Gender and climate change as new development tropes of vulnerability for the Global South: essentializing gender discourses in Maasailand, Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how international discourses on gender and climate change currently unfold for the Global South, and compares this with earlier gender discourses that traveled to Maasailand (Tanzania). By tracing the genealogy of older gender imaginaries, striking similarities emerge between the traveling discourses which position (African) women as vulnerable. This article argues against the feminization of climate change: the simplistic and historical reproduction of vulnerability along gender binaries. Gender and climate change discourses repeat historical productions of vulnerability and development that lead to a tendency to speak for rather than listen to the very women the discourses seek to support. I argue that more research is needed to understand what women do to live with climate change and its emergent discourses instead of focusing merely on what “climate change does to women.” Discourses on gender and climate change need critical insight from de- and post-colonial critiques of development and (eco)feminist scholarship that foregrounds gender’s intersectional, productive dimensions and agentive qualities. Essentializing categories like the “feminization of poverty” and women as “victims of culture” should serve as cautionary tales for climate change, which can be used by those in power to obscure more urgent problems, such as increasing land dispossession.

Género e alterações climáticas como novos tropos no desenvolvimento da vulnerabilidade para o Sul Global: essencialização discursos de gênero em Maasailand, Tanzânia

RESUMO

Este artigo explora como os discursos internacionais sobre gênero e mudança climática se desenrolam atualmente para o Sul Global, e compara isso com discursos de gênero anteriores que viajavam para Maasailand (Tanzânia). Traçando a genealogia dos
imaginários de gênero mais antigos, surgem semelhanças notáveis entre os discursos movilizados que posicionam as mulheres (africanas) como vulneráveis. Este artigo argumenta contra a feminização da mudança climática: a reprodução simplista e histórica da vulnerabilidade ao longo de binários de gênero. Nos discursos sobre gênero e mudança climática se repetem produções históricas de vulnerabilidade e desenvolvimento que levam a uma tendência a falar em nome das próprias mulheres em vez de ouvi-las nos discursos que buscam apoiar. Defendo que mais pesquisa necessária para entender aquilo que as mulheres fazem para viver com a mudança climática e seus discursos emergentes, em vez de se concentrar apenas sobre o que a “mudança climática faz às mulheres.” Discursos sobre gênero e a mudança climática precisam de uma visão crítica desde a crítica pós-colonial ao desenvolvimento, incluindo os estudos (eco)feminista, sobre como o gênero tem dimensões intersetoriais e produtivas e qualidades agentivas. Os problemas de essencialização, em categorias como “feminização da pobreza” e das mulheres como “vítimas da cultura”, deve servir como advertência para a mudança climática, que pode ser usada por aquilos que estão no poder para obscurecer problemas mais urgentes, tais como a crescente despossessão de terras.

Género y cambio climático como nuevos tropos de desarrollo de vulnerabilidad para el Sur Global: esencializando los discursos de género en Maasailand, Tanzania

RESUMEN
Este artículo explora cómo se desarrollan actualmente los discursos internacionales sobre género y cambio climático para el Sur Global, y compara esto con los anteriores discursos de género que viajaron a Maasailand (Tanzania). Al rastrear la genealogía de los antiguos imaginarios de género, surgen sorprendentes similitudes entre los discursos que posicionan a las mujeres (africanas) como vulnerables. Este artículo argumenta contra la feminización del cambio climático: la reproducción simplista e histórica de la vulnerabilidad a lo largo de binarios de género. Los discursos sobre el género y el cambio climático repiten producciones históricas de vulnerabilidad y desarrollo que conducen a una tendencia a hablar en nombre de las mujeres en lugar de escuchar a las mujeres que estos discursos pretenden apoyar. Sostengo que es necesario investigar más para comprender lo que hacen las mujeres para vivir con el cambio climático y sus discursos emergentes, en lugar de centrarse simplemente en lo que “el cambio climático hace a las mujeres.” Los discursos sobre el género y el cambio climático necesitan una visión crítica de las críticas al desarrollo y de los estudios (eco)feministas que destacan las dimensiones interseccionales y productivas del género y las cualidades agentivas del género. Las categorías esencializadoras como la “feminización de la pobreza” y las mujeres como “víctimas de la cultura” deberían servir como cuentos de advertencia para el cambio climático, que pueden ser utilizados por los que tienen el poder para ocultar problemas más urgentes, como la creciente desposesión de tierras.
1. Introduction

I had exchanged the mud hut in Maasailand (northern Tanzania) for the air-conditioned negotiation venues of Doha (Qatar), where the 18th international climate change conference (COP18) was about to take place. Feeling somewhat out of place in these futuristic conference halls, on my second day at the conference I was thrilled to meet a Maasai woman in her traditional gown. She glanced at the beads that I was wearing on my arms and legs, and she immediately recognized that I must be living with the Kisingo tribe. She introduced herself as a Kenyan Maasai. During our brief encounter, a Sami hunter from Norway passed by, who was also dressed in his traditional gown, and he enthusiastically exchanged some words with the Maasai lady. Apparently, the two had met before at previous international climate change conferences. She explained to me that he is also an indigenous person, just like her, and that today it is “Indigenous Peoples for Climate Change Day.” The next day, I met the Maasai woman again, but this time she was wearing her “formal” conference gown. While her business suit ironically appeared somewhat masculine, I asked her why she had changed her Maasai dress, and she replied, “Because today it is Gender Day.” She thus represented women for the Kenyan parliament and not just the Maasai, and dressed accordingly. (fieldwork notes, adopted from de Wit 2017, 66)

After my encounter with the Maasai woman in Doha, it dawned on me that climate change – as global discourse and political arena – not only prompts the resurfacing of older human rights issues and development paradigms, but also that these discursive dimensions build upon similar notions of vulnerability. Being a woman, an indigenous person and an East African pastoralist, at this global platform she represented the epitome of vulnerability. However, while embodying all of these categories, she was not all of them at once, but the universal appeal of conforming to such labels rather allowed her to move in and out of these different valuations in different moments. With her longstanding experience engaging with gender issues, the Maasai representative seamlessly navigated her way through global fora weaving transnational ties to address indigenous rights and climate change, as contemporary matters of concern. The performative dimensions and shifting positionalities of this Kenyan Maasai lady at the international conference vividly reveal how the transnational climate change paradigm brings new registers into being that build upon and entangle older gender development discourses, thereby shaping the contours of what becomes possible and (un)desirable to say.

