INTRODUCTION

Landscapes of Memory

Standing on a rocky outcropping, one looks across the rows of low hills to Mangwesi Mountain on the far horizon. The short grass lawn is a vibrant green, dotted with well-spaced acacias (umbrella trees), beneath which graze a dozen zebras and a few Thomson’s gazelles. One might see this western Serengeti landscape as nature at its finest, a last remnant of unspoiled wilderness where animals can roam free. Or one might see it as a landscape shaped by people who set fires to create openly spaced woodlands with productive grasses, tell stories about ancestors settling at Mangwesi Mountain, propitiate spirits at the nearby spring, and follow the paths of hunters, traders, and raiders that crisscross the land. This second way of seeing the landscape is that of people whose ancestors lived in the western part of the Serengeti-Mara ecosystem for the past two thousand years, including land that is now within Serengeti National Park and surrounding game reserves. Their view of the landscape has not been a part of the global conversations of other people who care about the Serengeti. Western Serengeti peoples have been dismissed as recently arrived poachers within a landscape envisioned as empty of people. Yet, for as long as we have memory, the western Serengeti has been a profoundly humanized landscape with the stories, hopes, and challenges of its people deeply embedded in its rocks and hills, pools and streams, vistas and valleys. A history of western Serengeti peoples’ memory rooted in a humanized landscape introduces a new perspective to current debates about the future of African environments and the histories of people who live with them.

Serengeti National Park was founded on a view of the landscape that presents a sharp contrast to local ways of seeing.¹ When people throughout the world imagine the Serengeti, they do so through the medium of the many documentary
films produced by National Geographic and others promoting it as an endangered global wildlife resource. Bernhard Grzimek, who worked for the Frankfurt Zoo in Germany, produced one of the first films of this genre, *The Serengeti Shall Not Die* in 1959. The film opens with Grzimek's explanation of why he and his son, Michael, were bringing a small plane to the Serengeti—to do a count of the animals and to map the migration routes in order to aid the new park in establishing its “natural” boundaries. The beautiful images of wildlife and scenery in the Serengeti, anthropomorphized stories of animals and interesting biological facts are interspersed with the plea to save “the last refuge for the great herds of the African plains.” The narrative suggests that animals can be saved only by establishing parks, aided by the efforts of people like the Grzimeks, who perform difficult and selfless acts in harnessing science and technology for the task. Even the walls of the Ngorongoro Crater are presented as enclosing “the most magnificent zoo on earth.” In the Grzimeks' previous African film, *No Room for Wild Animals*, parks are described as “a forbidden land for man” where the animals know no fear of people. The image of the Serengeti landscape (or any other African park) in these films is entirely wild and natural, without history or social context. They describe a landscape broken into ecological zones—plains, water holes, and hills—but devoid of names or information that would differentiate one place from another either in time or space.

Portrayals in these films of a landscape for wild animals alone is rooted in the Grzimeks' overriding compassion for and delight in the animals and their disdain for “civilization” and urbanization, which inevitably lead to ecological destruction. Local people, manufactured objects, and the colonial context in which the films were shot seldom appear at all; the park is depicted as a completely natural space that must be kept separate from people for the wildlife to survive. The film views hunter-gatherer peoples like the wild animals themselves, in danger of extinction, while the “Negroes” and other “civilized” or “mixed-race” Africans (referred to as “human hyenas”) wantonly burn the grass, cut the trees, and poach with weapons that make the animals suffer and “die a lingering, senseless death.” In the Serengeti film the Maasai appear briefly as proud pastoralist warriors who recklessly cut trees and brush, causing the water holes to dry up. The only mention of the western Serengeti peoples is an oblique reference in the footage where Michael Grzimek supposedly “discovers” the German Fort Ikoma as he is looking for water after a plane crash and notes that the Ikoma, who live in this area, were, during the German period, a “frontier tribe, as unruly then as they are today.” These potently symbolic images of the Serengeti as one of the “last nooks of paradise,” a wild Africa, existing in its pristine state since the dawn of time, proved influential in creating the global perception of the Serengeti landscape.

Yet other regional ways of seeing that same Serengeti landscape still exist, present in the collective memory of people who have never been included in global narratives about Serengeti National Park except as “poachers.” Calling themselves
Ikoma, Nata, Ikizu, Ishenyi, and Ngoreme, these peoples now live on the western border of the park. During the summer of 2003, in the course of historical research, I traveled with Ikoma elders, Pastor Wilson Shanyangi Machota and Edward Wambura Kora from Morotonga, out to Tanzania’s Ikorongo-Grumeti Game Reserves, adjacent to Serengeti National Park, to identify the abandoned settlement sites and graves of their Ikoma ancestors, now accessible only with a special permit and a village game scout as guide. We tried to get permission to go into the park to find other Ikoma sites but were unsuccessful. Although restrictions had kept these elders out of the area for over thirty years, they directed us in the car to the old settlement sites, springs, and sacred sites for propitiating the ancestors. The elders had to search the whistling thorn brush thicket for a long time before finding the sacred site at the Kumari spring, where a snake representing an ancestral spirit guards the land. No one had brought offerings here for propitiation in decades, and the old spring was dry and barely visible. The elders pointed out, and told stories about, the origin place of the first Ikoma man and woman, who pitched their camp under the Mukoma tree after arriving from Sonjo, now on the eastern border of Serengeti National Park. The elders’ ability to locate the sites in the wilderness came from hunting trips long ago with their fathers and grandfathers, who told the stories of the past as they walked over the land or camped in these spots. Seeing these places brought tears of joy to their eyes. As the trip ended they expressed their gratitude for being granted an opportunity to see this magnificent land one more time. They only wished that their children and grandchildren could also visit these places where their ancestors are buried.

