

BOOK REVIEW

Open Access

Review of *Being Maasai, Becoming Indigenous: postcolonial politics in a neoliberal world* by Dorothy Hodgson

Stephanie Irlbacher-Fox

Correspondence: stephaniefox@theedge.ca
Dalla Lana School of Public Health, University of Toronto, 27 King's College Circle, Toronto, Ontario M5S 1A1, Canada

Book details

Hodgson, Dorothy *Being Maasai, Becoming Indigenous: postcolonial politics in a neoliberal world*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press; 2011. 288 pages, ISBN-13: 978-0253223050

Keywords: Tanzania, Pastoralists, Donors, NGOs, Neo-colonial, Northern Canada

Shaped largely by neoliberal global aid/development forces, in a context of internal colonialism, Indigenous pastoralist Maasai have turned to international fora to press for recognition and action to support their collective social and political goals. In this book, renowned anthropologist Dorothy Hodgson offers a detailed ethnohistorical investigation of why and how Maasai of Tanzania first sought then eventually abandoned a rights recognition strategy premised on being identified as Indigenous within international/United Nations fora as a venue for pursuing their goals.

Divided into seven chapters, the book offers an analysis that takes neoliberal governmentality's diffuse economic and social effects as an overarching orienting framework situating Maasai efforts to combat impacts both at home in Tanzania and abroad among international Indigenous activist fora and aid organizations. Ironically, she finds that the 'economic stratification, resource alienation and social upheaval' characterizing neoliberalism and targeted by activist Maasai efforts are to some extent mimicked and exacerbated on a local scale by and within the very organizations meant to fight it: programme money spent on cars and drivers, donor aid evident mainly in the big houses and frequent travel of elite Maasai sporting overused passports and Western business suits, rubber tire sandals notwithstanding. Meanwhile, community members, illiterate and uninformed, cannot guess what the organizations are meant to accomplish.

Indeed, the revolution, it is said, will not be funded. This aphorism seems to be borne out by the wry observations of commentators such as Roy (2003) and the things noticed by Hodgson in her multi-sited research. It is no surprise that aid donors of the West not only drive the agendas of Maasai activists, but also require the creation of a 'professional Maasai' class, paid to be the embodiment of the oppressed Maasai pastoralist, in ways palatable to donors. In this international Indigenous rights movement context, Hodgson argues that Maasai engage in what she

astutely characterizes as 'positionings' to describe their consistently fluid matrix of relationships and resulting imperatives for Maasai activists having to some extent to adopt the agendas of those who would support their efforts. This positioning is essential for Maasai to be able to highlight their situation and pursue their goals in international, national and local contexts. What results, she argues, is characterized by Roy (2003) as 'the NGO-ization' of politics and resistance, defusing political anger 'rather than organizing tangible social change'.

And that concession seems borne out in various ways as detailed by Hodgson, who takes us to meeting rooms of Maasai activists arguing over committee membership and speaking times, engaging in bitter feuds over legitimacy and funding, and pursuing personal notoriety on the Indigenous rights circuit. This contrasted with the musings of village women increasingly bearing the brunt of internal colonialism's policies of displacement and assimilation of pastoralists, squatting for hours at roadside stalls selling wares at near-zero profit margins to support husbands back home mired in hopelessness and the malaise of the dispossessed, colonized man. These same women seem to know exactly what they want: according to Hodgson, the same cannot be said of Maasai activists who are so structured and engaged with justifying and funding their activities that to some extent donors keep them more engaged in fighting for their organizational existence than bettering their human and political reality.

The echoes of the same structural phenomena and relational positionings are evident across Northern Canada and the circumpolar world. Located as they are though, in what is viewed as the developed world, Northern Indigenous peoples' activism is similarly framed by national policies and 'donor' funding (e.g. national and territorial governments), but without recourse to international aid and the broader scrutiny it might bring to their situation. Quite a drawback when, in the situation of Canada recently, funding for Indigenous peoples' representative organizations has been slashed by up to 80% in some cases, as have organizations focused on Indigenous and women's health, Indigenous governance and education. Thus, similar to Maasai pastoralists, Northern Indigenous peoples are vulnerable to the whims and fortunes of funders, and associated political positioning inherent to that context.

This is where the utility and the likelihood of this book to become a classic in literature on Indigenous peoples' politics and advocacy really shines: it draws stark connections between the way external forces (the nation-state, donors, international fora) play into, exacerbate and create vulnerabilities and fissures within-Indigenous political and social movements. This book also complicates and provides nuanced consideration of debates around whether actions of Indigenous peoples are about 'selling-out' or about pragmatic and ever-fluid positionings for achieving stability and gains toward larger, strategic goals in ways that might not be evident in the immediate situation or short term.

The book is a wonderful achievement and evident in it is the author's genuine hopefulness and sensitivity about the goals and future of Maasai in Tanzania. For this reader, ethnographic description of Maasai distributed throughout the chapters working in ways to scaffold larger arguments was done extremely effectively. This adds to the book's readability and careful assembling of the author's arguments. It deserves a wide readership in anthropology, African studies and Indigenous studies. For Northernists, the book

provides an excellent comparative work for understanding the forces with which Indigenous peoples in the North - and worldwide - contend, and how Indigenous peoples are forced to engage in constant positionings, not just to establish organizations to engage with broader social forces, but also for their very survival.

Competing interests

The author declares that she has no competing interests.

Received: 1 November 2012 Accepted: 5 November 2012

Published: 19 December 2012

Reference

Roy, A. (2003). *War talk*. London: South End Press.

doi:10.1186/2041-7136-2-27

Cite this article as: Irlbacher-Fox: Review of *Being Maasai, Becoming Indigenous: postcolonial politics in a neoliberal world* by Dorothy Hodgson. *Pastoralism: Research, Policy and Practice* 2012 **2**:27.

Submit your manuscript to a SpringerOpen[®] journal and benefit from:

- ▶ Convenient online submission
- ▶ Rigorous peer review
- ▶ Immediate publication on acceptance
- ▶ Open access: articles freely available online
- ▶ High visibility within the field
- ▶ Retaining the copyright to your article

Submit your next manuscript at ▶ springeropen.com