By comparing the ways in which the contemporary discourse on gender and climate change adaptation unfolds for the Global South with earlier gender and (environmental) development discourses, I argue that vital lessons can be learned about the historical misrepresentation, reproduction, and fixation of certain ideas about gender and the agentive possibilities it affords and forecloses. As detailed in the work of Dorothy Hodgson, I draw lessons from the historically produced, stereotypical imaginaries about Maasai men and warriorhood, and gender and human rights discourse (the international anti-Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) campaign), that resulted in the imposition of (Western) development priorities at the expense of women’s own agendas. By drawing parallels between such historical imaginaries and the more recent international discourse on gender and

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1The official term is Female Genital Mutilation. However, some scholars have criticized this term for being too politically charged. In the context of Maasailand, Dorothy Hodgson has reframed it into the more neutral term Female Genital Modification (2011b). There are many different forms of FGM, and hence this practice is referred to in different ways. In the context of Sudan, Janice Boddy considers Female Genital Cutting or Female Genital Surgery to be arguably more neutral terms (Boddy 2016, 42).
climate change – focusing on adaptation as a new trope of vulnerability for communities in the Global South – essentializing discourses on gender can serve as cautionary tales.

In scientific and policy documents, adaptation to climate change is increasingly framed in alarmist terms. Adaptation is presented as the ultimate condition for the survival of vulnerable states, including low-lying islands and Africa (IPCC 2014a; Klepp and Chavez-Rodriguez 2019). The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has identified an “Adaptation Deficit” for Africa, which refers to a lack of internal capacity whereby solutions are sought in the continent’s acceptance of technical and financial support from developed nations (IPCC 2014b). This vulnerability discourse clearly echoes all too familiar colonial notions such as “tropicality” and more recent post-colonial discourses of development and natural disasters that render the Global South dangerous, poverty-stricken, and disaster-prone (Bankoff 2001, 28). By seeking to find cures in Western aid and assistance, new forms of dependency and power imbalances are produced and old ones sustained (de Wit 2017, 2018, 40). Furthermore, drawing on political ecology approaches, Marcus Taylor (2015) has criticized the framing of adaptation to climate change as a seemingly natural response – an approach rooted in evolutionary biology that conceives of adaptation as integral to all forms of life – in which climate is treated as an externality to which people adapt, thereby creating the fertile ground for a technocratic politics of intervention and control (Taylor 2015, xi). Due to its alarmist undertone and naturalizing impetus, adaptation to climate change conveniently operates as an “Anti-politics machine” that reposes highly political questions as technical (Ferguson 1990) and reduces social life as amenable to technical interventions (Escobar 1995), enabling development to be played out by bureaucrats as a “technical game” profiting both those who give and receive aid (Rottenburg [2002] 2009).

In the following, I argue that gender and climate change discourses have befallen the same fate, but have largely escaped de- and post-colonial feminist scrutiny. Because the international debate on gender and climate change is predominantly grounded in development theory, highly reductionist images of vulnerable women in the Global South dominate the narrative. The historical fixation of gender categories that are reproduced in the climate change literature by focusing on women and vulnerability – constituting a new form of climate determinism or reductionism (Fleming and Jankovic 2011; Hulme 2011) – warrants more critical insights from feminist scholarship that foreground gender’s multifaceted, relational, and intersectional dimensions (Crenshaw et al. 1995; Collins 2000; Harding 2009a; 2009b; Lykke 2010). Moreover, historical geographers George Adamson, Hannaford, and Rohland (2018) observe, while there is increasing recognition that adaptation to climate change requires a deeper temporal understanding of social processes, the past – including cultural dimensions of climate, institutions, and ideas about climate – remains poorly integrated into the wider literature on adaptation to climate change. I seek to address this gap by combining insights into historically produced gendered vulnerabilities with ethnographic insights of how Maasai women themselves make sense of climate change and variability.

In the first part of the paper, I briefly elaborate on early eco-feminist approaches to nature/culture (and briefly reflect on some myths) as a way to understand how contemporary climate change and gender discourses in development are advancing. I juxtapose these insights with my fieldwork observations and reflect on the ways in which Maasai women perceive and live with climate, which reveals a degrading sense of agency, loss
of culture and power. However, women themselves foreground their vital symbolic and moral connection to God and rain (Eng’ai). It will be demonstrated that climate change travels through a moral environmental and political universe that has a gendered history. This has very little to do with climate change per se but is rather influenced by projects, discourses, images, and institutions linked to constructions or notions of “modernity.” Furthermore, elevating climate change and women as two single variables in a complex lifeworld amounts to a new form of gendered climate determinism, which de-politicizes the structural inequalities that both women and men have endured and overlooks their agentive potential. I draw attention to the symbolic, ritualistic, and moral gendered relations to climate in historical perspective that have received very little attention in the climate change literature so far.

In the second part of the paper, I draw lessons from decolonial feminist theory (e.g. Lugones 2008, 2010; Bhambra 2014), to situate how the cultural and moral trajectories underpinning gender norms have shaped Maasai identities and lifeworlds. Building on Hodgson’s historical work, I contextualize how the production of Maasai masculinities – and consequent gender roles and rights – has to be understood, at least in part, by the obsession of early travelers and missionaries of the Maasai man as “the archetypical warrior” (Hodgson 2011b; 2017). A recurring trope in both colonial and contemporary debates about Maasai gender dimensions is the intrinsic vulnerability and oppression of rural, illiterate African women (and thus the inherent repressive, patriarchal tendencies of rural African men (Scully 2011)). Such tropes have been used to justify interventions into the lives of these African men and women by outsiders – whether British officers, Euro-American feminists, or Tanzanian feminists – in the name of justice and rights (Hodgson 2017). In line with the contributions in this cluster, without replacing existing norms with anti-norms, I propose a more critical reading of the fluidity of gender normative categories, contributing to an empirical and theoretical exploration of what it means to “do post-colonial gender” (Lamoureaux and Rottenburg 2021, see introduction to this cluster) here in the context of climate change.

