Live from the pastures: Maasai YouTube protest videos

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Abstract
While much attention has turned to new and social media as tools to facilitate democratic participation, little attention has been paid to the ways that these tools are used by rural and nomadic communities. In this article, I examine the ways that Maasai pastoral-nomads are utilizing YouTube to present evidence of eviction, hunger, and other threats to their communities. I explore how the Maasai are using new and social media to engage and create communicative networks which both advance their protests and enrich our study of international communication.

Keywords
deliberation, international communication, Maasai, protest, social media, Tanzania, YouTube

Introduction
Throughout Eastern Africa, communities have increasing levels of access to the Internet, social media, and digital tools made possible through improved cellular networks and digital infrastructures (Chachage, 2010; Musitwa, 2012). Capitalizing this increase of technological access, pastoral-nomadic communities such as the Maasai of Tanzania and Kenya are participating in new and emergent online communities, calling into question historic networks of power, communication, and technology (Dyson and Underwood, 2006). In this study, I am interested in the ways that new and social media such as YouTube are reforming the networks of communication between the Maasai and the Tanzanian national government.

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Conceptualizing the Maasai’s deep relationship with social media would require an analysis beyond the space constraints of this article. This article draws attention to one aspect of this phenomenon, the production and distribution of protest videos by Maasai communities. These videos point not only to a new body of protest literature but also to the barriers that emerge in contemporary scholarship investigating pastoral-nomadic use of new media and technology and the ways social media is impacting local and national governance (Sobaci, 2014). While significant work has been done in the ways that protesters and citizen journalists utilize YouTube to spark public deliberation (Antony and Thomas 2010; Soukup, 2014), these studies frequently focus on settled communities. Problematically, settled scholars may read pastoral-nomadic communities’ use of new and social media as a desire or expectation of settlement (Khazanov, 1984). For example, one of the few communicative studies of the Maasai, Fraser et al.’s (2012) article in the *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, describes the utility of photo-voice to enable Maasai women to articulate their experiences with development and social-change. Such study methodology and framing is representative of current rhetorical scholarship concerning pastoral-nomads that divides the needs of communities into women’s groups, development projects, or education programming. While such study is informative, it risks neglecting the complex and often competing articulations and emergent trends of pastoral-nomadic communicative networks. Fraiser et al. indicate that new media provides new pathways for engagement; however, those pathways are still reliant on the scholar or development worker as mediator and interpreter of the text. In this study, I propose conceptualizing the Maasai community’s use of social media such as YouTube as evidence of a community’s leap beyond Western mediation toward the community production and distribution of their own arguments and protests.

Central to this leap is the question of access to and use of new and social media. Do the Maasai have access to the requisite technology? Is their access equitable? Is it even possible to use these tools while maintaining a pastoral-nomadic lifestyle? Some studies suggest that the emergence of new and social media tools will assist the community, which is ‘transitioning from a nomadic patriarchal polygamous society to one that is more democratic, non-nomadic, and formally educated’ (Fraser et al., 2012: 20). While technological transition is indeed occurring, Fraser et al. risk buying into the Tanzanian government’s expectation of settlement (Ndaskoi, 2005, 2011) which I argue is not a necessary precondition of technological use. It is possible, and indeed evident, that pastoral-nomadic communities such as the Maasai are using mobile sources of energy (solar, batteries, and generators) to power mobile technologies (cell phones and laptops), thus combining technological advances with traditional pastoral-nomadic patterns (Aderinoye et al., 2007; Chatty, 2013; Mareeg, 2014). This means that the once clear divisions between the settled, technological societies and mobile, archaic societies are becoming less tenable.