Figure 0.1. Wilson Shanyangi Machota (left) and Edward Wambura Kora at dry spring in the Ikorongo Game Reserve, abandoned Ikoma settlement site. Photo by Paul Shetler, 2003
In contrast to Grzimek’s images, the elders see a differentiated social landscape that also includes wildlife. The places we visited evoked stories about the past that represented a variety of different landscape images and social groups. The elders identified many of the abandoned settlement sites of generation-sets by springs, now dry because the people were no longer cleaning them out. Standing on the higher places, they looked across the landscape and named the areas settled by different clans, often associated with hills. They uncovered the remains of rock walls that were once fortresses to protect the people from Maasai raids in the late nineteenth century. One elder said that as a youth he used to herd cattle and play around these walls, when they were higher than his head. The walls were now almost gone because the park had used the rock for its building projects. Because they knew this land as hunters they also knew the water holes, campsites, and paths that connected them with other communities in the region. They had walked these paths as migrant laborers going to Nairobi to find work, stopping and spending the night among friends in Sonjo, to the east, or as traders to take wildebeest tails to barter for goats and sheep in Sukuma, to the south. In these later, more historically identifiable stories the landscape visions of other peoples also became apparent—a Maasai view of the land as a pastoralist domain, a British view of the land as a resource for economic development, and a global conservationist view of the land as wilderness to be kept apart from people. In response western Serengeti peoples told new kinds of stories about these events. Although western Serengeti peoples incorporated these newer landscape visions that fundamentally altered their ways of living on the land, they continued to tell the older stories and visit the places that kept earlier landscape memories alive.

The Ikoma elders’ ways of seeing the landscape, as well as the contrasting film images, are all imaginative constructions: interpretations influenced by historical experiences, social identity, and political power, rather than by objective visions of the physical land. The title of this book, Imagining Serengeti, captures a broad definition of landscape as an “imaginative construction of the environment.” David William Cohen and E. S. Atieno Odhiambo refer to landscape as “encompassing the physical land, the people on it, and the culture through which people work out the possibilities of the land,” while Simon Schama writes that “landscape is the work of the mind. . . . built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock.” Thomas R. Dunlap, in his work on the British settler colonies, describes landscape as “the picture of the land people see as having significance for the nation and their culture.” Benedict Anderson’s influential book Imagined Communities describes the formation of European nationalism as shifting concepts of time and technologies like the printing press and the newspaper enabled Europeans to imagine themselves as members of “nations.” Similarly, western Serengeti peoples conceive of their own social identities through the “imagined landscapes” embedded in oral tradition. The power of a group
of people to shape the landscape is dependent on how they imagine the landscape, which, in turn, is reproduced on the landscape. However, both Grzimek and the Ikoma elders take their view of the landscape for granted as natural or objective reality and do not consciously see it as a means to assert power. It therefore takes careful analysis and comparison with other sources to unpack and “de-naturalize” the meanings they attach to physical features of the landscape and to place them within particular historical contexts and contests of power.¹¹

The problem for historical analysis is that the sources for making local landscape visions from the past visible and meaningful are difficult, inadequate, and not easily accessible. No written documents for this region, except the ecological or economic, exist before the beginning of the twentieth century, nor has much historical research taken place in this region. Archaeological and historical linguistic sources can be applied only at a rough regional scale, and it is problematic to project ethnographic information from recent societies onto the past. Oral traditions remain one of the few available sources, and those are fraught with inconsistencies since they have changed as they are transmitted over time, are expressed in local cultural idioms, and represent the views of only a certain segment of society. The historian struggles to find meaning in a list of place-names or the route of a generation-set walk presented by the elders in their narration of oral tradition. In a heterarchical society without chiefs or kings there is no dynastic tradition remembered by court griots or one master narrative about the past. While oral traditions seem to retain spatial images as they are transmitted over time, they lose connection to temporal sequences or to the historical context to which they first referred. Many Africanist historians use oral tradition to reconstruct nineteenth-century precolonial histories, but most have been unable to support the evidence for earlier histories without written sources.

This book addresses the problem of oral traditions as reliable sources with a new methodology for tracing a history of memory. Historical changes in ways of seeing the landscape are reconstructed by identifying core spatial images in oral traditions that can then be reinserted into historical contexts identified by other kinds of sources. The starting point for this methodology is a spatial analysis of oral traditions, based on the durability of spatial memory that is linked to social identity. I use accepted methodologies to reconstruct the basic historical contexts from archaeological, historical linguistic, ecological, ethnographic, and archival sources. Through a process of identifying congruency and logical patterns, the core spatial images are then recontextualized into historical periods or time frames. For the later periods the analysis also includes the profound material and ideological effects of introducing other ways of seeing the landscape from other regional societies, the colonial government, and global conservationists. This study relies on the interdisciplinary work of environmental and social historians, in Africa and elsewhere, who have identified key issues for the study of human communities in relation to their environment—including landscape, space, and

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memory—to provide the theoretical tools for analysis. With this methodology I am then able to reconstruct a long sweeping history of western Serengeti peoples as they interacted with their environment over the past two millennia. This methodology could be similarly applied for reconstructing environmental history in other places and times, especially where few historical sources exist apart from oral tradition.

New areas of inquiry open up as one incorporates, but moves beyond, a history of the environment to a history of memory connected to the environment. This lens allows us to see not only how people physically changed the environment by their presence but also how landscape memory shaped their societies and how this memory changed over time in response to new contexts. Using this critical theoretical insight, people become actors, rather than victims of environment, making environmental decisions rooted in continuity with the past while innovating as they adapted to new circumstances. Changes in ways of seeing the landscape over time indicated shifts in the physical way that people related to their environment. The two are inextricably connected and reciprocally interactive. Ways of seeing determined ways of using the land that, in turn, influenced memory as these landscapes became part of oral tradition in the core spatial images. When new contexts introduced new ways of seeing, and thus using, the landscape elders elaborated new oral traditions, while continuing to tell older traditions that retained the core spatial images from previous ways of seeing the landscape. These different ways of seeing coexisted, as they do today in the memories of elders who tell various kinds of stories about the past. But as oral, rather than written, traditions these memories depend on a physical connection to the landscapes in which they are embedded. The same physical space can be seen, and thus remembered, in a variety of ways with profound consequences for how people live in it. Paying attention to spatial patterns provides a key for recovering the historical meaning of oral tradition. It is thus through an investigation of the history of landscape memory that a long term history of people in relation to the environment can now be reconstructed.

This analysis asserts that the environment will be preserved, changed, or destroyed based on the memories imbued in it by specific groups of people. The tragedy of setting apart wild spaces that people can no longer visit is that these places cannot sustain social memories but rather become abstract, generic wild places consumed in a global marketplace. Deep social connections to specific landscapes may be more effective for protecting sustainable ecologies than an appreciation for interchangeable natural places often used to justify the destruction of the land in domesticated places. In an older western Serengeti tradition the bush is left to grow up undisturbed around the sacred sites of ancestral spirits of the land while the grass is burned in areas of habitation to create open parkland, healthy for both people and wild animals. But those human decisions depend on a historical memory connected to particular places and people. Seeing
the landscape as either wild or domesticated is not the only way of creating memories that honor and preserve the land. *Imagining Serengeti*, through a varied and contested history of memories embedded in peopled landscapes, adds both a rich, new dimension to existing conversations about preserving African environments and a new methodological approach to precolonial African history.

