Commoditizing the safari and making space for conflict: Place, identity and parks in East Africa

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Abstract

Increased resource scarcity, the social construction of nature, the disintegration of moral economy and associated policy shifts are often cited as the main drivers of resource conflicts in East Africa. Research in geography, anthropology and rural sociology has unveiled how common explanations of resource conflicts overlook multi-scalar political, economic, social, cultural and environmental tensions. The purpose of this study is to provide more nuanced explanations of resource conflicts by incorporating three disparate but related threads of literature. Using literatures on the commodification of nature, multi-stranded notions of identity and geographical conceptualizations of ‘place’, I demonstrate how three transformational moments structure and propagate conflicts between herders and protected area managers around a national park in Kenya. I argue that the rise of a commoditized form of nature tourism coupled with idealized notions of ‘nature’ and ‘wilderness’ have altered the micro-geography of interaction between herders and protected area managers. These altered geographies of interaction have diluted the shared history and traditional relations of reciprocity, created new social milieux, and lead to the creation of binary identities among herders and protected area managers. The enforcement of these binary identities culminates in conflict.

Prologue

On December 12, 2005, armed Maasai game rangers apprehended several Maasai herders grazing their families’ cattle inside a world famous national park in East Africa. At the onset of the worst drought in twenty-five years, these herders were directing their cattle to traditional niche grazing areas that are today located inside the protected area. The herders were chased across the landscape in four-wheel-drive vehicles and hid between clumps of Croton bushes before they were caught, beaten and abused. They were held in a makeshift jail until their families paid a hefty fine for their release.

This was not the majestic image of national parks presented in popular media. This was the reality for these herders.

Why did Maasai rangers resort to using violent means to apprehend herders grazing their cattle in the protected area? Why did herders seek out niche grazing areas inside the protected area? How did rangers know cattle were grazing there? Why does this matter for our understanding of resource conflicts? And what political geographies are at stake here?

Introduction

Over the last few decades our understanding of the drivers of conflicts related to resource use, control and access between different groups in and around protected areas, like the one I present above, has grown considerably. A large body of work in political ecology and political geography has empirically demonstrated that popular but apolitical representations of resource-related conflicts, such as the resource abundance and resource scarcity approaches (Homer-Dixon, 1999), oversimplify or misdiagnose conflicts. These apolitical representations detract attention from the important historical contexts of human–environment interactions (Derman, Odgaard, & Sjaastad, 2007; Peluso & Watts, 2001) within and around protected areas (Schwartz, 2006; Veron & Fehr, 2011). Counter-narratives blend critical social theory, embrace the changing materiality of the landscape and integrate innovative research methods to highlight the multi-layered historical, political, economic, and ecological dimensions of resource conflicts (Bassett, 1988; Brockington, 2002; Bryant, 2000; Neumann, 1998, 2004; Schroeder, 1999; Turner, 2004).

Several themes have become apparent in these counter-narratives, particularly within the context of African pastoral and wildlife landscapes. First, the social construction of ‘wilderness’ is important in setting the stage for conflict (Adams & McShane, 1992;...
Brooks, 2005). Idealized notions of ‘nature’ and the increasingly distant binary between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ (Ingold, 2000) have led to separation of productive peoples livelihoods and ‘pristine’ wilderness (Adams & McShane, 1992). Second, conflicts between park-adjacent dwellers and protected area managers stem from incompatibilities between discourses on colonial conservation strategies and discourses framed within an African moral economy (Neumann, 1998). Third, resource conflicts are the product of state policies and resource politics, which prohibit local people from accessing critical natural resources in protected areas (Hitchcock, 1995; Peluso, 1993). This is because local livelihood practices present a perceived threat to the conservation of biodiversity (Brockington, 2002).

These three themes provide a useful starting point from which to begin to construct alternative narratives of resource conflicts. As many scholars have noted, conflicts often have complex roots embedded in historically contingent processes that are continually reworked by changing social, political and environmental conditions (summarized in Derman et al., 2007; Peluso & Watts, 2001). Contemporary understandings of conflict should therefore be cognizant of changing patterns and processes of human interaction with the environment within local places (Turner, 2004). Additionally, a diagnosis of resource conflicts can benefit from engagements with new and old literatures, which reflect more nuanced understandings of how groups and societies interact (Derman et al., 2007). These approaches are attentive to political ecology’s conceptual toolkit, which emphasizes how power relations within social interactions structure and are structured by conflicts (Peluso & Watts, 2001).