2. Beyond nature–culture dualisms in environmental knowledge

When gender studies meant “women’s” studies in the 1970s and 1980s, the male–female binary was also mirrored in research on gender and the environment (Ardener 1972; Ortner 1974). Early eco-feminist approaches that foregrounded the universal and “natural” connection between women and nature on the one hand, and men and culture on the other (Ortner 1974, 87; Shiva 1988), have long been criticized in the social sciences and given way to a more fluid and expansive understanding of gender (Strathern 1980; MacCormack 1980). However, some eco-feminist fables like Mother Earth – that foregrounded the material dimensions of women’s “natural” connection to nature thereby invisibilizing men’s role in and connection to nature – turned out to be powerful constructs for the “Women, Environment and Development” (WED) as well as the “Women in Development” (WID) agendas. These policy discourses became a strategic and seductive mix for development organizations to encourage the active participation of

2Although Ortner recognizes that the link between women and nature is a construct of culture rather than a fact of nature.
women who were seen as victims, carers, and “fixers” of environmental problems (Leach 2007).

The universal and static value of such myths was debunked in the 1990s, which gradually also enabled anthropological theory on the environment to abandon unfruitful dichotomies between women and men, and between “nature” and “culture” more generally (Descola 1996; Descola and Palsson 1996). In particular, recent studies subsumed under the “ontological turn” have been instrumental in accounting for “radical” forms of alterity and material engagements with the environment, reflecting on non-human forms of representation and agency. This allowed for the proliferation and emergence of multi-species and “other-than-human” ethnographies and approaches to nature, illuminating an array of inter-relational and agentive possibilities that are afforded to nature (Viveiros de Castro 1992, 1998; Kohn 2015; Haraway 2003, 2008; de la Cadena 2015; Tsing 2014, 2015). This critical body of literature stands in stark contrast to the field of development cooperation, which continues to advance essentialist views of women, both ideologically and instrumentally in practical applications (Leach 2007; Großmann, Padmanabhan, and von Braun 2017; Großmann and Haug 2018).

While intersectional approaches to the gender–environment nexus have been advanced by feminist scholars in the 1990s, the climate change and gender research agenda does not seem to have followed this trend (but for a few exceptions, see below). While the term intersectionality has been used as a buzz word in development discourse since 2010, it has become part of a positivist agenda, generally used as a diagnostic to target intervention. The conflation of gender (i.e. women) with vulnerability (i.e. poverty) in international environmental policy discourse – and critique thereof – is not new in the wider global environmental policy agenda. This discursive construction resembles an earlier “othering trap” that has been coined “the feminisation of poverty” (Pearce 1978). The feminization of poverty discourse has largely informed the perception that female-headed households are overall poorer, which has, in a similar way, simplified the conception of poverty in relation to gender. As Chant (2010) has argued, while the “feminisation of poverty” construct has put gender on the international poverty reduction agenda, the “feminisation of anti-poverty programmes” has seldom relieved women from their existing household burdens, and has sometimes even exacerbated them.

Old concerns about women and nature/environment have now been recast in terms of property rights, resource access, and control (Leach 2007). For example, in fields like water and gender, the goal of “empowerment” led to women-centered approaches, encouraging women to become active participants in water management, but which resulted in ever-increased workloads (Cleaver 1998; Cleaver and Hamada 2010; O’Reilly 2006; Ray 2007, 423). In the Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene sector, women have been typically represented as having instrumental value, reducing them to reproducers, carers of children and family, or fetchers of water rather than seeing them for their intrinsic worth. These dominant framings have had crucial implications for how women’s access to water has been valued in mainstream development discourse, informing policy, and investments by means of the calculations of costs and benefits (Crider and Ray, under review), resulting in an essentialized understanding of women’s role in society.

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3 Framing gender as binary and heteronormative reflects the field of development more broadly (Jolly 2011).
3. The “feminization” of climate change

After a long period of omission, gender analysis made its way into climate change policy and into the academic literature about a decade ago. Recent studies have yielded important insights into the social dimensions of climate change, highlighted gender inequalities prominent in climate governance worldwide, and demonstrated that the ways we know about and act on climate change are differentiated along gender lines, including through the production of new values and performances of masculinity and femininity. Furthermore, the growing body of gender analyses in climate change research merits recognition for pointing out that gendered vulnerability is not an intrinsic characteristic of women as a group, but rather socially and historically produced (Pearse 2017, 2). Yet, as discussed above, international policy discourses on gender and climate change have almost exclusively focused on women’s vulnerability, asserting that women are disproportionally impacted by the consequences of climate change in comparison to men (UNDP 2012, 2013). The notion of vulnerability has gained particular salience in discourses about women in the Global South, notably sub-Saharan Africa, and it is largely taken for granted that “the gender impacts of climate change are likely to be the worst for women in developing countries” (Haysom 2014). Victimization along dichotomized gender lines is reinforced by the fact that men largely dominate decision-making bodies at all levels of governance, to the detriment of women’s participation (UNFCCC 2012).4 The causal link that is generally made between gender and climate change is that women are directly dependent on natural resources for their livelihoods (for example, for the collection of water and firewood), and thus face greater risks and burdens from the impact of climate change (also as primary childcare providers), and as such, have less capacity to adapt to environmental change and natural hazards. For example, it is stated that “Women, compared to men, often have limited access to resources, less access to justice, limited mobility, and limited voice in shaping decisions and influencing policy” (Burns 2017). Furthermore, it is said that “Women still have lesser economic, political and legal clout and are hence less able to cope with – and are more exposed to – the adverse effects of climate change” (UNDP 2011, 1).