**WESTERN SERENGETI PEOPLES AND SOURCES OF EVIDENCE**

The complex mix of languages, economies, and cultures making up the western Serengeti presents a challenge for historical analysis. Western Serengeti peoples are East Nyanza Bantu-speaking agropastoralists known as the Ikoma, Nata, Ishenyi, Ikizu, and Ngoreme ethnic groups who now occupy Serengeti and Bunda districts in the southeastern portion of the Mara region of Tanzania. Each of these ethnic groups claims its own unique identity and history, and no pan-ethnic identity developed here in the colonial period as it did among their Sukuma, Luo, or Maasai neighbors. Without a tradition of chiefs or hierarchical leadership, the Mara region also differed from the Great Lakes kingdoms, where dynastic history often overshadowed commoner or clan histories; thus, no centralized narrative tradition exists here. The adaptation of agropastoralists to the ecology of this region and their ongoing prosperity depended on interaction with other peoples in the region, such as the Tatoga (Dadog-speaking pastoralists, including Rotigenga and Isimajek Tatoga) and Asi hunter-gatherers. While I interviewed many Tatoga elders I could not identify any Asi descendants who knew their traditions other than those now integrated into agropastoralist communities. No local designation exists for this western Serengeti group of Bantu-speaking agropastoralists as a whole except Rogoro (the people of the east), yet even the area to which this designation refers varies relative to the location of the speaker. My research was concerned with these five ethnic groups, forming a coherent unit, and within the limitations of field research, but logically could have expanded to include other groups such as Zanaki, Sizaki, and, at a larger scale still, Kuria or the Mara region as a whole. Kuria moved into the Serengeti District during the 1950s. Limited interviews among these neighboring groups allowed for a regional comparison.

For the purposes of this analysis the western Serengeti is treated as an integral region, in the sense that it encompasses the geographical boundaries of an intercommunicating, interacting set of people. *Region* is not defined here as a homogeneous cultural or social unit, as the economic relations of exchange or as a formalized marketing system, as has been the trend in much of the recent regional analysis. Rather, regions are treated as historical products constantly in negotiation and transforming as different peoples interact in changing ways over time. Even the most rigidly conceived regional boundaries of western Serengeti with the Southern Nilotic-speaking Maasai herders to the east or the Sukuma
farmers of another Bantu-speaking family to the south were frequently crossed through trade, marriage, prophecy, or refuge. This region, both past and present, has functioned based on its linguistic, cultural, and economic diversity, even as western Serengeti peoples feel a diffuse sense of collective identity due to their common historical background, shared cultural assumptions, and proximity to each other. I have chosen to refer to this region as the western Serengeti, rather than eastern South Mara, because during the late nineteenth century, when the most significant social transformations took place, its people were oriented toward the Serengeti. From the colonial period on, the people of the western Serengeti began to see themselves as part of the Mara region, or Musoma District as it was then known. Serengeti is a Maasai word, referring to a historical Maasai section and meaning wide-open spaces. The Serengeti has widespread recogni-


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tion and puts this story in the current context of debates over Serengeti National Park. The people of this region do not use the name western Serengeti to refer to themselves but would recognize their common story within the historical region. The western Serengeti region is bounded on the east by the great Serengeti plains and the Maasai, on the north by the Mara River and the Kuria, on the west by a gradual shift without any natural division toward the peoples of Lake Victoria, and on the south by the Mbalageti River and the Sukuma. These boundaries also correspond to an ecologically unified area, the western woodlands of the Serengeti-Mara ecosystem.

Ignored in ongoing debates about Serengeti National Park and the surrounding ecosystem, western Serengeti peoples have also been ignored as a subject of scholarship. No academic work exists beyond this study to establish even the most basic chronological framework for the region. Written sources are few, including a handful of early travelers’ accounts and ethnographies that are based on visits of short duration and primarily in neighboring ethnic groups within the larger region. The written sources on this region, housed in the Tanzania National Archives and the East Africana Collection of the University of Dar es Salaam, are scarce, since the German records in the country were largely destroyed when they left the country during wartime. Only an incomplete set of the Musoma District files from the British period have survived—forcing reliance on papers from the provincial or territorial rather than the district level. Archival sources for the independence period are also problematic. Additional archival data from mission or British government sources is also scant, since a marginal region such as this received little attention in the home offices. The archival sources that do exist were quite useful for reconstructing the historical periods documented in the last three chapters of this book, but as for the pre-colonial period, the historian must find other sources for reconstructing the historical context.

Archaeology and historical linguistics remain the time-tested tools for African historians interested in the distant past. Yet no archaeologists have worked in this region on eras after the earliest domestication of plants and animals, nor have researchers been interested specifically in the ancestors of western Serengeti peoples. Therefore the archaeological evidence must be used carefully to describe wider regional patterns that seem to have some bearing on developments in the western Serengeti and to establish a basic chronology. I relied on the existing reports of archeological research in the wider region. Historical linguistics can tell us generally when and from what direction languages were introduced in the region. Comparing languages spoken today to identify changes in words and sound patterns over time provides a sense of how the languages are related to one another and how contact with other languages and local language innovations influenced the development of a language over time. Although dating through glottochronology has been somewhat controversial, it does provide a
rough sense of when people speaking a particular language lived in the area. Tracing words and their meanings throughout the region and back in time also helps identify concepts and their variations that have been fundamental to the culture for a long time, while loanwords provide evidence for cross-cultural contacts. The historian must be careful, however, not to assume that languages are synonymous with communities of people, since languages can spread without human migration.

Historical linguistics, like archaeology, identifies older changes more accurately than it does the recent. While relying on the existing linguistic work of David Schoenbrun and Christopher Ehret as well as locally published dictionaries, my research also included collecting core vocabularies of one hundred words in Ngoreme, Ikizu, Nata, Ikoma, Ishenyi, Sonjo, and Dadog and assembling a nearly complete 1,563-word cultural vocabulary list in Nata. The word lists were used to figure out how closely the languages were related to one another and the cultural vocabulary to see how meanings of words reflected their Great Lakes Bantu roots or borrowings from other language groups.

