



The Changing Landscape Due to Technological Advancement and Its Influence on the Maasai Image in Ole Kulet's *The Hunter*, *The Varnishing Herds* and *The Elephant Dance*

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Abstract

This paper examines the implication of modern technology on the Maasai culture as depicted by Ole Kulet in his novels: The Hunter, The Varnishing Herds and The Elephant Dance. The study employed textual analysis using the technic of descriptive qualitative research. Through critical reading of the primary texts and complimented by secondary materials such as novels, articles in journals and magazines, the study unraveled the intricacies of modern technology and how the various characters in the texts manipulate these technological resources in order to fit in the dynamics of the modern society. It is revealed that Ole Kulet, not only weaves a story of the close relationships that exist between landscape and humanity, but also identifies evidence of technological impact creating new spaces unfamiliar to the African people. This relationship can easily be disturbed by new developments introduced by variant cultures which appreciate landscapes differently. This portrays how technological advancement in Africa has led to changes in African landscapes causing major repercussions on African people's cultures and images.

Keywords: Technological advancement, African landscape, The Maasai, Ole Kulet, *The Hunter*, *The Varnishing Herds* and *The Elephant Dance*.



Introduction

The relationship between the traditional man, nature and the repercussion of the inception of modern technology on the environment has been of interest to Ole Kulet's fictional novels, *The Hunter*, *The Varnishing Herds* and *The Elephant Dance*. In these books, Ole Kulet takes us back to traditional culture and implications of modern technology on traditional culture. From his literary works, it is apparent that all traditional and modern cultures are technologically oriented, however, the level of efficiency is relative depending on the level technological advancement. It is, therefore, important to understand the extent to which technological advancement has transformed the social and political landscapes of the Maasai people. Since technological advancement is known to have come with problems and benefits many of which were not anticipated in some cases technology was rejected or embraced.

Technology is defined as the use of scientific knowledge to change human landscapes whereas technological advancement refers to a variation in the manner of producing various products or enhancing provision of resources and delivery so that the cost of production is reduced. Nevertheless, technology has been known to influence our daily lives and it has a strong influence on our culture. A technological change relies on importance of societal background and the ability of the producer to communicate and convince the user of the product and any other person affected by the cultural situation (Epstein, 2018). Technology is important since it encourages economic growth and leads to the satisfaction of human wants regardless of whether it is the need for more food better education (Fabayo, 1996.) Technological changes cannot be examined in isolation because of the close relationship that exists between technological and social changes. If society is ignored then technology will simply allude to tools and machines especially for Africa.

Most African communities were affected with the advent of technology albeit selectively because the Africans did not believe in adopting the whole of the western technology. Scholars argue that this could be because technology should be in tandem with the needs of a society and be integrated to improve the cultural values of a people (Austin & Headrick, 1983). For example, the money economy has led to technological advancement in various facets of life such as education, trade and commerce which leads to economic growth. This is contrasted with the African economy which had no monetary attachment and was controlled by customs, history and beliefs that were dependent on agriculture, fishing, hunting and gathering. In most cases, the Africans heavily depended on their harvests and traded by exchanging what they did not have with what they had (Amadeo, 2020).



Discussion

The Changing Landscape in *The Hunter*, *The Varnishing Herds* and *The Elephant Dance*

The author portrays a situation in which quite a lot changes in the Maasai community when the money economy is introduced to the Africans as a necessity including things such as taxes, school fees and payment for medical services. For instance, in *The Elephant Dance*, Ole Sulunye explains to his nephew Reson how the Maasai relied on food sourced through hunting in the forest and this provided what could sustain them. However, the African people have now been forced to adapt to using money and their intelligence to manipulate the environment through inventions such as agricultural farming, irrigation, weaponry livestock farming, and construction of shelter. As manifested in *The Hunter* and *The Elephant Dance*, the money economy has changed how the Maasai view the benefits of wild animals. In the past, they were culturally known to protect the lives of wild animals. But, with the opening of international markets, they are lured to the monetary benefits attached to animal trophies and other awards. In *The Hunter* and *The Elephant Dance*, animals are seen to be hunted down with impunity. For example, Ole Sipayo's gang in *The Hunter* converted the forest into a slaughtering zone whereas Shadrach in *The Elephant Dance: p126* shows his prowess by slaughtering three hundred elephants at one.

Furthermore, Pesi in the same novel, feels that because of the slaughter of the elephants "the blue bellied being" who had authorized them to live side by side with wild animals would punish them for abetting the killing.