The infrastructure for Maasai use of new and social media has long been established in Tanzania. By 2005, more than 97% of Tanzanians had access to cellular phones, radically changing networks of communication and power throughout the country and the East African region (Owiny et al., 2014: 240). A frequent advertisement meme in East Africa is of Maasai community members utilizing cell phones in the most remote areas of the
country. These advertisements produce the enthymeme – even the Maasai have cell phone coverage. Using trans-national cellular networks, coupled with access to electric generators or using solar technology, Maasai community members are able to call, text, and email from their pasture lands. This does not mean that each Maasai community member has her own cellular phone or can afford endless bandwidth. Technological inequities exist in Maasai communities – just as in all human communities. However, it would be a misnomer to assume that Maasai communities are unaware or unskilled in the use of new and social media. When I conducted interviews in Narok, Kenya, and Arusha, Tanzania, in 2013, interviewees indicated that these technological developments have allowed more Maasai voices, often unauthorized by either the state or community elders, to emerge in public spheres. As in many communities, these emergent communicative networks among the Maasai produce new deliberations regarding communality, authenticity, experience, and leadership. These new networks open space, as well as questions, for academics analyzing emergent discourse and protest among rural and pastoral-nomadic communities. Put another way, they produce a new digital memory which illuminates the cultural frictions of modernity (Reading, 2014). In what follows, I examine Maasai protests that have been recorded and distributed via YouTube. In this examination, I am interested in Maasai protest tactics that employ social media to place pressure on the Tanzanian government to preserve Maasai traditions and lands. This analysis aims to advance new understandings of how pastoral-nomads such as the Maasai are framing themselves as citizens, participants, resisters, and outliers of a rapidly globalizing nation. Following this analysis, I argue that a complex understanding of the dueling embodied subjectivities at play in these constructions is critical to understanding the ways that modern Maasai communities are engaging in online deliberation while defending and defining their traditional culture.

Why protest?

Maasai communities in northern Tanzania face a plethora of pressures from their national government, international development agencies, and private investors to settle and give up their traditional herding and migration practices. At stake is the international reputation of Tanzania – which wants to be seen as a developed nation but has difficulty promoting that image while acknowledging pastoral-nomadic communities such as the Maasai (Ndaskoi, 2005). Also at stake are Maasai traditional grazing lands, which once included the Serengeti and Ngorongoro National parks, now a primary driver for the Tanzanian tourism economy (Homewood et al., 2012).

Historically, the German and British colonial governments asserted that the Maasai did not occupy their traditional lands, could not prove continual occupation, or that they were misusing that land. Utilizing this argument, colonial governments appropriated Maasai lands and forcibly evicted the Maasai (Hughes, 2006). Today, the prevalence of new and social media, coupled with the comparative ease of encountering Maasai communities, has made it difficult for governments and corporations to claim that the land is unoccupied or underutilized. Instead, the rhetorical expectation has become that the Maasai will soon modernize and give up their pastoral-nomadic lifestyle. This expectation was expressed by President Jakaya Kikwete in his 2005 inaugural address:
Mr. Speaker, we must abandon altogether nomadic pastoralism which makes the whole country pastureland … The cattle are bony and the pastoralists are sacks of skeletons. We cannot move forward with this type of pastoralism in the twenty first century. (Ndaskoi, 2011: 4)

Maasai activists have pointed to the government’s expectation that pastoralism will end as evidence of a direct threat against their community. Such threats are not new; Ndaskoi, a member of the Tanzanian-based Pastoralists Indigenous non-governmental organization (PINGO), has collected this and other similar statements by Kikwete’s government to demonstrate an intentional governmental plan to develop a frame of expected eviction of pastoralists in Tanzania (Hahn, 2013).’ Historic evictions occurred to establish farms, railways, and state projects (Hodgson, 2011; Hughes, 2006). Today, evictions are occurring to create and expand tourism facilities around the Serengeti and Ngorongoro National parks (Ndebele, 2012).

In this study, I focus on the Loliondo Valley, a region adjacent to the Ngorongoro Crater visited by approximately 450,000 tourists each year (Akyoo and Nkwame, 2014). The Ngorongoro Conservation Area (NCA) was created at the same time as the Serengeti National Park. However, unlike the Serengeti, Maasai communities are allowed to live and graze their herds within the Ngorongoro. Despite this legislated right, Maasai communities have reported a lack of food, water, and at times forced evictions from both the Ngorongoro and surrounding lands as resources are divided between traditional lifestyles and the international tourism industry (NCA Residents, 2012).

Methodology

Utilizing YouTube’s search feature, I looked for evidence of Maasai protest regarding land policy in northern Tanzania. I specifically limited my sample set to Maasai-made or narrated videos. While the Internet is awash with documentaries, homemade tourist videos, and television specials about the Maasai, this project is interested in the ways that Maasai communities are engaging in online deliberation through self-made or narrated videos. Additionally, although I speak Swahili, I chose to focus exclusively on those videos that are narrated in English rather than Swahili or Maa, so as to reach a larger and intentionally international audience. I focused on YouTube both because it is internationally accessible and because of its role in enabling, but not necessarily promoting international social movements. As Strangelove (2010) and Guantlett (2011) argue, YouTube is ‘agnostic about content’, creating an open space for social engagement (p. 91).