Emerging literatures on how natural resources are commoditized, conceptualized and monitored (e.g. Brooks, Spierenburg, Van Brakel, Kolk, & Lukhozi, 2011; Carrier & Macleod, 2005; Igoe, Neves, & Brockington, 2010) coupled with theories from literatures on identity and conflict (Derman et al., 2007; Sen, 2006) and place (Tuan, 1977) can produce new ways of more precisely diagnosing resource conflicts. In seeking to understand these conflicts, this paper draws on three sets of literatures.

First, researchers have unveiled how the physical environment is becoming increasingly commoditized, managed and marketed (summarized in Heynen, McCarthy, Prudham, & Robbins, 2007; Prudham, 2009). Researchers have also documented the ascendance of neoliberal environmental policies (Bakker, 2007; Mansfield, 2004), which encourage the commodification of resources under the belief that privatization and market exchange hold the key to better conservation and management of natural resources (Heynen et al., 2007; Prudham, 2009, p.123). Scholars have also argued that global capitalism and conservation practices have become so intertwined that conservation organizations and policies directly enable the marketing of commodities. Igoe argues that, following Debord (1994 [1967]), these commodities are produced for us as a spectacle of images which “are not merely representations of late capitalist realities, they are an indispensable part of those realities” (Igoe, 2010, p. 376).

The presence of charismatic megafauna within the iconic landscapes of East Africa has contributed to this spectacle of images and led to the development of a large heritage tourism industry, which generates billions of dollars for national economies (Akama, 1996). The touristed industry is operationalized around the wilderness experience as a distinct commodity that is created, marketed, consumed, and reproduced among a network of tour operators, local and national government agencies, hotels, lodges and camp-sites within and outside protected areas. Nature-based tourism (ecotourism) has become the primary mechanism by which conservation practices are implemented and funded (Brockington, Duffy, & Igoe, 2008; Meletis & Campbell, 2007). This is because ecotourism is promoted as a sustainable economic activity that does not degrade natural surroundings and “engages with local people and their activities in a way that respects and supports them” (Carrier & Macleod, 2005, p. 315).

However, critiques of ecotourism (Duffy, 2002; Kiss, 2004; Mowforth & Munt, 2009) suggest that labeling ecotourism as non-consumptive is misleading. By situating ecotourism within wider debates about moral forms of consumption (Bryant & Goodman, 2004), Meletis and Campbell (2007) demonstrate how ecotourism represents a visual form of consumption of environmental features and cultures. They write, “when they (local peoples) are included as part of an ecotourism attraction, they are often portrayed as stereotypes… and rich and complicated cultures are reduced to snapshots or themes for tourists to consume” (Meletis & Campbell, 2007, p. 856).

Carrier and Macleod apply a Marxian conception of commodity fetishism to the ‘ecotourist bubble’. The bubble, they argue, “focuses attention on the interaction between ecotourists and the particular nature or culture that they are visiting” and obscures the historical and social contexts of the tourist experience (Carrier & Macleod, 2005, p. 316). Brockington et al. (2008) note that the commodity (nature, wilderness, game animals) is fetishized such that the historical transformations that occurred to make the commodity available are obscured from consumers. Tourists are therefore unaware of “…the loss of access to natural resources that local people may have experienced so that… [the commodity could be consumed]” (Brockington et al., 2008, p.144). Tourists often travel to game parks expecting the (fetishized) ‘wilderness’ that has been marketed and sold to them, often for thousands of dollars. The pressures on tour companies to create an authentic safari experience for international visitors are high given the immense economic reality of ecotourism (West & Carrier, 2004). Tourists often become dissatisfied when they witness people and/or cattle inside protected areas, as these experiences contrast with the safari experience marketed to them (Brockington et al., 2008; Monbiot, 1994; Norton, 1996).