Although killing of animals and selling their products had monetary benefits for the community, it led to their decrease since the numbers killed are higher as compared to the rate of procreation among the animals. In *The Elephant Dance*, Shadrach and company slaughter elephants that are expectant hence destroying two lives, one of which would have continued the propagation of elephants. Culturally, the hunters and gatherers would only kill what they needed for food but spare the expectant animals to allow for procreation. It is therefore evident that killing of animals not only leads to their extinction but is also a danger to the ecological balance. The interconnectedness of the ecosystem is affected because all organisms need each other for survival and once the wild animals are extinct the food chain is broken (Rinkesh, 2021). Ole Kulet in *The Elephant Dance* buttresses this argument through Pesi who explains, to his nephew Reson, that seeds are dispersed by animals that eat fruits and later excrete the seed somewhere else where they grow. Therefore, if the animals died, this chain would be broken and seed dispersal would not take place. Secondly, the haphazard disposal of the animal carcass is a health hazard because the grounds are littered with animal remains which rot bringing flies and all types of scavengers to feed. This massive slaughter is witnessed by the white hunters in *The Hunter* and Pesi and his nephews in *The Elephant Dance* who also come across such scenes.

Due to the indiscriminate killing of wild animals there is a shift in the relationship between man and wildlife because the coexistence that created a cordial understanding between wildlife and human beings has been destroyed. Norpisia in *The Varnishing Herds* sees the fight back by animals as self-defense because their habitat has been taken over and destroyed by man. The killing of wild animals also brings to fore the changed relationships amongst the Maasai because the cultural



relationship suffers due to the adoption of foreign cultural trends by some select Maasais. This creates hybrid cultures which are not preferred by all people. For example, in *The Hunter* Ole Sipaiyo's thirst for wealth is the epitome of cultural hybridity since he forgets the core mandate of the Maasai of protecting the animals from poachers and turns into one. In the process he alienates himself not only from his family but also from the rest of the Maasai.

Wild animals are seen as a source of wealth not only because of their tusks or horns, but as also a great tourist attraction to the locals as well as foreign tourists who visit the country. For example, with the development of infrastructure people come from far and wide to see the migration of the wild beasts at the Serengeti plains. In *The Elephant Dance*, the beauty of the wild animals is seen when Ole Kulet posits that people like Dick Jones who are invited to come and start a lodge and grow cash crops in Konini Forest find it difficult to make a choice between preservation of the beauty of the natural environment and development of the projects he had come to set up. In the same book, Pesi and his nephews admire the elephants as they pass them by, praying that poachers will not interfere with them. In *The Varnishing Herds*, Norpisia's love for wild animals is seen in her adoption of four wild beasts which live with her flock until they are unfortunately washed away by the floods. Her determination to have trees replanted is also an indication of her determination to preserve wild animals and the natural forest.

The money economy had benefits, however, it also introduced vices such as corruption; bribery and robbery changing how some of the hunters and the gatherers approached life. Ole Kulet exemplifies this in *The Hunter* and in *The Elephant Dance* when talking about corruption as depicted in the books. In *The Elephant Dance*, Abednego and company corruptly acquire land that is home to the Ogieks for the purpose of hunting wild animals for their meat, which is used to feed the SMA security team and for the acquisition of animal trophies which they sell to foreigners. While the Ogieks think that they could solve the problem amicably, the three men understand that corruption could get them what they want. When the Ogieks realize they could not get their land back, they subvert their culture by hunting many animals and drying the meat for storage as a safety net since their future in the forest is uncertain. The poaching activities of the trio; Abednego, Shadrach and Meshach continue destroying the forest and its habitat until Regina Naitore who does not condone corruption is posted to Konini as a game ranger. She puts a stop to the poaching taking place and gets the culprits. The vice of corruption is also exemplified in the description of activities that take place on the SMA juggernaut which is metaphorically portrayed as a train in which those who have intricate problems go into in order to get a resolution to their problems. This is a journey in the life of a person and by the time they get to their destination, the problem has been solved but at the expense of his identity and demeanor. According to Ole Kulet, an honest person cannot get onto the juggernaut because of the social ills practised on it. In *The Hunter* corruption is so imbedded in the society that Lesaiyo whose desire is to save the animals from Ole Sipaiyo and his army of poachers, decides to take law into his hands when he realizes that even the highest office that is supposed to protect animals takes bribes and allows poaching to continue.



Technological advancement led to improvement in transport systems leading to faster and cheaper ways of moving people and things. Ole Kulet points out the convenience of modern transport such as the introduction of cars, lorries and helicopters allow Ole Sipayo in *The Hunter* as he conveniently collects his harvested trophies from the forest and transports them to foreign markets. He further notes that initially the Maasai traveled long distance on foot either herding their animals or when in search of food. Communication was verbal hence the need to access the recipient of the message physically. For example, the need for fast communication is brought out in *The Elephant Dance* when the hunting and gathering Maasai are invaded by poachers and they are unable to get assistance fast enough because Reson has to walk for several days to get to the game warden, Regina as the poachers vandalize and kill a whole village. In *The Varnishing Herds*, Kedoke and his wife are exposed to hard living conditions and tough traveling conditions because of their desire to go back to their home with their herds of animals because they have to travel back home with their wealth. In the process, they sacrifice their happiness and the start of a family because of the realization that getting a child in the wilderness is not practical because of the health related issues. Some of the emerging issues mentioned above propel the village into adopting the advanced means of transport introduced by new technology.