Following the collection and transcription of these YouTube videos, I utilized a Critical Discourse Analysis framework to first code protest videos at a meso-level, focusing on the production, consumption, and authentication of Maasai argumentative claims and articulation of Maasai culture. Then, I coded at a macro-level, considering how videos published by pastoral-nomadic communities via YouTube may facilitate Maasai participation in national and international deliberation regarding the place of pastoral-nomadic communities in modernity. In the following analysis, I begin by addressing meso-level argumentative production focusing on truth claims by Maasai speakers. Then, I assess two ways that speakers position these videos on a macro-level. First, I assess the videos’ places within national deliberation by making statements directly to President Kikwete
and internationally. Then I assess the role of social media in facilitating and distributing Maasai protests.

**Truth claims**

Contemporary deliberations have focused on the ‘realness’ of Maasai community protest. For example, in 2009, Arusha District Commissioner Elias Lali informed the Kenyan Feminist Action Coalition that no conflicts were occurring between the Maasai, the government, and private corporations. Instead, Lali alleged that Maasai community members were misinforming both the media and their own communities in an attempt to create political turmoil and gain parliamentary seats in the next election. When asked about forced evictions, Lali suggested that the Maasai community was burning its own homes to facilitate more dramatic images and perpetuate their claims of turmoil in the region (Feminist Action Coalition, 2009). Protests erupted again in 2012 when the Ortello Business Company (OBC) attempted to lease land for a private hunting reserve. In response to these protests, OBC’s Country Director in Tanzania, Issac Mollel, responded by questioning the realness of the conflict:

> Honestly, there’s no conflict whatsoever at Loliondo area, save for the social media … We have been the development partner with the Loliondo villagers since our inception. Apart from these baseless campaigns, we haven’t encountered any problem with the real people in our area of operations. (Shadrack, 2012)

Mollel’s statement points to a critical difficulty faced by the Maasai: how can they prove that they are real or authentic protesters? While visual images have had some effect on international reception of Maasai arguments, Lali’s allegation that Maasai communities are burning their own houses points to the limitation of images that must be narrated for outside audiences. The need to present both a protest and an authentication of the conflict to international audiences has been met by Maasai protesters who have begun using tools such as social media to produce and distribute protest images.

The realness of Maasai protests concerning land and resource scarcity was frequently narrated and explicitly illustrated in the collected videos. For example, the Maasai claim that the NCA currently refuses to allow Maasai herders to tend subsistence crops that will be used to feed their children and herds. In 2012 NCA Endulen Residents Food Crisis, Maasai activist Noolasho Nakuta of the Endue Village of Ngorongoro stated,

> We are treated as if we are not Tanzanians, this is why we are prohibited to cultivate. There is a foodstuff called bran, which is normally given to livestock. This is now what our children are eating. Even my children eat this bran; there is no need to hide the truth, when they eat it they can die. They are forced to eat it because of the drought in which our cattle died. We are not lying, we are telling the truth, let that woman from Sing’ida bring the bran for you to see. (NCA Residents, 2012)

As Nakuta makes this statement, another woman enters the screen carrying a plastic bag containing cooked bran from which she and her children have been eating during the protest. The video footage of this protest reflects the way that Maasai communities are
simultaneously adapting to a Maasai audience (who presumably already know about eating bran) and an extended social media audience, to which the Maasai protesters speak when showing the realness of the bran through the woman from Sing’ida’s display. Additionally, Nakuta’s speech directly responds to government officials, such as District Commissioner Lali, who claim, ‘the pastoralists are lying’ with a verbal statement, ‘we are not lying’, and visual evidence to support her claim that her family is eating bran not fit for human consumption.

Similarly, in the video *Evictions*, produced by the PINGO’s Forum, a Maasai elder is interviewed regarding his recent loss of land. This video includes images of burned homes, the type of images that Lali calls into question. However, the primary imagery is of a Maasai elder, expressing his confusion and dismay in light of his recent eviction from his home. He directs the camera to film an area that was once his home, indicating,

If you have come to defend my rights, then do it because I am like a wild animal … the only thing remaining for you to do is go and see the burnt shambas and homesteads that have been reduced to ashes. (PINGO’s Forum, 2012)

This video, produced by the Maasai-run PINGO’s Forum, was shown to the Swedish Embassy and the African Commission on Human and People’s Rights in Banjul, Gambia (PINGO’s Forum, 2012). The combination of Maasai-directed narration and images have resulted in a Swedish lead fact-finding mission in the region as well as international support for the Maasai community. On a meso-level, the Maasai are utilizing YouTube to combine visual and verbal evidence of their argumentative claims. The claim that Maasai communities are disenfranchised or suffering due to government policy is not new. However, the ability of the Maasai to control the recording, distribution, and translation of their arguments is new and has potentially significant ramifications on the future of Maasai participation in national and international policy making as the community gains the ability to send out their own reports and analysis.

