle and oppose such advances:

[close-up shot of man]

Man: “They are using new tactics against us. Their latest strategy is to divide and rule. Now two groups have formed: one group who continue to fight for the land, another who have joined the land-grabbers.”

Man: “Our unity is our strength. We must find ways to recover our land.”

In a 21st century that is marked by a new scramble for Africa’s natures (Frame), this call for unity is more important than ever. For Maasailand, it demands reconciliation and the recovery of territorial unity, sovereignty, and self-determination by peeling back the multiple layers of division, both epistemic (deconstructing the coloniality of nature) and physical (expelling the capitalist tourism industry and state domination). Extrapolating this call for unity to a broader context, it can be interpreted as a push for solidarity among indigenous people globally, whereby indigenous films, ecomedia, and film festivals represent a powerful platform to build alliances (Monani).

## Conclusion

In this essay, I have offered an interdisciplinary interpretation of the Maasai film *Olosho*, which testifies to the configurations of land struggles in Loliondo and their relation to the coloniality of nature by prompting the audience to be witness to Maasai ecotestimonies. Specifically, I have examined the critiques and proposals in *Olosho* through the interconnected aspects of place-based, feminist, and decolonial narration, Maasai cosmovisions and land relations, and strategies to decolonize natures. Collectively, these themes contribute to the decoloniality of nature in Loliondo and work toward restoring Maasai land tenure and sovereignty, community and gender systems, and nonhuman natures. As such, *Olosho* is part of the global movement to revitalize indigenous systems and recover indigenous sovereignty through decolonization which is fundamentally geared toward

corroding global coloniality and other forms of colonialism (e.g. settler colonialism). The paths to achieve this are pluricentric and must dethrone Eurocentric perspectives to move toward decolonization and decoloniality. To do so, we must seriously support the struggles of indigenous peoples globally and recognize their indispensable contributions to a pluriversal collection of alternatives to colonial natures and ecologies by proposing and practicing new solutions, worlds, and futures. *Olosho* contributes to such a collection and serves as example for Iheka's recent insistence that "many African societies, despite their complexities and differences, are drawn to an ethics of the earth-[they] posit a relationship to the environment that differs from the commodification of life that predominates in the hypercapitalist global economy" (7–8). Such ethics of the earth are now more important than ever.

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#### N O T E S

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BRvRRxoDggQ> (Accessed August 27, 2019).

2. For further collaborative projects between InsightShare and Maasai communities see, for instance, the Living Cultures Initiative (<https://insightshare.org/network/>), and reflections on participatory video and land issues (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fc4577JsB9M>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eKaptFVuz8s>).

3. *Abya Yala* is the indigenous Kuna term for what is now known as "the Americas" (Figueroa-Helland).

4. My use of "indigenous" (struggles, cosmologies, cosmovisions, knowledges, and practices) throughout this article is based on Figueroa-Helland and Raghú's definition of indigeneity as "a plexus of worldviews, knowledges, practices and communal lifeways that advances decolonial and non/post-anthropocentric alternatives to the ecological crisis of civilization" (2).

5. My engagement with Maasai cosmovision is to provide a decolonial analytical framework rather than a romantic generalization suggesting that all Maasai practice it in this way.

6. These statements were made on OBC's Twitter account ([https://twitter.com/obc\\_tanzania?lang=en](https://twitter.com/obc_tanzania?lang=en)) (Accessed August 27, 2019).

7. This was confirmed by the author during a research trip to Northern Tanzania in 2019.

8. This is not to say that precolonial Maasai societies were free of patriarchal tendencies (Hodgson "Once Intrepid").

9. Although many have observed this centrality of femininity and womanhood in Maasai culture and cosmology, Hodgson's ("Once Intrepid")

research highlights that gender inequalities is a serious issue and can be to no small extent be traced back to colonial policies that focused on the hyper-masculine figure of the “Maasai warrior.”

10. Although we are not given the names of the six narrators, the viewer of the film is able to recognize and identify the narrators in the interview-style scenes, establishing a familiarity and connection between the audience and the narrators. Further, throughout this article I identify the narrators through their perceived gender in order to visibilize women’s narration and claims to “Maasai-ness.”

11. The continued maintenance of indigenous socio-ecological practices such as traditional grazing systems, risk-spreading strategies, pastoral production systems, and egalitarian social relations have also been discussed by Homewood.

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