A second, and complementary, way by which we can better understand resource-related conflicts is to look at the field of identity construction. Anthropologists, geographers, sociologists and others have long argued that identity is fundamental to understanding conflict, and that identity is complex (Derman et al., 2007; Keith & Pile, 1993; Little, 1998; Okolie, 2003; Spear & Waller, 1993). Nobel laureate Amartya Sen suggests that individuals have multiple identities that transcend ethnicities, castes, nationality and ideology. Each person chooses to portray ‘an identity’ to share with others, and at the same time has identities they choose not to share. There are also competing identities “that everyone has”, adding “…in our normal lives we see ourselves as members of a variety of groups” (Sen, 2006, p. 12–17). Conflicts emanate from the desire to classify people into singular groups (Nic Craith, 2002). An investigation into conflicts between people and protected areas can therefore benefit from how different actors that operate within and around protected areas (rangers, park managers, tourists, tour operators, and herders) create, deploy and enforce different identities upon each other, in addition to exploring the varied contexts under which these processes occur.

Third, insights from the literature on ‘place’ in human geography (summarized in Cresswell, 2004; Pred, 1984; Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977) can also help us to better understand resource conflicts. This sub-field has demonstrated that meaningful interactions between and among human and non-human actors can be better understood by focusing on the co-dependent aspects of space and place. Tuan suggests “what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value” (Tuan, 1977, p. 6). Places are unique material and spiritual constructions that reflect the culturally specific
meanings attached to particular locations (Hetherington, 1997). Place-based approaches emphasize the historicity of interactions between various actors that operate within particular locations (Cresswell, 2004). Place is often at the center of felt value and the meanings attached to place embody the historical and contemporary day-to-day interactions between different actors within a particular place. Place, along with the politics and power associated with institutions, groups and individuals, provides a useful context from which to deploy an investigation of the processes that shape and contest identities over time (Keith & Pile, 1993).

My purpose in this paper is to bring together these three literatures in order to better understand contestations between people and protected areas using a case study from southern Kenya. In the following section, I describe the various dimensions of the study site and briefly introduce the history of people and protected areas in Kenya. These descriptions provide a useful starting point from which to understand how these new dialogs can provide more sophisticated representations of conflicts between people and protected areas. In subsequent sections, I demonstrate how an escalation in the frequency of contestations between herders and protected area managers can be attributed to the rise of a commoditized form of nature tourism — the ‘safari’. By employing place-based and actor-oriented approaches, which are sensitive to the spatiality and temporality of interactions between actors, I illuminate how the increased commodification of the ‘safari’ experience and idealized notions of ‘nature’ and ‘wilderness’ have altered the micro-geography of interaction between herders and protected area managers. These altered geographies of interaction have diluted these two groups’ shared history and traditional relations of reciprocity, leading to the creation of binary identities among herders and protected area managers. The enforcement of these binary identities culminates in conflict.

Identity, place and the ‘production’ of the Maasai Mara

Prior to European colonialism in Eastern Africa, there was a rich and complex history of interaction between pastoralists and rangeland environments. Across the region, archaeologists have uncovered pastoralist settlements up to 3000 years old (Collett, 1987), while anthropologists have unveiled how pastoralists established settlements and interacted with rangelands in ways that created social landscapes which embody their history and identity (Shetler, 2007).

Rangelands in East Africa are characterized by a high degree of spatial and temporal variability in rainfall and forage resources (Ellis & Galvin, 1994). Pastoralists cope with environmental variability by keeping different livestock breeds, periodic destocking and restocking, and movement across heterogeneous environments and resource gradients (Scoones, 1994). Beginning in the early twentieth century, pastoralists were evicted from and denied access to ancestral lands that would eventually become protected areas (Brockington, 2002; Hughes, 2007) and commercial agricultural fields (Kituiyi, 1985). Since that period, pastoral coping strategies have been further disrupted by the collectivization and subsequent privatization of land (Mwangi & Ostrom, 2009).

Today, the interactions between pastoralists and protected areas are varied, complex and contested because protected areas are a large source of revenue for the state, reservoirs of biodiversity (which are conserved in order to ensure tourism revenue), and traditional grazing reserves (which are becoming increasingly necessary to sustain pastoral livelihoods) (Butt, Shortridge, & WinkerPrins, 2009). Protected area managers often view pastoralists as a threat to the conservation of biodiversity, and by extension, to revenue generation, because of popular (but incorrect) perceptions that pastoralist densities will grow, sedentarization increase, and livestock production intensify, resulting in overgrazing and degradation (Homewood & Rodgers, 1991). However, many indigenous peoples feel morally justified to enter protected areas in order to access resources because of ancestral claims and customary rights to resources (Shetler, 2007). Many protected areas were established in some of the best grazing areas where there is a higher quality and quantity of forage.