**Tell the government**

Maasai speakers have identified multiple national and international audiences for their videos. It is striking that in none of the videos are Maasai community members, or even diaspora community members, addressed. Instead, statements are made directly to the Tanzanian government and the community’s international supporters. Future research is needed to investigate the ways that new and social media such as YouTube are facilitating intra-Maasai communication. However, in this analysis I will focus on those statements made by the Maasai to President Kikwete. These statements are particularly important because they highlight the need for and success of YouTube as an emergent method to put pressure on the national government. It is my argument that this pressure functions through a boomerang effect, which sidesteps traditional pathways to government petitions, favoring instead direct communication between the Maasai and their international supporters. These supporters have often found the Maasai either through their own online engagement or through in-person interactions during independent travel
to East Africa. Through social media, the Maasai are able to directly interact with these supporters, and then the emergent base of support to put pressure on the Tanzanian national government.

Because the boomerang effect requires a departure from national spheres of deliberation, many of the Maasai statements collected in this study are made in the form of ‘tell the government’ rather than ‘I am telling the government’. These statements first require the speaker to identify as a Tanzanian, a tactic taking the form demonstrated in Olosho when a young Maasai woman states, ‘I am asking the government, they must acknowledge us as Tanzanians. We have not migrated from anywhere else’ (Insightshare, 2015). Then, after authenticating the speaker as Tanzanian, the individual or community of speakers indicate the willingness of the Maasai to utilize traditional pathways of engagement. For example, in People Have Spoken (Voices from Loliondo), speakers reflect on this transition from direct community engagement to international mediation:

Hasn’t Kikwete been here? Wasn’t he the one who stood on that platform? When he arrived, I received him with four levels of welcome. First I received him with happiness and joy. Second I received him in a land full of wildlife and trees. Third, didn’t I even contribute the fuel for his car? Above all, I gave him a bull, a token of our livelihood. So he decided to destroy us in return of all that kindness? I can’t believe he’s really the one who’s doing this to us! Go and tell him we disagree with his proposal!. (Maajabu Films, 2011)

In this statement, the speaker expresses a movement away from direct engagement by tracing the history of his own support for dialogue with Kikwete moving toward attention to deliberation in an international sphere. Similarly, speakers indicate an expectation that the government has not been paying attention to the community, ‘even the president himself does not listen to us, why is he delaying?’ (Maajabu Films, 2012). Other speakers express a fear that the government is becoming beholden to international organizations:

We ask our Government not to be pressured by foreign institutions, although many of these institutions are helping us, the government has a responsibility to listen to its people first and foremost, and to alleviate hunger within the country. (NCA Residents, 2012)

This fine-tuned separation of international institutions, between those that are supporting the Maasai and those that are causing difficulties for the community, is continually reflected in Maasai community demands to return to traditional land and grazing policies and avoid future famines such as those experienced in the Ngorongoro during 2012 (Maajabu Films, 2012; NCA Residents, 2012).

Social media

On an international level, Maasai-produced YouTube videos reflect an awareness of and engagement with online deliberative forums. Recall that OBC spokesman Mollel indicated that the only conflict occurring was through social media. The YouTube videos collected in this study indicate that the Maasai community is aware of these allegations and using new and social media to authenticate their arguments and protests. Statements
of engagement range from the authentication of a Maasai speaker as occurs in the opening statement of *Olosho* to authentication of Maasai claims, such as visual evidence of hunger in the *2012 NCA Endulen Residents Food Crisis*. A Maasai woman introduces *Olosho* with the statement, ‘Many have spoken for us, now we speak for ourselves. Please listen to our story’ (Insightshare, 2015). Similarly, in *2012 NCA Endulen Residents Food Crisis*, a Maasai woman proclaims, ‘we are telling the truth, let that woman from Sing’ida bring the bran for you to see’ (NCA Residents, 2012). These acts of authentication not only give importance to specific videos but also indicate knowledge of, and engagement with, the broader body of Maasai videos and documentation.