The following main themes have been addressed within both the academic and development literature on gender and climate change: women as vulnerable (particularly in the Global South), women as virtuous and more environmentally conscious than men, who, in turn, carry the main responsibility for greenhouse gas emissions, as they are the main polluters and decision-makers (mainly in relation to the Global North). Another recurring theme of vulnerability is the higher mortality rate for women during natural hazards caused by climate change. For instance, widely circulated statements of vulnerability are that women are 14 times more likely to die during natural hazards (e.g. Brody, Demetriades, and Esplen 2008) and that women are vulnerable because they comprise 70% of the poor (e.g. IUCN 2015; MacGregor 2010), assertions that are anecdotal rather than empirically rigorous (Chant 2010; Medeiros and Costa 2008; Sen 2008; Arora-Jonsson 2011, 745; Clancy 2018).5 Neumayer and Plümper (2007) have demonstrated that “…it is the socially constructed gender-specific vulnerability of females built into everyday

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4It might be superfluous within the context of this cluster to mention that “gender” is not a dichotomous variable (m/f). However, while in some reports it is acknowledged that gender should not be conflated with women, the majority of policy reports do almost exclusively focus on women’s vulnerability in the debate about climate change and gender.
socio-economic patterns that leads to the relatively higher female disaster mortality rates compared to men” (cf. Pearse 2017). One of the pitfalls of reproducing above-mentioned discourses uncritically is, as the authors also point out, not only that they have erroneously taken on the status of truth or fact, but also that they “(...) can deflect attention from power relations and inequalities reproduced in institutions at all levels and in discourses on climate change” (Neumayer and Plümper 2007).

Victimization discourses have rightfully been critiqued by scholars for producing a static conception of women’s roles, overlooking the fact that household members often don’t operate as individuals, as if they were part of entirely separate domains, but as a collective. Indeed, gender cannot be explored in isolation or reduced to a single and static category of vulnerability (cf. Bretherton 1998). Another pitfall of such discourses is that it erases the role of men and their own responsibilities in relation to nature, resembling earlier eco-feminist fables (cf. Leach 2007). This holds true in Maasailand where gender roles have historically been complementary, where both men and women are responsible for enabling the livestock production system (Hodgson 2004). Since pastoralism has become less viable economically, many men have left the homestead, leaving women as head of households, a responsibility that has not been matched by increasing rights (Hodgson 2011c, 146). Put otherwise, the fact that women are increasingly vulnerable can hardly be blamed on climate change alone. Gendered dimensions of adaptation to climate change should always be understood as relational, forming part of a multidimensional social order that is continuously enacted through daily life and ritual practices. For example, historically, Maasai women are considered to be closer to God and therefore fulfill an important moral role within society which gives them decision-making power over very specific domains of social and cultural life (Hodgson 2005). A recent study has demonstrated that Maasai women are increasingly diversifying their livelihood strategies to bring cash into the household, which simultaneously challenges and reifies a pastoralist gender division of roles (Smith 2015).

Furthermore, as MacGregor (2010) has emphasized, the victimization of women in the Global South has (unwittingly) resulted in a narrow focus on the material effects of climate change, and fixed the definition of “gender.” Climate’s material effects have not only led research and policies to uncritically accept the “scientific” framing of climate change, but also diverted attention away from discursive practices and power dimensions that are entailed by new gendered climate change perspectives. Moreover, and crucial for my own argument, MacGregor (2010) argues that “little thought seems to have been given to the cultural and symbolic (that is, ideational) dimensions of climate change or to the ways in which gendered environmental discourses frame and shape dominant understandings of the issue” (228). The majority of studies thus focus on “what climate change does to women,” while scant attention has been given to symbolic gendered

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5Even though it is beyond the scope of this paper, it is interesting to note how some of these assumptions are circulated widely without rigorous empirical grounding. The frequently cited statement that women are 14 times more likely to die than men during natural disasters – is a vulnerability that is often ascribed to culture and gender mores. However, as Arora-Jonsson has demonstrated, in tracking down this “fact,” the history of the source turned out to be uncertain, and appeared to be based on one presentation that was given during a natural hazards workshop, after which the author incorporated it into a report, and has since then been picked up and presented as a fact in innumerable policy documents (Arora-Jonsson 2011, 747). This illustrates how numbers have a certain policy appeal and gain currency to circulate rapidly.
differences – and how women relate to nature in religious and ritualistic ways – and therefore “what women do to live with climate change.” While important studies exist on gender and reproduction, power, ritual, and rain in Tanzania (see the work of Todd Sanders 2004) and on rain and power and climate discourse more general (see Michael Sheridan, 2012), studies on gender, climate change, and morality largely remain unconnected bodies of work. The following account draws on the historical work of anthropologists and Maasai experts and is brought into conversation with my own reflections and observations based on qualitative, multi-sited fieldwork that I carried out in Tanzania between 2011 and 2013.6

4. Localizing climate change

As I have been arguing, international climate change discourses on gender and development center around the adverse material effects of climate change on women’s livelihoods, development, and empowerment. This framing of women as particularly vulnerable to a single external variable not only overlooks historically produced vulnerabilities that will be described in the final sections of this paper, but arguably renders both men/women and nature/culture into separate domains. This is significant in the case of Maasailand where relations of reciprocity and exchange transcending rigid gender categories have formed key adaptation strategies over time (albeit perceived to be eroding). Moreover, nature/culture forms part of a cosmology that has become deeply entangled with Christianity in which society, climate, and morality are intricately interwoven. As observed during my fieldwork, the new message of climate change enters the village of Terrat through the radio,7 NGO work, educators, government officials, and researchers like myself. But the way in which this new scientific prophecy is translated does not always sit comfortably with local understandings of the world: as the ways in which scientific concepts are translated to the Maasai pastoralists is by relegating God to the margins, which leads to the introduction of a certain purified worldview that ceases to make sense (de Wit 2020). In other instances, when the villagers are told that they are to be blamed for climate change because they are cutting down trees, it reinforces pre-existing ideas of in-group blame – through “trajectories narratives” of cultural and moral decline (cf. Rudiak-Gould 2014). These existing narratives prompt the Maasai to search for explanations within their own society due to immoral behavior and the erosion of morals and respect within society. The traditional ruler of Terrat – who was well-versed in the climate change rhetoric – made a crucial point when asked to comment on the translation of climate change into the Maa language from Swahili, as proposed by the radio station: “you should not make a literal translation from Swahili to our language because it will be misleading: it is better to ask us, what does climate change mean to us”? (de Wit 2020).

