

Scott Kloeck-Jenson Pre-Dissertation Travel Report (2008)
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Thanks to the support of the Scott Kloeck-Jenson Pre-Dissertation Travel Grant, in the summer of 2008 I was able to travel to southern Kenya with three primary goals. First, I wanted to begin to explore whether and how Kenyan nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the communities they served expressed indigenous identity. Second I was interested in learning about how these organizations interacted with each other. And finally, I hoped to identify a field site where I could conduct my dissertation research. I was especially interested in exploring indigenous identity in Africa because some African governments claim that all black Africans are indigenous people and refuse to recognize particular ethnic groups, such as the Maasai, as indigenous people. However, at the international level, these groups are recognized as indigenous people and invited to take part in conferences on indigenous peoples' rights. In order to answer my questions and I spent two months visiting four Maasai NGOs, each for at least a week, speaking with representatives of numerous other NGOs, and visiting and speaking with community members about the issues and challenges they are facing and their involvement and awareness of the indigenous peoples' rights community.

Overall, I found that very few people were familiar with international understandings of indigenous peoples. In part, this was an issue of translation, as I was unable to find a Maasai word that would be equivalent to 'indigenous'. Those who were familiar with the term were typically high level staff of Maasai organizations. These people explained to me that the Maasai were indigenous because they maintained their traditional culture. This contrasted with international understandings of indigenous peoples, which tended to emphasize three characteristics. In addition to maintaining cultural differences, indigenous peoples are described as the aboriginal inhabitants of a territory, and as peoples who are subject to political marginalization. In Kenya where it is difficult to claim to be the first on the land, especially after colonial treaties moved many Maasai people, culture may offer the most secure way to claim indigenesness.

Most of the people familiar with the international concept of indigenous peoples had at least some college level education and had participated in international indigenous conferences, including conferences on biodiversity and climate change and the annual sessions of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. Organization staff explained that attending international meetings allowed them to make contacts with people who helped them both with fundraising and by increasing their visibility through publications. Others pointed out that they only attended when these meetings furthered their own interests. In addition to attending meetings, nearly every program I visited had at some point received financial support from Western organizations interested in indigenous peoples. So, even if they weren't active in the international indigenous community at the moment, well-developed and successful groups at least had a history of involvement.

Interestingly, though these organizational "experts" were familiar with the international meaning of 'indigenous', often their family members and even lower level staff of the organizations were less familiar with the concept. When I explained what the international community usually meant by 'indigenous peoples,' people usually exclaimed that they shared those characteristics. They were certainly aware of being

politically marginalized and exploited, expressing concerns about many of the same things as other indigenous peoples. People were very concerned about losing their land to non-Maasai people. Loss of land usually meant a change in lifestyle not only for the people selling land, but also for their neighbors. People were also concerned with the way their cultural heritage was used by non-Maasai groups to make money, especially through tourism. People argued that their clothes, jewelry, and customs belonged to them and that other people shouldn't use them to make money without giving money to the Maasai. They also grappled with conservation programs in Kenya. Everywhere people wanted more control and more direct benefits from conservation and tourism. Some people argued the Maasai were natural conservationists, explaining that all the major national parks were in their territory. Other people had very negative attitudes toward conservation, primarily because they saw the government making money from national parks that drew tourists while the Maasai people had to live with wildlife that occasionally destroyed livestock and crops.

One of the things I found most interesting was that in villages close to Nairobi, people were turning to conservation strategies as a way to protect their land in anticipation of the expansion of the Nairobi. People were concerned about losing land to speculators in ways that would reduce land plots and change land use practices, making keeping livestock more difficult for Maasai people. The local NGO was collaborating with Kenya Wildlife Services to create plans that would protect wildlife and promote Maasai lifestyles. This strategy, I think, raises interesting questions about the ways in which people think about themselves and their lifestyles in contrast to those around them.

Thanks to the Scott Kloeck-Jenson pre-dissertation travel grant, I was able to travel to southern Kenya and learn more about how Maasai people and NGOs relate to the international indigenous rights community. Being able to travel to visit groups in different regions was especially useful as it helped me learn about the ways groups in different areas were grappling with diverse problems and interacting with each other differently. I was also able to learn that most community members do not explicitly express their identities in terms of indigenesness and that most NGOs draw on this identity selectively, primarily when interacting with the international community. Thanks to this opportunity, I have been able to sharpen my focus on the particular rights issues with which NGOs and community members alike are concerned. Specifically, I plan to further explore what Maasai community members and NGO staff living near Nairobi think about urban expansion and how they choose strategies to either resist or control that expansion. Without the opportunity to visit Kenya and talk to Maasai people about how they identify themselves and what challenges they face, it would have been impossible for me to know that this particular issue was something of concern. Thus, this experience has provided me with knowledge and contacts in the country that have increased my understanding of important issues for indigenous peoples in the country and continue to help me sharpen the focus of my dissertation. I am very grateful that Mr. and Mrs. Jenson and the Center for Global Studies provided me with such an opportunity.