In other videos, Maasai community members reflect upon the efficacy of online engagement. For example, speakers make statements indicating the urgency of protest: ‘people have given their lives to protect it yet we still cannot find peace. We have sought help at different times, in vain. Now we have no choice but to fight’ (Insightshare, 2015). Other speakers reflect directly on their own participation, such as a speaker in *Women’s Rights in Loliondo*, who indicates,

> I am holding this microphone to air views that need to be heard. As women, we have the right to be heard. Women have the right to freedom of speech. Whenever a woman speaks on an issue, that issue should be attended to. She is a human being too. (Insightshare, 2014)

These statements address another continuing difficulty faced by the Maasai community, a system of patriarchy that at times prevents equitable access to education and property rights for women and girls (Hodgson, 1999; Talle, 1988). However, this problem is also addressed and acknowledged by the equitable gender distribution of speakers in many of the YouTube videos. These statements are either made by women or groups of men and women. I have not found any YouTube protest videos that are exclusively narrated or authored by Maasai men. For example, the last statement in this analysis is prompted by a Maasai woman who is interviewing Maasai community members regarding the ongoing conflicts in northern Tanzania. Her interviewee indicates not only the importance of the video that she is producing but also the emergent engagement of Maasai communities and the Tanzanian national government via social media:

> I heard that the President wrote [on Twitter] that the government will not take our land. Writing on machines is not enough. It must be a visible, binding document. That is the legacy you will be remembered for. You will receive our blessings, instead of leaving the Maasai children crying. Our fingers helped put you in power, don’t use that power to oppress us. (Insightshare, 2015)

In this statement, simultaneously directed toward Kikwete and an international audience, the speaker reflects on President Kikwete’s Twitter feed while drawing attention to the pressures faced by his community. He reminds the viewer, be they national or international, that Maasai community members are participating in national politics at multiple levels, from voting to deliberation to engagement via social media. In this way, the speaker points to Kikwete’s responsibility to be attentive to the Maasai as a voting contingency. But more importantly, the speaker is informing international audiences that
while it may seem that Kikwete is making statements in support of the Maasai, there is still a place for skepticism and criticism of Tanzanian governmental policy. In this way, the Maasai have turned the allegation that their protests are only occurring via social media back on the government. They are demanding that government promises be made not only over social media but also in legal, binding documents.

**Conclusion**

The emergent body of Tanzanian Maasai YouTube protests indicates multiple contextualizations of Maasai-situated arguments. Unlike the Tanzanian government’s attempts to compartmentalize Maasai political participation into sectors of land ownership, herd movement, and community traditions, the videos collected for this analysis indicate that Maasai communities are engaging in a complex negotiation of identity and political participation by utilizing social media to respond to orthodox discourses.

The choice of an online video medium to display Maasai argumentative processes allows for a contextualization through multiple images, words, and music that cannot be captured by a singular image, newspaper article, or political speech. While these YouTube videos have seemingly small audiences, their production and existence demonstrate the ways that YouTube enables non-elites to distribute political speech beyond traditional gatekeeping models (Dylko et al., 2012). Additionally, my findings do not disprove Hess’ (2009) argument that YouTube cannot facilitate democratic deliberation. However, these videos do indicate that Maasai community members are participating in new and transformative political deliberations. Their videos have prompted direct responses from President Jakaya Kikwete (2014) who announced, via Twitter, ‘There has never been, nor will there ever be any plan by the Government of #Tanzania to evict the #Maasai people from their ancestral land’. While the factual basis of Kikwete’s Tweet has been called into question (Brockington and Igoe, 2006), this type of response is proof of the ways that Tanzanian online interaction is informing and transforming offline communicative networks (Chachage, 2010). Future research is needed to investigate the engagement of pastoral-nomadic communities in national and international deliberation via social media. Governments and development agencies continue to expect that pastoral-nomadic communities will settle and use pastoral-nomads’ use of technology as proof of the desire for settlement (Fraser et al., 2012). However, the spread of new and social media makes many of these goals attainable for pastoral-nomadic communities that continue to live in traditional ways. Coupling technology such as solar panels with mobile video cameras and cell phones, pastoral-nomadic communities may be able to continue their traditional practices while obtaining the goal of national and international participation. This study has pointed to the ways that one such community, the Maasai of northern Tanzania, are opening space for new arguments about community identity that embrace the complexities of tradition and modernity. It is my argument that the production of these arguments through new and social media not only articulates but also demonstrates a knowledge, participation, and deliberation concerning the role of new and social media in traditional nomadic-pastoralist communities.
Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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