6I carried out 14 months of qualitative and multi-sited fieldwork ethnography in northern Tanzania and attended global and regional platforms where climate change was discussed. During my stay in Terrat village, which formed my base, I carried out more than 60 in-depth interviews and several focus group discussions (and countless informal talks/discussions). Moreover, during some six months, I participated in all forms of social, cultural, religious, and political life and daily activities – including cattle herding – while living with a Maasai family in a boma (kraal). To protect the anonymity of my interlocutors, no personal details are mentioned.

7Orkonerei Radio Station is a local NGO based in Terrat and is the only radio station countrywide that broadcasts programs in the Maa language.
In Maasailand, climate variability has gone hand-in-hand with profound socio-economic and political changes and powerfully impinged on the key social and religious institutions of pastoralists in East Africa. Women make sense of current and past climates, which is expressed through their bond with the female deity *Eng’ai* – which simultaneously means God, rain, sky/heaven – and attests to the intricate relation between women, morality, and God/rain (de Wit 2018). It is important to note that most female interlocutors had never heard of the official term climate change in Swahili or in Maa – for which there was no official term yet – but it was spoken about on the radio and featured in educational programs. The following analysis, therefore, does not focus on how women make sense of the discursive phenomenon of climate change, but on women’s ideas and perceptions of climate change/variability, that appeared to be inseparable from talking about the loss of values and respect in society. This is not surprising considering the crucial role of respect (*enkanyit*) and the maintenance of relations of reciprocity in Maasai culture.

In the village of Terrat, when women were talking about past climates and weather, a moral universe was invoked that mainly emphasized women’s role as the ritual and moral guardians of society. Rural Maasai women seek a model of gender relations based on a sense of what they had historically: the complementarity of gender roles concerning rights and responsibilities. They attribute themselves with an essential moral obligation to challenge perceived violations of the social order. They emphasize the need to challenge power issues of justice collectively, not as individuals (Hodgson 2011c). Crucially, when I asked women about the main challenges to sustain their livelihoods, global climate crisis narratives did not seem to resonate with local concerns as people have an array of other pressing issues to deal with that cannot be reduced to climate. While many mentioned the lack of rainfall, the concerns expressed by women included a lack of the most basic needs, including access to health care, education, water, land (tenure security), pastures, infrastructure, medication, and vaccination for their cattle. The looming climate change predicament may arguably only exacerbate already existing vulnerabilities. In many ways, it was not so much climate that they feared, but rather the possibility of losing their land and rights to access land. To illustrate my point, I share two statements made by Maasai pastoralists while attending a climate change workshop in Arusha where the government presented a climate change strategy for the pastoralists. After the audience had patiently listened to an hour of political rhetoric and expert talk about the dangers of climate change for the Maasai, Adam, a Maasai man from a grassroots organization representing Maasai pastoralists stood up and calmly began to articulate his concern:

> The government in this country is using a lot of money to protect animals like giraffe and elephant, but it does not even use a single shilling to protect a person known as the pastoralist. We are in danger of being chased away by the government from our land (...). Because for me the big threat to pastoralists is not climate change! The big threat is that the government is going to take away our land and increase the vulnerability of pastoralists. To me this is the issue. To me climate change is not the issue!

Adam’s emotions left the audience speechless. His account was remarkable in so far as he not only reminded those in power of the marginalized position of the Maasai, but relegated the alarmism of climate change to the margins altogether. Adam’s reluctance to
acknowledge this new prophecy was not the only one voiced in Maasai communities. Rehema, a Maasai woman from the community, stood up and aligned with her “brother.” She began her talk with a rather soft and careful tone of voice, but during the course of her speech, her anger mounted and she became very emotional:

We can see that when the investors come they quickly get the land to invest but if you look the kind of life that the indigenous peoples are living, it is very difficult that some of us have no land to establish settlements!

5. On climate change and gendered moral trajectories in Terrat

While I was interested in knowing about peoples’ climate change understandings and observations, our conversations prompted stories about the loss of culture and respect, society, love, money, globalization, church, and traditional religion versus Christianity – almost everything that encompasses Maasai culture and ways of being and believing. For example, many elder interlocutors whom we talked to recalled the fact that they and their forefathers have adapted to the climate by “following the clouds as long as we can remember.” And while pondering the climate and environment of the past, their nomadic lifestyle was invoked and the freedom of movement, but so was their cultural identity and what it once meant to be a “true” Maasai. In other words, talking about climate appeared to be a commentary upon themselves and society’s behavior (de Wit 2019). More rain, sufficient grasslands, abundant trees, plenty of water, animals, and flowing streams were all imagined as part of the ideal past, and mentioned on par with the rootedness of cultural values, such as respect, love, reciprocity, faithfulness, and solidarity. In early ethnographies, it already became clear that mutual respect, *enkanyit*, formed the heart of Maasai culture and sociality. While men by and large spoke about

Figure 1. Maasai women dressed up for a circumcision ceremony, emphasizing their ritual and symbolic significance during celebrations. Picture taken by de Wit in 2013.
money, modernization and globalization at large, or a change in oregie (culture and customs), it was the group of elder women who unequivocally deplored more specifically the eroding of enkanyit and enyorotto – the disappearance of respect and love – from society, which was often brought up in relation to the lack of rainfall.

The female preoccupation with respect can be explained by a gendered conception of morality, as historically women were considered to be naturally more religious and closer to Eng’ai. As mentioned before, they saw it as their responsibility to ensure the moral order of the daily world (Hodgson 2005, ix–x); a role that they continue to assume and fulfill today (Hodgson 2011b) in a Christian moral universe. The following quotes from female interlocutors illustrate the interconnection between rain and morality:

The rains are bad nowadays because we are behaving badly, nobody is respecting each other any longer.
People nowadays cannot even greet you properly any longer. Our society is losing their culture, and people do not love each other anymore. This is what is causing climate change to happen.
When God decided to give us no rain, it is because we have sinned. People only want money nowadays. So they kill each other, do abortion and go to the mines.
When I hear that there are changes in the weather this is maybe because of wrongdoings like homosexuality.