Both ecological and ethnographic sources assisted in reconstructing earlier historical contexts for oral tradition. Since this area is located in the Serengeti-Mara ecosystem and near Serengeti National Park, abundant ecological data is available. While I do not claim to be an ecologist (or archaeologist, ethnographer, or linguist), I have read the works of ecologists looking for patterns that might explain or corroborate the human imagined landscapes evoked in the elders’ stories. When I walked with elders out to the historical sites, I located them on a geographical grid using a Geographical Positioning System and the technology of GIS (Geographical Information Systems). Peter Shetler constructed the maps in this book using this information as well as data from the Serengeti Research Institute GIS project under the Frankfurt Zoological Society, with which he was involved in 1995 and 1996. These maps, which appear at the beginning of each chapter, allow us to see the landscape from a bird’s-eye view, a vantage for visualizing the information that the elders transmit in oral traditions but see in a different way. Ecological data helps to place some evidence from oral traditions and ethnography in the time frame of slow and long-term ecological changes. I have read the existing ethnographies from the region, but I also did my own informal village survey and have learned one local language as part of my method. A friend in the village met with me regularly to learn and practice Nata, although I was never proficient and functioned mostly in Swahili. Participant observation was also an important method, as my family and I lived in the rural Nata village of Bugerera for eighteen months and were incorporated into the extended family of Magoto Mossi Magoto. I made the habit of visiting women in neighboring homesteads in the late afternoon and sometimes helped with their daily tasks. However, I had to use ethnographic data carefully in relation to
other sources, since one cannot assume an unchanging “traditional” past from which these practices were transmitted.

Oral traditions, although also problematic, formed the most important source used in this study. Historical narratives in the western Serengeti, like those of many other noncentralized societies in Africa, are nonformal and loosely structured. They appear more in the form of conversation than as epic poetry in set verse.22 No particular word exists in local languages for this genre of oral tradition except as amang’ana ga kare (matters of the past). No formal experts control this knowledge although some are considered more knowledgeable than others. Those who know more about “matters of the past” acquired their knowledge through personal desire or aptitude, rather than purely as a function of their social position. Some people have a gift for it, given by the ancestors. Elders attain legitimacy as narrators of “matters of the past” and specialize in particular kinds of knowledge through a combination of ability, respect, role, interest, experience, and the sanction of the ancestors—all of which are manifested in the effectiveness of their tales.23 The people most often recommended to me as those who knew about these “matters of the past” were men more than sixty years old who occupied positions of authority or respect in the “traditional” structures of society and were often consulted for their wisdom.24 Men who had education and held political offices were considered especially valued intermediaries for an outsider like myself. On the other hand, many felt that educated people disparaged “traditional” knowledge. Material wealth was not a particular criterion for recommendation. Almost all were born after colonial rule and had once worked as migrant laborers, but the most knowledgeable elders had spent much of their lives at home in the Mara region. Because the kinds of stories that men told were influenced by their roles, experiences, and interests, historical interpretation of oral traditions is inherently problematic.

Women’s stories have not been part of the corpus of historical knowledge, thereby confirming the problem that oral traditions represent the experiences of only certain segments of society. Women possessed entirely distinct forms of knowledge about the past. When I asked to speak with those who knew about history, local colleagues, men and women alike, agreed that men of this generation were the keepers of historical knowledge. When I insisted on talking to women, I found that most women did not know the larger ethnic accounts of origin, migrations, clans, ritual, and battle, which made up the spontaneous content of interviews with men. At first I thought that women were just reluctant to give me their versions of the past, but I later became convinced that women possessed not just another version but wholly different kinds of knowledge about the past.25 Because people learn about the past in the gendered spaces of the male courtyard beer party or the female cooking fire, men and women share neither styles of oral narration nor types of knowledge about the past. Men and women occupy
separate spheres of interaction in their daily routines, sharing the same world but participating in different, though intersecting, sets of discourses about that world. They keep and transmit historical knowledge by the paths they walk each day and the positions they occupy in the imagined male and female spaces that permeate their world. Women may learn some of men’s knowledge about the past, but they do not transmit those stories in the narrative style of men or in the formal setting of men’s courtyard meetings. Their knowledge about community relationships and genealogies is, however, critical to understanding the imagined landscapes shared with men, even though it does not appear in the formal narratives. A gendered analysis of oral tradition is necessary for finding its historical meaning.

I had access to these stories about the past as a young American woman with a husband and two children who had been associated with the Tanzania Mennonite Church. While I carried out formal research in the Mara region at various times over the past decade, I have worked and lived in this region over the past two decades: from 1985 to 1991 as a development worker with the Mennonite Central Committee, for eighteen months in 1995–96 as part of my Ph.D. dissertation research, during a brief follow-up visit in 2001, and for three months of research in 2003. Regional context also comes from living and working in Ethiopia from 1980 to 1983 and again in 2005. During my research I also collected locally written histories from groups of elders in the region that were published as *Telling Our Own Stories: Local Histories from South Mara, Tanzania*. In interviews with over two hundred Nata, Ikoma, Ishenyi, Ngoreme, Ikizu, Ismajek, Kuria, Rotigenga, Ruri, Sizaki, Sonjo, and Zanaki informants I asked open-ended questions, trying to explore the range of historical knowledge. When I put these accounts side by side, a common regional history emerged in many unique versions. I gained access to knowledgeable elders through the mediation and recommendation of trusted local people who introduced me in the various communities and helped with the interviews, which often lasted more than four hours at a sitting. Although I learned some Nata, the interviews that started in Swahili often turned to any of the other, often mutually recognizable, languages for which I needed interpretation. Those friends who helped me were part of social networks established during earlier work in the region, and they were themselves committed to preserving local history. The oral research depended on this network of friends, family, and colleagues. The extended family of Nyawagamba Magoto hosted our family in Nata Bugerera during the main research period, and he is responsible in large part for making the research possible. The oral histories, however, cannot stand on their own as unmediated accounts of the past. They must be reconnected to the social groups and historical contexts from which they were transmitted. This context is reconstructed by placing the evidence from other disciplines (archaeology, historical linguistics, ecology, ethnography) within a framework built by using the theoretical tools from a wide variety of scholars.
Figure 0.2. (top) Author (left) in an interview with Mechara Masauta, Robanda, Ikoma. *Photo by Paul Shetler, 2003*