This research is centered on three Maasai pastoralist villages which lie along the borders of the Maasai Mara National Reserve (MMNR) in southwestern Kenya. The iconic grassland landscape that covers much of the MMNR is the product of several shifts in vegetative cover over the last 150 years. These changes are the result of fluctuating human and elephant demography, changing densities and distributions of tsetse flies, variable grazing intensities of both livestock and wildlife and the changing intensity and frequency of natural and anthropogenic fires (Dublin, 1995). Archaeological research has revealed at least 200 pre-historic settlements dating back as far as 2000 years ago located around the MMNR (Robertshaw & Brown, 1990).

The MMNR is an unfenced and locally managed protected area located within the northern extent of the larger Serengeti-Mara Ecosystem (25,000 km²), straddling the Kenya and Tanzania border. It is considered to be East Africa’s most biologically diverse region (Sinclair & Arcese, 1995), supporting about 237 herbivores per km², making it one of the most productive terrestrial ecosystems in the world (Watahaka, 2004, p. 79). Precipitation is bi-modal corresponding to the north—south movement of the Intertropical Convergence Zone (ITCZ) and highly variable across space and time. There is a single long dry season between July and October/November, a short wet season between December and February, and a long wet season between March and May/June (Pennycook & Norton-Griffiths, 1976).

In 1948 the British colonial administration established the Mara Game Reserve (MGR), which was managed by the Game Department under the jurisdiction of the Royal National Parks of Kenya. In 1961, management of the MGR was brought under the control of the Narok County Council (NCC), a local government administration system, in order to more effectively share the revenues generated from tourism with the local community (Thompson, Serneels, Ole Kaelo, & Trench, 2009). Under the established rules, livestock grazing inside the MGR was prohibited (Talbot & Olindo, 1990, p. 69). In 1984, three excisions of the MGR were made along rivers so that the Maasai and their livestock could have access to perennial rivers (Walpole, Karanja, Sitati, & Leader-Williams, 2003). Between July and November, the MMNR is heavily used by millions of wildebeest and lesser numbers of Thompson’s gazelle and zebra that migrate yearly between the Serengeti National Park in Tanzania to the MMNR and surrounding areas. The migration is driven by rainfall and the availability of green biomass in the dry season (McNaughton, 1985). The MMNR has been represented as the very best Kenya has to offer international tourists and it is popularly known as, “the jewel in Kenya’s wildlife crown” (Walpole et al., 2003, p. 5), largely because of the wildebeest migration. Tourism visitation peaked in the mid-1990s when the MMNR accounted for as many as 200,000 visitors annually, making it one of Kenya’s most frequented protected areas (Karanja, 2003). Numerous new lodges and camps were constructed to cater to the increase in visitation, despite a moratorium on new construction (Karanja, 2003). In 2002, Reid et al. (2003) counted 13 airstrips and 72 tourist lodges and camps within and immediately outside of the MMNR. The highest rates of bed occupancy are between July and October/November and between December and January (Karanja, 2003, p. 7). Park entrance fees in 2006 were 40 $US per day for those who are not citizens or legal residents of Kenya, and most tourists spend between one and three nights visiting the MMNR.
The spectacular scenery of the MMNR regularly attracts heads of state, entrepreneurs and celebrities who visit Kenya. Shortly after a high-profile trip to the MMNR by then US Senator Barack Obama, America’s ABC television along with USA Today, proclaimed that, “the site of the great [wildebeest] migration is the new seventh wonder of the world” (ABC, 2006). ABC News also declared that, “the uniqueness of the area and the preservation it provides to so many species living in harmony landed it on our list” (emphasis mine; ABC, 2006). This prompted the government of Kenya to list the acclam on the official government website (GOK, 2007).