Discussions about climate have a temporal dimension in which a somewhat utopian and timeless culture of the past is imagined, mirroring ecologies of abundance: rain tales of the past are a commentary about an ideal present (Van Beek 2000, 31). The weather is a tangible manifestation of Eng’ai, a way to communicate Her satisfaction as well as discontent with the people. Sufficient rain is received as God’s grace, while prolonged droughts are understood as a curse. Drawing on early ethnographies (such as Merker 1971; Hollis 1905; Johnston 1902), Hodgson describes the Maasai and their relationship to the environment and religious practices as follows (Figure 1):

As pastoralists, Maasai had a close customary relationship to and dependence on the environment for their sustenance and social reproduction. Nature and its elements were understood as manifestations of Eng’ai or expressions of Her will, and were therefore central to Maasai religious beliefs and practices. The symbolic meanings of these aspects of nature were dynamic and contextual; they were shaped (and reshaped) through their use in ritual practice, and, in turn, shaped the form and content of these practices. (Hodgson 2005, 25)

Women fulfilled important ritual roles in mediating with God, which was common and necessary as it was through sacrifices and (communal) prayers that Maasai tried to repent on their sins, re-establish social and moral order, and reinforce their bond with Eng’ai (cf. von Mitzlaff 1988). Women served as the midwives between Eng’ai and her people, for women were given the power to create new life (Hodgson 2005, 64, 213). The forms of mediation and intercession with Eng’ai have taken a different turn since Christianity has made its way to Terrat, which has impinged upon local perceptions of power, faith, and the climate. Whenever my research collaborator and I asked elder women whether they thought the rains/weather had changed compared to the past, they would generally not emphasize changes in the weather, but lament the loss of ritual power, which they collectively employed during rain prayers.
In the past, the mediation of rain took place by ritual prayer under a sacred tree (oreteti) or close to a water source, by sacrificing a black sheep or a goat. This ritual was carried out by several women (at different stages of fertility) who prayed and sang naked while surrounding a dam. This ceremony was guided by the oloiboni, who was responsible for the timing and also for giving instructions to the participants. Nowadays the rain prayer in church, under the charge of the male pastor, has replaced this practice. Yet the timing of the rain prayer was not only instigated by the pastor, but could be demanded by any member of the church. Whereas many elder women did not rejoice in this Christian individualist principle of praying for rain, others argued that the God of the church is still capable of bringing rain, “perhaps a little bit slower though” and “less powerful than in the past.” Overall, there is a decreased sense of the bond between God, society, and rainfall, for which people sought an explanation in either the lack of ritual or the loss of faith.

Particularly female interlocutors have attributed the lack of rain in society to the fact that this ritual prayer through sacrifice has ceased to exist, and blamed the church for prohibiting this practice. For example, these three Kokos (older women) remembered the effectiveness and power of this prayer:

After we carried out this practice by surrounding a dam, the rain occurred the same day and not any other day. The same day the rain fell down. But nowadays the church is not allowing us to go.

In former days when there was no rain we just took a goat and we made a sacrifice, and women sang to God and pray for some days and we got rain again. […] During the day of sacrifice the rain rained a lot. Nowadays we start going to church and that is why the rains do not come. The church is not bad but what we can say is that years changed a lot.

When we were young the water was flowing. There were water sources, if you compare now the river is dry. But also there used to be an organization that came to oloiboni and people came to sacrifice to that river so that the water will not be finished. That it will not be dry, we slaughtered a black sheep in the river or a black bull in those years. That is how we tried to protect the river from becoming dry. But for these years now, something like that cannot be done. Maybe that is why the river is dry.

While women blame the church for the individualization and masculinization of morality, they also take on the moral responsibility for the loss of rain. This self-responsibilization is far removed from notions of vulnerability that are so pervasive in global discourses. Rain and power are intrinsically connected, particularly in a context where rain sustains all forms of life. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that rain is seen as a sacred matter that, in part, both conceptually as well as linguistically coalesces with the supreme being.

For when it rains people exclaim, “There is Eng’ai!” The disappearance of the ritual rain prayer – accompanied by the collective sacrificing of a black animal as a gift for Eng’ai – has entailed a weakening of the ways in which women could seek redress for society’s behavior, and maintain a relationship with Eng’ai. In this section, I have demonstrated that the relationship of the Maasai to the climate – as an element of the complex entanglements between Christianity and Maasai religions – remains embedded in an inclusive ontology in which society, gendered morals and nature are interwoven. The ritual role of the divine and women in mediating rain needs to be understood as being ontologically different from a weather forecaster or climate scientist. Considering vital Maasai virtues like love and respect expressed through relations of reciprocity, ritual power, and mediation with Eng’ai was not just to predict weather or rain, but to keep morals and
society in place in face of an impending disaster (Taddei 2012): a way of living that ceases to make sense when purged of Eng’ai.

6. The epitome of manhood: the production of the Maasai warrior

Everyone ‘knows’ the Maasai. Men wearing red capes while balancing on one leg and a long spear, gazing out over the semi-arid plains stretching endlessly to the horizon or women heavily bedecked in beads, stare out at us from countless coffee-table books and tourists’ snapshots. Uncowed by their neighbours, colonial conquest, or modernization, they stand in proud mute testimony to a vanishing African world. Or so we think. Reality is of course different. (Spear 1993, 1)

From historical studies on gender, we glean that transnational ideas about gender have produced and fixed certain gendered identities about Maasai, which were in fact much more flexible, negotiable, and contested before that (Hodgson 2002, 2017; Smith 2015; Talle 1987). It is important to note that contradictory claims and observations have been made about the role of women in Maasai or pastoral society. Particularly in early ethnographies, a common patriarchal model was put forward, which took for granted the idea that pastoral women were possessions owned and controlled by men (Schneider 1979; Spencer 1979; Llewelyn-Davies 1981) and that male Maasai were the “real” pastoralists while females were negatively perceived to be lower-ranked hunters (Galaty 1979); or that “woman and nature” were outside “man and society” (Ardener 1972, 152). This entrenched patriarchal perspective may have been, at least in part, due to the fact that the very production of both early and later ethnographies and travelogues were notably less reflexive of their own gendered norms and assumptions.