Figure 0.3. (right) Nyawagamba Magoto, Mbiso, Nata. *Photo by Paul Shetler, 2003*
Environmental historians provide the tools for understanding how the environment has been created through interaction with human society and human society through interaction with the environment. Because the popular image of a wild and natural Serengeti has so strongly influenced conservation policy, it is important to demonstrate the argument long made by environmental historians that virtually all landscapes are created by human intervention and that the division between nature and culture is artificial. On the other hand, this book further draws on the work of historians who acknowledge the biological limits to social creation of the environment and look at environmental features as historical actors in their own right. For this book, the particular kind of soil, grass species, or rainfall pattern matters in charting historical patterns. Environmental historians are careful not to err too far on the side either of environmental determinism or of romanticizing the harmonious relationship of precolonial people with the environment. For example, Emmanuel Akyeampong’s “ecosocial” history of southeastern Ghana emphasizes the mutualism between people and their environment as a dynamic interaction. These tools allow us to see that western Serengeti peoples are neither natural conservationists nor destroyers, nor can one characterize their historical interactions with the environment homogeneously.

Recent studies in African social history using oral history also assist in the analysis of pan-African concepts of social organization found in their particular form in the western Serengeti. Many Africanist scholars have noticed the clear identification of people in their oral traditions with ecological zones (cattle people or hill people, for example) and the congruence of some of these categories with what we would now call ethnicity. Others have documented how extensive social networks of reciprocity were mobilized in times of famine, how communities used descent as an idiom for thinking about relationships, how the multiple meanings of ritual and of sacred sites changed over time, or how economic strategies concentrated on minimizing risk. The literature also provides a framework for understanding African resistance within a framework of the moral economy and local agenda. All these insights and more are used in each chapter of the book as tools for analyzing the data from a variety of sources. However, few of these social histories based on oral sources extend the analysis to a precolonial narrative beyond the nineteenth century. Through the new methodology introduced in this book, the tools of social historians can assist in reconstructing various time frames that are then brought together in one synthetic account of imagined landscapes moving through time. This chronology derived from local understandings disrupts and blurs the Eurocentric time periods of pre- and postcolonial. For the western Serengeti, interactions with Masai power in the second half of the nineteenth century was at least as important
for social and environmental changes as colonial incursions. This book builds specifically on the work of scholars in East Africa, and especially Tanzania, who have produced a wealth of recent literature combining social and environmental history, including James Giblin, on patronage as an older way of protecting the environment; Steven Feierman, on local ways of evaluating leadership in terms of its efficacy in healing or harming the land; and the collection compiled by Greg Maddox, James Giblin, and Isaria Kimambo on the intersection of social history and environmental change.39

Environmental historians also provide tools for dealing with the question of the ongoing destruction of the environment. Depending on their perspective, some scholars have blamed land degradation on poor or “primitive” African techniques and management; others, on the advent of Western capitalism, with its global trade and colonialism. William Cronon argues that the narrative forms and plot lines we use to tell environmental history lead to very different conclusions about the trajectory of environmental change.40 African historians debate degradation narratives that point to the collapse of indigenous environmental control in the late nineteenth century, emphasizing previously successful African ways of management.41 Newer studies have cautioned against a monolithic analysis of colonial discourse and environmental science, bringing out the conflicting and ambivalent ways that colonial officers both denied and championed or learned from local knowledge.42 Archival sources from the Musoma District, the administrative authority of the western Serengeti, show colonial officers both reprimanding chiefs for not growing cassava or cotton and investigating resistance in local populations to sleeping sickness. Some historians applied an ecological model of disequilibrium ecosystems to rethink apparent environmental degradation.43 Examined with these tools, the late nineteenth century, a time of ecological disaster in the western Serengeti, becomes an important turning point in the narrative. However, it does not mark the destruction of the environment but rather the beginning of the end of human occupation and the development of a protected reserve for wild animals.

A growing body of literature serves as an aid for analyzing the conservation movement and the development of parks in Africa in relation to the communities that surround them.44 African parks, following the U.S. Yellowstone model, were based on a European way of seeing the landscape that separated productive space from leisure space or civilization from nature, while at the same time legitimizing state control over land and natural resources. Jane Carruthers demonstrates how the Kruger National Park in South Africa became a symbol of Afrikaner identity, as it preserved a “remnant” of the vacant wilderness that the pioneers conquered.45 Because Europeans assumed that their view was universal, they thought that the way to solve the problem of local opposition to the parks and poaching was to “educate” the people to appreciate nature, essentially to make them see the landscape in the same way.46 Grzimek’s film, released a few years
before Tanzanian independence, said that “our Serengeti” could not be secure until the “natives” (“who believed that the animals were only being preserved so that Europeans could come and shoot them”) were “won over” to protecting the animals as the “property of all mankind.”

Although park policy is largely enforced by coercive violence, beginning in the 1980s there has been a movement throughout Africa toward community conservation, or giving the people who live near the park benefits from a stake in preserving it. While these programs have clearly improved western Serengeti peoples’ attitude toward the park, community conservation efforts may actually be increasing government control over land and resources and not substantially reducing violations of park rules.

Significant to this study are the tools of analysis for making the critical connections between landscape and memory. Landscape as an analytical concept developed among an interdisciplinary mix of geographers, ecologists, regional historians, and art historians in Europe, especially during the interwar years. The concept revived with a postmodern turn in the 1980s and 1990s to look at the “socially constructed and politically contested” ways of seeing the environment as an ongoing process. Landscape as it was first conceived was both a genre of European seventeenth- to nineteenth-century painting and the new class-specific way that these paintings presented the environment. Because European landscapes separated people from nature, by viewing the environment from an outside and distant gaze, many scholars wondered whether the idea of landscape was entirely a European phenomenon. Scholars were quick to identify the concept of landscape in other cultures and times but also to recognize the particular connection of landscape to imperialism. For example, Deborah Bird Rose finds that Australian Aborigines view the “country,” or the land, as a living being with a history and a people who care for it. Candace Slater compares competing visions of the Amazon rainforest, contrasting the “gigantic” images of outsiders, who project their own fears and desires on the Amazon to the “shapeshifter” images of local people, who see mystery and hope for transformation in the forest. One of the first African historical landscape studies, Cohen and Odhiambo’s *Siyà*, shows how Luo concepts of landscape and identity shifted over the last hundred years.

