

The Politics of Ethnic Identity and Wildlife Conservation in Kenya

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Abstract

Current debates about wildlife conservation in Kenya raise contentious issues about the rights of ‘indigenous’ (pastoral) cultures, since most of the rich wildlife areas in Kenya are in current or former pastoralist territories. Strategically, conservation groups and governments like Kenya, who depend on revenues from wildlife-based tourism, have realized the need for local cooperation with these communities for the simple reason that up to 70 percent of Kenyan wildlife migrate outside protected areas for part of the year. Simply put, conservationists interested in biodiversity conservation in East Africa must work with pastoral communities near parks and reserves for the simple reason that they host large populations of wildlife during part of the year. This presentation traces the ascendance of pro-market reforms in wildlife conservation from the early 1990s to the 2000s when almost all conservation-based activities were gauged in neo-liberal economic terms. It will show the ways that new strategies of local political resistance--as well as accommodation—have emerged among pastoral communities in Kenya. By focusing on a set of Maa-speaking communities in three districts of Kenya--Baringo, Kajiado, and Samburu (including parts of neighboring Laikipia District)--the lecture will compare different conservation programs and their impacts in multiple cultural and political settings. It also will address the ways that sets of globalized discourses and policies based on neoliberal assumptions about privatization, local community empowerment and participation, and the benefits of private versus state actors have strongly influenced the ways that conservation programs are implemented in key pastoral/wildlife areas of Kenya and will show how pastoral lands are being lost (or have the strong potential of being lost) under different mechanisms of conservation control. The trends, if they hold up, may have as much of an impact on pastoral livelihoods and lands, as did earlier colonial resettlement programs and national park systems. The presentation is based on periods of anthropological fieldwork conducted in 1995-1996 and 2003-2007.

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