As Ulrike von Mitzlaff (1988) observes in her ethnographic study among the Parakuyo Maasai in Tanzania (until then) very little attention had been paid to the significance of the socio-economic and ritual lives of women (9). Even though Spencer’s (1965) work among the Samburu was an exception at the time, his statement that women were ignorant of many larger aspects of society and unhelpful as informants (231); or Ardener’s (1972) comment that women in traditional societies do not have a metalanguage “for this kind of discussion” (136), attest to the gendered bias in the production of knowledge. Von Mitzlaff concludes that because knowledge about women was accessed via men, the view of the researcher was twice broken:

Travel descriptions and ethnographic reports written before and around the turn of the century, as well as later scientific publications, describe the world as seen by men. The missionaries, colonial officers or travellers who collected this kind of data, were almost exclusively men. Their Euro-centric perspective took – in total agreement with their times – male superiority and female inferiority for granted. (1988, 10)

It is important to note, however, that one of the earliest ethnographies by Merker (1971) detailed both complementary and interdependent gender roles, and while asserting that women are perceived to be subordinate in rank, this is not in line with their own self-perception (102). In this ethnography, there is no evidence that women are perceived to be subordinate to men. Hence, a more critical stance is taken by Hodgson, who observes that very little attention had been paid to changing gender relations among pastoralists, and asks instead “how people have come to think of women as possessions”? Based on
ethnohistorical research, Hodgson demonstrates that current gender patterns are not inherent to the pastoralist mode of production and ideology, but rather the result of a particular constellation of interactions between British and Maasai ideas and practices (Hodgson 1999, 42–43).

As mentioned before, Maasai historical patterns have by and large been (re)produced through a fixation on certain masculinities, in local mediations of modernity. In her book “Once intrepid warriors” (1999), Hodgson argues that although interventions fostered by processes entailed by modernity vary, the underlying objective has always been the protection of Maasai culture guided by an image of pastoralism as a purely masculine endeavor. British administrators were obsessed with what they perceived to be proud and handsome Maasai warriors, and when they spoke about “the Maasai” they meant Maasai men. This complex intertwining of modern interventions and reified cultural differences had substantial material consequences for Maasai people; as an ethnic group, they have been marginalized from both political and economic resources (Hodgson 1999, 122). And at the same time, these interventions have reinforced and expanded the political and economic power of Maasai men over women as “individuals,” “owners,” citizens, taxpayers, and household heads. The consolidation of male political power went hand-in-hand with the construction of the link between Maasai ethnicity, cattle herding, nomadism, and warriorhood. The characterization of all these activities as male has been to privilege and fix certain masculinities, at the expense of female economic rights and disenfranchisement of a sense of Maasai identity as well (Hodgson 1999, 22). The shifting production of masculinities and a certain configuration of attributes to Maasai men have – broadly speaking – brought about two forms of masculinities, the dominant Maasai as the traditional cattle herding warrior and the modern so-called ormeek masculinity, which increasingly became associated with modernity and all its discontents.

As soon as I arrived in Arusha, the heart of the safari-going, wildlife-spotting, and game-hunting world, I instantly recognized the contours of the aforementioned accounts. With their spears and decorated bodies, both males and females have become part of the urban landscape, albeit in distinctive ways (women can be found on the market selling their artwork and beads, while men roam around in town advertising safaris). Some men walk around with a picture or the tale of a dead lion, as a testimony to their manhood. But there is also the modern Maasai man in town who embraces the other, historically more contested ormeek masculinity. The term ormeek seems to have first been applied by Maasai to denote other Maasai men who worked as headmen for the colonial government in 1930, but later broadened and used as a derogatory term to describe educated and baptized Maasai and Swahilis or “non-Maasai,” often symbolized by their “Western” clothing (Hodgson 2001a, 251). These oppositional gendered identities created stereotypes about modernity and tradition:

(...) the ormeek/Maasai opposition refracted the modern/traditional dichotomy in terms of Maasai subjectivities in a manner that reified two extremes within a range of possibilities, masking the complexities and contradictions of cultural change. In many ways, ormeek became as much a stereotype as the dominant Maasai masculinities. (Hodgson 2001b, 125)

Christianity has played into the shaping of gender roles for both men and women. One of the reasons why so many Maasai women have converted to Christianity is because women have always been recognized as more religious than men. Their
conversion to Christianity was perceived as a modern extension of their religiosity, and not so much a radical change in their subjectivity, as would have been the case for men who wanted to embrace a modern lifestyle. Whereas the imposed dichotomies of traditional versus modern Maasai men have shaped certain masculinities and fixated a particular dominance over Maasai women, it is the same process that has left females largely out of this problematic identity issue (Hodgson 2005). Yet, with the arrival of Christianity women’s relationship with Eng’ai has changed in terms of their ritual power. Women used to have more agentive possibilities to keep society together through ritual slaughter; events that have now been afforded to the male pastor in church.

7. Gender development narratives and the power to obscure

Maasai women have been exposed to an array of assumptions, projections, and development discourses that have shaped gender and cultural identities and mobilized some political agendas at the expense of others. I focus here only on the anti-FGM campaign, as ethnographically detailed by Hodgson. In her work, she demonstrates how (1) FGM as a “travelling” human rights narrative has reshaped notions of culture and gender; and (2) how it largely downplays rural women’s own agendas and obscures the broader economic and political context. Since the early 1990s women’s rights have been reframed as human rights, which have resulted in women and men reframing their demands and needs in the seemingly more neutral language of rights (Hodgson 2011c). While the expansion of women’s rights as human rights has provided powerful ways to challenge gender inequality and violations against women (Hodgson 2002; Merry 2006; Hesford and Kozol 2005), a growing number of scholars have critiqued “the dominant ideological prism” (Scully 2011) of international human rights-based approaches to social justice, development, and governance and are concerned with “the rhetoric of human rights at work” (Scully 2011; Abu-Lughod 2011; MacManus 2015), which is in itself a cultural practice (Merry 2006, 228). Such studies have explored how culture has been deployed as oppressive and disparaged by some activists and institutions (Hodgson 2005; Abu-Lughod 2002; 2009; Merry 2006), as “they typically zero in on women as the quintessential innocent victims of culture” (Levitt and Merry 2011). The Maasai case illustrates this concern.