Africanists, too, have used the tools of landscape analysis in historical work, concentrating on colonial conflicts over landscape perceptions and particular features of the land. Tamara Giles-Vernick’s study of a forest community in Central Africa explores Mpiemu people’s perceptions of the environment through a category of environmental and historical knowledge called *doli*. She shows how these ways of seeing and interpreting the landscape changed in the twentieth century and how local people used *doli* to engage in conflicts with contemporary conservation efforts. Michele Wagner investigates history as it is embedded in mental maps of the Baragane (Burundi) environment. Some of these studies also demonstrate how landscape is gendered, allowing us to look critically at
oral sources that have been controlled by men’s knowledge and to see how men and women have used the landscape in different ways. Landscape studies, both in the West and in Africa, often focus on the stories surrounding particular environmental features such as forests, rivers, or mountains, while much of the work from Africa concentrates on sacred places. For example, Sandra E. Greene looks at the effects of profound shifts in understandings of sacred places during the colonial era and how that affected and was affected by new kinds of social identities. In an example from the Zambezi River, JoAnn McGregor contrasts a European way of imagining the landscape that emphasizes the generic sites of scenic visual value with African accounts that feature sites of specific historic value associated with ancestors and past events. Terence Ranger studied the shifting meanings associated with the sacred site of the Matopos hills of Zimbabwe that were particularly evident at moments of conflict. These Africanist landscape understandings can be extended beyond specific sacred sites and into the precolonial era.

Literature on the development of Anglo-American and specifically British ideas about landscape and nature provide the tools for understanding colonial and conservationist perceptions of the landscape. Roderick Neumann describes a “nature aesthetic” that developed from artistic representations of “picturesque” idyllic or awe-inspiring landscapes, without evidence of human work and poverty, that positioned the observer outside the landscape. Elite landlords and bourgeois capitalists promoted this ideal view of the landscape separated into productive (practical, rational) and consumptive (aesthetic, recreational) spheres in the context of transition to industrialization as a way to legitimize control over land and resources. Others have shown how this view of the landscape was also evident in the popular craze for natural history among settlers in the colonies, who used nature both to conquer and transform the new environment as well as to critique the problems of urban industrial society and the destructive environmental policies of the colonial government. Ecological science, and eventually environmentalism, developed out of these imagined landscapes and more specifically in relation to management of the colonies, as well as in interaction with the colonized.

Both hunting and appreciating nature became a mark of class distinction as social access to hunting in Britain and the colonies was gradually restricted to “sportsmanship” rather than subsistence. The idea of the game preserve was based on the model of the nineteenth-century private shooting estates that took common land to create the “planned wilderness” of paintings and literature. Africans, first seen as part of nature in their primitive, innocent state, became impediments to elite consumption of nature.

The way that memory and identity is “inscribed on land” as explored in the landscape literature provides a critical perspective for analysis. Much of this scholarship draws on Maurice Halbwachs’s and Paul Connerton’s work on collective memory, which demonstrates that memory is socially constructed and
structured by group identity. James Fentress and Chris Wickham, interested in the social meaning of memory rather than recovering historical facts, look at the history of memory, or how the way we remember changes over time in relation to context. Memories are always connected to a context, involving a particular task and reflecting the collective experience of a particular social group when they are formed. In addition, memories must be simplified and conventionalized or transformed into conceptual images in order to be socially meaningful and thus remembered. However, the images of social memory rapidly lose connection with the original context; they are decontextualized and reinterpreted when they are transmitted as oral traditions.

THE METHODOLOGY OF A SPATIAL ANALYSIS OF ORAL TRADITION

These insights from the study of social memory provide the framework for the central contribution of this study in presenting a methodology for unlocking the historical meaning of oral traditions in the reconstruction of a history of memory. I argue that through a spatial analysis of oral tradition, in conjunction with other kinds of evidence, historians can recontextualize landscape memory or reconnect images from oral traditions with the older contexts through which they were transmitted in the past. Historians using oral tradition as their principal source of evidence have been confounded by the central problem of the reliability of this source in accessing an objective rather than a mythical past. It has been demonstrated many times that the content of oral tradition is not stable and that it changes from performance to performance over time and in relation to the various historical contexts in which the traditions are told. Different social groups tell different stories about the past and in different ways to legitimize a particular social order. When the social context changes, features of the oral tradition that no longer have meaning drop out or change to reflect new meanings. Not only does the present influence the narration of the past but knowledge of the past most surely influences our experience of the present. The historian’s analysis of any one tradition must take into consideration the present context in which narrators tell it, as well as all the other historical contexts through which it has passed in transmission. Because of these difficulties, many have despaired of finding any verifiable historical content in oral traditions.

One way to assess the historical content of oral tradition is through an understanding of its narrative form. Studies of oral memory have shown that narrators construct (rather than reproduce) oral traditions in performance through the use of mnemonic systems, the central elements of which scholars of oral tradition call core images or clichés. Fentress and Wickham contrast the visual character of these images that embody knowledge (“memory of things”), common among oral societies throughout the world, to a semantic knowledge (“memory of words”), characteristic of literate societies. By recalling these core images
narrators improvise the entire narrative as they tell it. In the Nata origin story the core images are a hunter following his prey from the wilderness and a woman at her cave by the spring. Narrators elaborate details of how they met and what they said around these core images to form episodes or narrative units that they string together to create the larger story anew in each performance. Historians of oral tradition have long postulated that it is these core images that hold the key to historical interpretation. Jan Vansina proposed guidelines for interpreting the “implicit meaning” of these core images, or “clichés,” such as comparison with other traditions and other cultural expressions. Joseph Miller later suggested that since core images serve as the mnemonic device for recalling the story, people pass on these images from generation to generation, even if they no longer understand the original meaning. Facts are lost during transmission not just because they are gradually generalized and forgotten but also when they no longer apply or have meaning in a new context. Miller postulated that the core images held the best possibility of bearing “information from and about the past.” While the reconceptualization of these core images often erases historical fact as the images are dislocated from the original context, the process also ensures an incredible stability of core images and shared meanings.