The introduction of modern means of transport and better means of communication system has its shortfalls because although penetration into the interior of Maasai land initiates growth, there are some negative repercussions that are noted. For example, a major shortfall in modernization is the destruction of natural resources such as forest and the displacement of wild animals because of the need to create space for building projects such as roads and urban centers to accommodate people who come from other places in search of jobs in the large farms that emanate as a result of the new learned farming methods (Amadeo, 2020). The development of these towns have their short comings as noted by Eddah Sein in *The Varnishing Herds* who says that the mushrooming towns are haphazardly planned with narrow alleys that housed *chang'aa* dens and were known homes to hard drug takers. These are vices not experienced in these areas. The changed landscape is also seen to affect the wild animals because their space is invaded by this new development and accessibility to food is interfered with. This development forces the animals to fight for their space which has been downsized by mankind's activities. According to Regina in *The Elephant Dance* towns develop but from resources that are illegally acquired from poaching. To Reson, this is an unfortunate situation because as the poachers flaunt their wealth, the heritage of the hunters and gatherers is lost. Reson and his friends opt to collect bones of the elephants and the rhinos from the forest and construct a monument in memory of the dead animals. This monument is also a reminder to the poachers of the need to preserve wild animals.

Technological advances led to creation of jobs that are unfamiliar to the Maasai way of life. For example, the Maasai were employed to be watchmen, to be guides for the hunters, to be wardens and so on. These jobs were in certain designated areas far from the homesteads of the Maasai. This necessitates rural-urban migration since people left home and their families to go to towns in search of these jobs with varied repercussions Ole Kulet posits that Leseiyo in *The Hunter* leaves



home to go and look for a job in town, however, he encounters setbacks that leave him frustrated. He realizes that life in town was valueless since it was not hinged on any of the customs that bound his people together in the manyattas. Leseiyo encounters hostility from neighbors in town an occurrence that does not happen in the village he comes from. Ole Kulet illuminates the deteriorating Maasai values since people living in urban areas are exposed to new cultures hence creating a mutual one, they could all adhere to. Some jobs created are also not honest jobs as observed by Ole Kulet. They are jobs that bring destruction to the environment and to the community. For example, the poachers employed by Ole Sipaiyo in *The Hunter* and Abednego and his friends in *The Elephant Dance* are paid to kill elephants and remove their tusks for sale. This is against African cultural understanding of work which dictates that man should do honest work and not destroy nature which the gods have tasked them to preserve. Ole Kulet in his novels posits that contributory factors such as the coming together of mixed cultures encourage varied interpretations to the definition of work as well as to the definition of how the natural environment should be conserved.

Initially, the Maasai wealth was based on the number of animals they possessed. They would take them to the forests to graze. For example, Kedoke in *The Varnishing Herds* who is going back home without his sister consoles himself by stating that although his sister is dead, his grown herd would appease his parents. New methods of farming were introduced to the Maasai by the white man and this brought many changes to this community. The new methods of farming influenced the Maasai understanding of animal husbandry. It advocated for the keeping of fewer animals that could be confined thus people could now settle in one place and lead sedentary life. The Maasai realized that it was advantageous to keep fewer animals in paddocks and cultivate land in order to grow cash crops. In *The Varnishing Herds*, some Maasai farmers subvert traditional farming by adopting these new methods. They change from pastoralism, hunting and gathering as a way to get food and adopt new technological. This is confirmed by an old man who notes how Kedoke's cows are emaciated as seen in *The Varnishing Herds* despite the availability of grass in the forest. However, introduction of new methods of farming comes with a price because of its demands. Ole Kulet posits in *The Varnishing Herds* that for one to carry out the modern agricultural practices they have to acquire land to settle on as seen in *The Varnishing Herds* where the rich Africans destroy thousands of acres of forest in the process of acquiring land for development. This has repercussions in that reduction in forest land, meant that man and animals have to fight for the available space with dire consequences for both. For example, in *The Varnishing Herds* while farmers kill wild animals found wandering into their constructed homes, the wild animals are also known to destroy crops planted and kill anybody who tries to stop them.