Charismatic indigenous peoples complement the charismatic megafauna of the MMNR. The Maasai people are largely associated with the Maasai Mara and viewed as the symbolic cultural group of Kenya. The Maasai are popularly portrayed in advertisements by government agencies such as the Kenya Tourist Board (KTB, 2007) as well as in many commercials by Kenyan and international tour companies. Colorful Maasai ‘morans’ (‘warriors’) regularly entertain visiting heads of state on arrival at the airport and fete tourists at hotels and lodges while on safari in Kenya. The romanticized visions of Maasai have worked their way into our homes over the past half-century. As historian Thomas Spear notes:

“Everyone knows the Maasai. Men wearing red capes while balancing one leg and a long spear gazing out over the semi-arid plains stretching endlessly to the horizon, or women heavily bedecked in beads, stare out at us from countless coffee-table books and tourists’ snapshots” (Spear, 1993, p. 1).

A deeper cultural—historical look at Maasai livelihoods in the MMNR reveals how the Maasai were active in violent cattle raiding practices over the past several centuries (Galaty, 1989). The motivations for cattle raiding are: a rite of maturation, prestige, retaliation and revenge, looting, and acquiring or reacquiring livestock (Jacobs, 1975). Cattle raiding activities within and around the MMNR often involved the neighboring Kuria ethnic group (Fleisher, 2000).

The study site is therefore an amalgamation of each of these different historical, social, political, economic and ecological elements that characterize the essence of the MMNR as a unique ‘place’.

**Methods**

The objective of this paper is to elucidate the drivers of conflicts between protected area managers and herders. In order to achieve this objective, I rely on an actor-oriented approach (Bohle, 2007) encompassing key informant interviews and participatory observation. These methods follow a network approach, which treats complex assemblages as ‘networks’ rather than ‘chains’ in order to “avoid a conceptual hierarchy of power and causal force” (Robbins, 2004, p. 210–212). A network approach relies on research observations, which are made from, “multiple standpoints (nodes) within a given structure. The methodology is one of ‘seeing multiple,’ from situated perspectives” (Rocheleau & Roth, 2007, p. 433). This methodology is made possible, in part, by placing power within networks and by joining social and ecological elements with networks.

**Method #1: Key informant interviews.** Interviews were conducted with four main actors: Maasai elders, international tourists, hotel managers, and rangers and other park officials. Interviews were semi-structured and followed a series of main questions, probes and follow-up questions (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). One Maasai research assistant and the author conducted interviews with elders during the wet season in Maa. Seventy-two interviews were conducted with elders and involved both males and females. These interviews were undertaken within the confines of Maasai households, while interviews with tourists and hotel managers occurred in the lobbies or conference rooms of major tourist lodges within the study site. Ten interviews were conducted with hotel managers and 12 interviews with tourists. Interviews with hotel managers were conducted in either English or Swahili by the author, while interviews with tourists were conducted in English. Interviews with park officials were conducted at the major park entrance gates of the Maasai Mara National Reserve (MMNR). Five interviews were conducted with park officials. All the interviews were recorded using shorthand in notebooks and expanded immediately after the interviews were completed. Interviewees were randomly selected after they had assented to voluntary participation following human subjects protocols.

**Method #2: Participant observation (PO) of actors.** PO techniques included numerous game drives with tourists both within and outside the MMNR in the vehicles of tour companies. I also participated in herding cattle from selected households within the study area (Maasai households within 2 km of the MMNR) and performed role-playing simulations with herders related to the conflict event. I was also able to witness several incidence of actual grazing conflicts between park managers and Maasai herders.

Primary fieldwork was conducted between 2005 and 2006 and followed up with subsequent lengthy field visits between 2006 and 2009. During fieldwork I lived and conducted research from a camp situated between the border of the protected area and the surrounding pastoral lands and traveled daily both inside and outside the protected area.

**Networks of actor interactions**

In this section I portray the narratives of each of the four actors. I maintain an intentional separation in the narratives of these actors in order to emphasize the networks of interaction and power differences that exist between, as well as among, actors.

**Elders**

Interviews with elders focused on how relationships between herders and rangers have changed over the last several decades. Elders hold oral records of past interactions with park authorities. Elders are often the most respected members of Maasai society and considered by community members to hold and narrate many events of the past.