Some of the most important core images found in African traditions are visual and, more specifically, spatial images of landscape, place, or topography. Work on oral traditions and memory over the past fifty years shows that while oral traditions are notoriously deficient in usable historical chronologies, they are amazingly consistent in their accurate representations of specific places and ways of understanding space, suggesting that memories themselves are attached to place and spatial representation. As Isabel Hofmeyr, writing about South Africa, puts it, “oral memory has a close mnemonic relationship with place and location, and in a variety of societies people often bank information in the landscape.” She questions whether people can sustain memory if they lose touch with the places and landscapes of the core images. Many of the oral traditions that I have collected over the past ten years in the western Serengeti are little more than a decontextualized string of place names in a clan migration narrative or the stories of miraculous events in specific places. Elders wanted to take me out to see the places themselves and to walk over the landscapes as they told the stories, providing more information about people, events, and ideas associated with the places. However, the recognition that core images often appear as spatial images does not solve the problem of their interpretation. The first generation of historians to interpret oral traditions in Africa accepted the literal meaning of place names in migration or clan origin traditions, which resulted in untenable reconstructions of the movement of large and discrete groups of people over long distances. The internal meaning of spatial images is not always explicit and the original contexts not always clear. The central focus of my investigation was how to interpret these many references to space and place in the memories of elders.
The historian best approaches the interpretation of spatial images by understanding how and why our minds spatialize memory. Studies of memory have shown that people store the recollections of their past as spatial rather than temporal images. We remember events and people by locating them in particular places, landscapes, and organizations of space rather than by reference to time or date. Thus memories appear to us as a sequence of places rather than as the orderly passage of time. For example, we cannot conceive of or tell our own family histories without memories of the succession of family homes to anchor and order the stories in time. In his exploration of the “poetics of space,” Gaston Bachelard writes, “Memories are motionless, and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are.” This insight has profound implications for the historian using the evidence of memory as a primary source. As Bachelard notes, “to localize a memory in time is merely a matter for the biographer and only corresponds to a sort of external history, for external use, to be communicated to others.” The job of the historian, like the biographer, is to fix memories within a chronological sequence in order to understand change over time and its possible causes. Yet if Bachelard is right, memory cannot provide the historian with precise temporal sequences or duration. Clearly, the historian cannot reconstruct the temporal framework of oral memory without paying particular attention to the indigenous conceptual frameworks that govern the use of time and space in oral narratives.

If the spatial elements of oral tradition are part of this mnemonic system of core spatial images, then the historian can use them as “evidence in spite of themselves” that provide tangible information about the past. The spatial elements of oral tradition—references to place-names, landscapes, topographical features, and the social organization of space—are crucial elements in the historical reconstruction of this region, rather than geographical background. While historians have often disregarded these elements as useless details they provide bits of evidence from the past, transmitted to the present because of their function in oral memory. Imagined landscapes, embedded in oral traditions as core images, are artifacts from the past that, although people might understand their meaning differently or lose their meaning altogether in different time periods, remain tenacious fragments of past social worlds transmitted in oral memory. Like the ceramic artifacts that an archaeologist unearths, a particular shard may have been used in subsequent generations as a shallow water container for chicks in the yard or later picked up off the refuse heap by a child to be made into a toy. Still, the archaeologist can sometimes reconstruct its original use and historical context through careful comparison with similar shards found in other places, other kinds of artifacts found nearby, and contemporary pottery forms and their uses. These encoded fragments yield information about the past only as historians interpret them within their cultural context and alongside other kinds of evidence.
Instead of preserving oral narratives for their esoteric or archaic value, oral traditions are transmitted to the next generation by and through specific social groups to communicate knowledge critical to maintaining group identity and relationships with others. Individuals preserve memories as members of a group and those memories are situated within the socially specific spatial framework provided by that group. Memories are not only spatially located but also socially located within particular groups. We can identify each kind of oral tradition with the history of a particular social unit. Different social groups located in one place may preserve radically different memories about the same time period because each builds on its own “mental map.” Just how spatial organization relates to social organization has been the subject of much scholarly debate, beginning with geographers who argued that landscape functions not as a neutral backdrop to the events of history but shapes and is shaped by human action. A classic argument, first articulated by Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss in 1903, holds that the built spaces we inhabit represent the social structure. Scholars have demonstrated this mainly in the layout of homestead and village as well as the interior design of houses. I extend this observation to hypothesize that oral traditions encode social relationships and identities by employing a spatial imagery that includes landscapes and topography. How people order their memories within a particular spatial construct or landscape, then, depends on their own social identity—that is, their socially shared, situational definition of self in relation to others—that both shapes and is shaped by the landscape. As social identity changes over time so do oral traditions and ways of seeing the landscape. Thus, as powerful symbols of collective identity that both drive and reflect historical change, landscapes are always social and political.

If this is to be a history of landscape memory, then the next step in solving the problem of interpreting oral traditions is to find a way of determining the time frame or chronology of these different spatial images that have long since been separated from their historical context. Some have described oral traditions as resembling palimpsests, or tablets that various people have written over with the older writing just barely visible beneath. In the search for historical meaning, the core spatial images for each set of oral traditions must be analyzed and recontextualized. One can hypothesize and test the relative age of these images by interpreting their cultural meaning in connection with other forms of evidence and in comparison with other traditions. Through this process the historian can arrive at a tentative understanding of relative time depth and how the different elements of a single tradition were reinterpreted at different time periods. For example, references to practices associated with the core spatial images in oral traditions as well as current ethnography for which we find similar evidence in the ecology of the area—like plant adaptations or species selection that take a long time—might indicate a similarly old time depth. Likewise core spatial images in oral traditions that describe practices or settlement patterns also in the
ethnography seem to be old when they are congruent with proto-Bantu words or loanwords from now extinct languages or archeological finds that can be dated to an early period. These congruities of evidence can never be conclusive proof that the practices were not adopted fairly recently or at any other time in between. But with enough evidence from a variety of different kinds of sources one can build up a logical case that identifies the historical context that seems to fit the core spatial images of the oral traditions.