As Hodgson demonstrates, after international anti-FGM campaigns shifted from framing the practice as a health concern to a human rights violation to justify interventions (Shell-Duncan 2008), FGM officially became illegal in Tanzania in 1998. Indigenous organizations that refused to put it on their priority list were pressured into fighting against FGM, while trying to insist on the need to address a different set of priorities and human rights, namely economic and political empowerment. This disagreement exemplifies the larger tensions between culture, power, and human rights. Rights-based approaches to justice that privilege the individual and the power of secular law, often fail to address the structural causes and context of gender injustice, such as the deepening impoverishment produced by the implementation of neoliberal policies and practices that led to the dismantling of health care, education, and other social services (Hodgson 2001a, 2011c). This period of neoliberalization marked the introduction of health care fees, withdrawal of support for education, and other social services, and
attempts to “replace transhumant pastoralism with more “productive” and less “environmentally harmful” modes of livestock “farming” (as opposed to “herding”), such as “ranches” (Hodgson 2011c, 146).

During the period of heightened economic liberalization in the 1980s, the Tanzanian state began to encourage the commercialization and intensification of land use (Igoe and Brockington 1999). This resulted in restricted access to key resources, and thus constraints on movement due to land privatization, subdivision, and conservation policies that led to the creation of national parks and (the expansion of) wildlife reserves, greatly impacting the Maasai (Homewood, Kristjanson, and Trench 2009; Århem 1985). Mainly under international pressure from the World Bank, IMF, and northern countries, the Tanzanian government has privatized industries, encouraged the sale and alienation of (village) land, and expanded the highly profitable wildlife tourism leading to an extraordinary influence of foreign-owned ecotourism and big game-hunting companies (Hodgson 2011c, 146; cf. Gardener 2016). Benjamin Gardner writes: “It is not unreasonable to read the history of the Maasai in East Africa as one long land grab in the name of global conservation and national development” (2016, 19). Until today large-scale land evictions for the lucrative hunting and tourism industry continue to take place – depriving thousands of Maasai families from their grazing lands.8 The historically produced gender identities of Maasai pastoralists – informed by women’s rights discourses and anti-FGM campaigns that cast Maasai culture as “problematic” and inherently oppressive to women – have come to obscure and deflect the attention away from the political and economic causes and contexts of dispossession, marginalization, and oppression. For many rural Maasai women, FGM (like climate change) has not been a priority on their list of concerns. While most rural women are confronted with hunger, lack access to basic health facilities, potable water, education, and increasingly lose access to grazing land, millions of dollars are in the meantime invested in abandoning the criminalized practice of FGM (Hodgson 2011c). Without historicizing the socially constructed gendered vulnerabilities and drawing attention to wider issues of the global political economy in which women’s own agendas and agentive qualities are obscured, climate change and gender discourse will only reproduce these old othering traps. Therefore, reducing climate change to the idea that women are vulnerable due to climate’s biophysical manifestations exacerbates rather than alleviates existing vulnerabilities.

8The recent “Loliiondogate” is a prime example of violent land evictions of Maasai pastoralists, when the President granted exclusive hunting rights to a private investor from Dubai. This video demonstrates how women’s collective voices become particularly salient as they perceive themselves to be moral guardians of society. Maajabu films, “People have spoken (voices from Loliondo):” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7knZOEVx0k&t=187s.
of gender vulnerability (Pearse 2016, 12), which thus invites us to critically rethink the one-dimensional ways in which current discourse on gender and climate change are advancing and shaping international policymaking. Moreover, it has been argued that, while gender analysis within climate change research has proven to be a necessary lens to understand gendered vulnerabilities, the current focus on “women in the Global South as vulnerable” seems to fall into a deterministic trap that limits rather than enriches our understanding of how climate change, gender, and other drivers of vulnerability intersect. As other authors have pointed out, an intersectional analysis does more justice to gendered climate realities, as gender roles form part of multiple social orders and are continuously enacted and shaped by new discourses and policies.

In line with other scholars who have begun to critique a reductive approach of gender in climate change research, this paper suggests that a conceptual reorientation of gender is needed that broadens, rather than limits, its heuristic potential. In other words, the uncritical acceptance and reproduction of the idea that “women” in the Global South are disproportionately vulnerable to climate change in comparison to men, risks defeating its own emancipatory potential. It has been argued that the preoccupation of women’s vulnerability in the Global South has deflected attention away from other, more structural and historical causes that have led to vulnerability. Moreover, this trope of vulnerability has led to a single-minded focus on climate change’s material impacts, to the detriment of more critical and symbolic approaches. Against this background, it is argued that more research is needed into the discursive dimensions of this nascent gender paradigm, and into the gender implications of ensuing climate policies and interventions. Historical work on the production of gendered vulnerabilities should serve as a cautionary tale for the emergence of development discourse on gender and climate change that – by reproducing static categories detached from local realities and lived experiences – can play an active role in the (re)production of vulnerability itself. In Terrat village, the nascent climate change discourse is gradually dawning on the village, yet women are still largely excluded from such discourses and other decision-making platforms. Drawing lessons from decolonial feminist theory (Lugones 2010; Bhambra 2014), more critical attention needs to be paid to the rhetoric and politics at work, by asking what climate (change) means for women themselves from their gendered and lived experience along the complex, historically produced interplay between “modern” and “indigenous” identities. The more urgent question is how such discourses can provide opportunities that suit norms and values articulated by women and men themselves.

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