The fencing of land by the farmers has its repercussions because it leads to the construction of dams as a prerequisite for irrigation and provision of water for the confined animals. To construct these Dams, rivers are interfered with because the water to these dams has to be redirected from the surrounding rivers. Norpisia, in *The Varnishing Herds*, observes that this denies people, plants and animals outside the farm access to the water. When forests are destroyed it is not only the animal habitat that is affected but also the people at large because the water catchment areas are also destroyed leading to the



destruction of top soil due to soil erosion occasioned sometimes by flooding and drought (Nunez, 2019). The pastoralists are forced to change their way of life and work for the rich farmers with a hope of getting food and grazing grounds for their animals. For example, in *The Varnishing Herd* Kedoke a pastoralist finds it necessary to move into Barnoti's farm on realizing that their animals will die of hunger and thirst due to the prevailing drought. Although the confinement to the farm benefits Kedoke since it allows him to start a family, he still sees it as an inhibition to him since he is unable to achieve his main goal of reaching his home. Ole Kulet advances this argument in *The Varnishing Herds* when he describes the drought that leads to the death of Kedoke's cattle. Through Norpisia, we understand that destruction of forests destroys the source of food and medicine for the inhabitants of the forest. She sees an interrelationship between man, animals and forests and once destroyed the gods rein their wrath on people.

Firewood has been and is still a popular source of energy for the African people. The Maasai for example, used firewood to cook their food although in some cases they preferred to eat raw food. However, they had rules governing the use of firewood. According to Ole Kulet in *The Varnishing Herds* once food was cooked and eaten, the fire was put out and the cooking area cleaned. With the introduction of new technology, charcoal became an alternative source of fuel. Charcoal was produced in great quantities leading to destruction of forests and the depletion of indigenous trees. The clean air was also destroyed due to the carbon monoxide emitted from the burning of charcoal. Soil erosion was eminent because trees were cut for charcoal production leaving the ground bare and in the process of burning the charcoal the ground cover was destroyed and the ground left bare. Sein the environmentalist, shows us the vulnerability the forests are exposed to in *The Varnishing Herds* and champions a program to address the anomaly amidst opposition from the large scale farmers benefiting from the destruction of the forest (Ole Kulet, 2011; Ndambuki,1998).

Rehabilitation of forests and the conservation of wild animals has been a nagging issue in the country. This has been necessitated by the pressure on land, sea and influence of climatic change. As stated, when resources are degraded, competition ensues between man and animals for the little that is left. It is agreed that in order to stop degradation it is necessary to promote sustainable management and equitable distribution of resources as championed by Wangari Maathai in her Green Belt Movement initiated in 1977 (Grassi & Maathai,2017). The literary writers have not been left out in the fight against deforestation. Ole Kulet through in *The Varnishing Herds* focuses on salvaging the forests that have been destroyed. Norpisa focuses on trees that are medicinal and encourages the community to plant. The rehabilitation of forests leads to the salvation of medicinal trees which are a benefit to the community. Ole Kulet, sees the need to replant indigenous trees and sensitize people on the importance of stopping deforestation. In *The Varnishing Herds* Ole Kulet maps out a reforestation program which turns out to be very successful. Women in his books spearhead this reforestation program which is a subversion of the Maasai culture. For example, the women under the guidance of Norpisia in *The Varnishing Herds* work on a reforestation plan that sees whole forests populated with trees. She encourages women to look for seedlings from the forest and plant those in areas where trees have been cut and within no time a whole forest develops. Sein the



environmentalist, on the other hand, goes round villages educating people on the repercussions of destroying trees and encourages them to help Norpisa in her reforestation program. Her incentive of sheep to those who plant many trees see men join in the exercise and this boosts the whole program.

The indiscriminate killing of the wild animals has led to the need to conserve of wild animals not only because they are becoming extinct but also because of reasons stated below. As already noted above, wild animals are economically viable to the country because apart from the selling of their trophies for selfish gains, they are also a tourist attraction especially those conserved in wildlife parks and zoos. Several species of animals are known to be near extinct because of constantly being hunted down such as elephants, rhinos and many others. Conservation of these endangered species is paramount and a priority because of the likelihood of them becoming extinct (Gamborg, Palmer, & Sandoe, 2012). Conservation of animals has been Ole Kulet's concern in *The Hunter*, *The Varnishing Herds* and *The Elephant Dance*. In the three books, the locals with the help of outside forces struggle to preserve the animals. Through the hunters and gatherers who understand that wild animals are a gift from gods and they could only hunt enough for food. They, therefore, understand that it is their duty to preserve them and that is why they see the need to stop the wanton destruction of animals and report to Regina the forest warden who stops corruption and helps save the animals from poachers. Leseiyo in *The Hunter* sacrifices his health and body to fight the poachers under Ole Sipayio who kill the elephants for their tasks in the forests.

Conclusion

This paper can conclusively argue that there has been environmental degradation and there is need to stop this regression of the land and rehabilitate it. Ole Kulet is an environmentalist to an extent because in his novels he demonstrates that the fight against deforestation and destruction of wild animals is an urgent issue that has to be addressed. Therefore, both scientists and literary writers advocate for the importance of changing this trend if the environment is to be salvaged.



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