More problematic yet for dating is when one must deal with the material that represents continuities in social patterns over an indeterminate period. For example, chapter 2 connects the spatial images of diversification, inclusion, and distribution from clan traditions to economic strategies, homestead patterns, leadership roles, and descent systems, for which the memories of elders living today talking about the “traditional way of doing things” provides most of the evidence. Ecological evidence of climatic, demographic, and soil data does provide some evidence for the economic possibilities of early settlers while kinship and leadership terminology can be traced back in time through the methodologies of historical linguistics. Again the congruence is only circumstantial and holds up only as it presents a logical reconstruction of long-term social patterns that are reflected in this particular view of the landscape. One cannot know with certainty that western Serengeti peoples have used regional social networks established through clan and friendship to gain access to food during famine times for the past millennium. But if the core spatial images of clan stories that depict a landscape of social networks are indeed an artifact from the past, then all the other evidence that is consistent with these images might logically identify long-term regional patterns. Although the nature of the sources does not allow us to say any more than that, if or until other evidence becomes available, further confirmation comes from a study of different kinds of temporalities.

Another problem in the identifying historical sequences in oral traditions is that they cannot be read as a straightforward account of linear time because they employ different concepts of time or temporalities. African historians have proposed at least three kinds of traditions, representing three different indigenous time frames: (1) the origin traditions of clans and ethnic groups employ *mythical time*, (2) scarce and cryptic information in the form of lists of settlement sites or place-names related to descent groups, sometimes called the *floating gap*, refers to the long middle period of *social process* or *cyclical time*, and (3) stories about the more recent past that can be dated by genealogies or age-sets draw on *historical time*. These temporalities of indigenous periodization represent relative chronologies that become more disconnected and mythical the further back in time they go. Although the historian must consider that oral traditions of the first two temporalities are also used as “social charters” to justify present power arrangements, their careful analysis can still provide important evidence about the past. Similarly, Fernand Braudel’s classic history of the Mediterranean is
structured around three different temporalities: geographical time (history of imperceptible changes in the relationships of people to their environment), social time (the slow but perceptible rhythms of social process), and individual time (the short-term political time of remembered history). His model allows for each type of analysis to simultaneously supply a different kind of historical information through its own time frame, corresponding to a different spatial scale and social unit. 

Local concepts of both time and space must be combined in the analysis of oral traditions, although firm dates are not always possible. These concepts of time or temporalities are used as the basic organizing principle of this book’s chronology.

The landscapes derived from oral traditions presented in the first three chapters represent long-term continuities in basic social processes such as economic strategies, kinship, and generational relations that may date back two thousand years but still have ongoing relevance today. These core spatial images, also evident in other kinds of sources, represent underlying themes or generative principles; they generate a range of strategies and options for social organization that change form over time while retaining the foundational approaches to the recurring problems that have confronted western Serengeti communities in relation to their environment. Oral tradition rationalizes these generative principles that govern the daily elaboration of social practice into a static “official” version of what is a dynamic process to preserve the existing social order. When we understand lineage as a strategy rather than a structure, we see people’s everyday actions as significant because they are making choices rather than following a script. The early-period traditions present social organization in a rigid and timeless, “traditional” form. Although this is the given spatial text, people have read it in countless ways over time. The exclusive narration of the “official version” has now silenced some of these various interpretations. The historian must resist the trap of the “ethnographic present” inherent in the telling of oral tradition by using them alongside other sources and other versions that give them historical specificity.

We can be reasonably sure that oral traditions do contain information about the past because of the remarkable congruence between historical reconstructions based on the core spatial images of oral tradition and the contexts reconstructed through the evidence of historical linguistics, comparative ethnography, archaeology, or written sources. If those who tell oral traditions cannot have known about this other evidence, how else could they tell such similar stories concerning social processes in the distant past? Oral traditions provide a culturally grounded expression of historical processes about which we know from other kinds of evidence. The historians must also accept the limitations of oral traditions. The genres of oral tradition corresponding to “mythical time” and “social process time” cannot by themselves show change over time. Only the comparison with other sources and with various versions of the same types of traditions
throughout the region or among different social groups can accomplish this result.99 Even then these lead only to tenuous hypotheses, usually confirmed by written sources. However, even once the oral traditions can be confirmed by written sources in the late nineteenth century, one is still interested in how these landscape memories change within that historical context.

Ultimately, my goal as a socially engaged historian, like the western Serengeti narrators themselves, is to produce an account of the past that speaks to current debates and the concerns of common people’s lives in the western Serengeti today. This book aims to insert a new historical voice, an internal perspective from the communities surrounding Serengeti National Park, into the discussions of those thinking about the future of African environments. Concerns about the environment and its degradation, including the question of how to preserve the continent’s prolific wildlife, are among the most controversial and pressing issues facing Africa today.100 The various approaches of governments, scientists, conservationists, NGOs, historians, and local people to these problems are a direct result of how they imagine those same African landscapes. While the park’s managers have been successful at preserving the wildlife, they are ultimately fighting a losing battle on the borders against poachers, woodcutters, and grazers. Even though ecologists and historians alike have given more attention to indigenous environmental knowledge and championed a movement toward community involvement in and benefit from parks, after two decades of rather spotty success with community conservation they still know little about how local people who live in those environments have imagined and humanized the landscape.101 An appreciation of local landscape memory is the first step in working toward rethinking present practice. Acquiring that environmental knowledge will surely add a rich, new dimension to present understandings of the Serengeti-Mara ecosystem and provide a methodology for accessing similar knowledge about other African landscapes.

At the same time this book presents a new methodology that speaks to the concerns of African social historians who have recognized the importance of writing history from an African perspective and from sources generated in Africa. This book models the application of a spatial analysis of oral traditions by presenting a complex and historically grounded understanding of how the people who live in the Serengeti ecosystem have viewed the landscape over time and how those views have affected their interactions with the environment. The methodology combines many of the tools of analysis and sources of evidence on which African historians have long relied. Yet it combines them in a way that allows for historical claims about the precolonial past even where sources are scarce and problematic. While recent theoretical debates among historians have cast further doubt on the use of oral traditions, my hope is that this new methodology will reinvigorate the study of precolonial African societies and the discussion about oral tradition as history.102 The contrasting visions of the land-
scape represented by the Grzimeks and the Ikoma elders concern more than a conflict over control of the Serengeti's natural resources; they are also about a struggle over the symbolic meaning of the landscape and its relevance to a people's history.103 Parks conceived of as natural spaces that exclude people and keep them from seeing and interacting with the landscape separate the people from the “texts” of their history and ultimately erase that history. Although a seemingly esoteric enterprise, taking time to see the landscape from the perspective of others in an interconnected world matters profoundly for those involved both in the study of the African past and in setting policy for the African future.