Many statements by elders demonstrate the mutual respect and affection that existed between the Maasai and park authorities in the 1960s and 1970s. Elders remembered, with great fondness, some of the daily interactions that helped cement these relationships:

“...Rangers came to our houses for ‘natalengos’ (ceremonies). They ate meat, drank homemade brews and made friends, mostly with the women. In the past,... rangers assisted us by taking someone who is sick to the hospital in Narok (some 80 kilometers away) using a council vehicle....” - Interview Aug 02, 2006

The quote illustrates how park officials were active participants within the local community. Elders recalled how park officials were involved in the fund-raising activities of a primary school, which was built in 1982, and in providing school bursaries for secondary school students who wanted to study in the district capital. Elders also stated how rangers and park officials not only came to Maasai villages to share in food, but also to trade and sell goods, and to ask about the general welfare of the Maasai community. This was possible because many villages were located near roads that rangers often traversed for work purposes.
Relationships between pastoralists and park officials also revolved around the assistance park officials offered pastoralists. The quote below demonstrates how herders would actively seek help from the park authorities, whether it was for sick people, or to ask for permission to graze in the park during periods of drought. One elder, who was part of a large group of herders who went to visit senior park officials during the drought of 1984, recalled:

"...We visited the (senior) warden and took him a gift of a he goat and maize beer...we politely asked him to allow us to graze in the park because of the drought...He never hesitated. He told us where to graze - in the designated areas of the park (between Posse and Oon'gila). As soon as the rain fell we removed our livestock out of the park without being ordered to do so by the park authorities." - Interview June 20, 2005

Many elders have compared the violent acts carried out by rangers today to those of their historical archenemies, the Kuria cattle raiders (Ilmutendes). Many elders equate the rangers of today with Kuria Ilmutendes of the past because Maasai livestock owners become dispossessed of their property. "They chase them like wildebeest and leave them without food or water and sometimes left, and eaten by the lions" remarked one elder whose cattle had been stolen by Kuria Ilmutendes in the 1970s.

When I asked about the nature of the relationships with the park officials today given the rich history of cooperation, many elders responded rhetorically and disdainfully: "What relationship? The relationship is dead!" Others commented on the decline of respect herders once had for park officials and vice-versa. One elder spat on the ground and angrily said that today a ranger may even hit men of their father’s age set - a cultural taboo.

Elders suggested there were two main reasons for the deterioration in their relationships with park officials. First, there had been a shift in where park rangers are recruited. One elder recounted the period during which he was a ranger in the 1960s. Many of his colleagues were born and brought up in the villages surrounding the protected area. He stated that park officials understood the local conditions that many Maasai experienced during dry and drought periods because they too were from the local area. He remembered how park authorities were knowledgeable of the niche grazing areas that the Maasai had used prior to the formation of the park in 1961, and he believes that is why the park authorities were accommodating of cattle movement into areas like the Posse and Oon'gila plains during drought periods. Many elders stated that rangers today are recruited from Maasai areas far away from the park and that these ‘new’ rangers are unfamiliar with the traditional strategies that the Maasai of his particular village use to cope with drought.

Second, elders suggested that the number of tourists who visited the park in the 1960s and 1970s was much lower than today. In particular, they pointed to the number of tourists arriving in the peak seasons (December to January and June to September), suggesting that it is much higher today than it was previously. They often referred to fact that there were only two main lodges and hardly any camps at that time. They also intimated that rangers and park officials seldom visit Maasai villages anymore because of the increasing number of tourists (and the corresponding increase in tour drivers, lodge and hotel staff and suppliers) and the corresponding growth of trading centers. These centers serve a number of roles: as recreational spaces with barber shops, bars, and night clubs, as centers of credit services and general purpose merchandise, and as stores that sell fresh vegetables. Many of these services and products are made possible by numerous matatus (public service vehicles) that are routed daily through many of the park gates and on to the district capital.

Tourists and tour drivers

Interviews with tourists sought to understand how tourists experience the safari and to uncover the nature of the interactions tourists have with both human and non-human actors within and around the protected area. There are numerous tourist camps and lodges inside and around the MMNMR. The tourist clientele ranges from low-end budget travelers to billionaires who stay at remote exclusive lodges and luxury camps. Many tourists come to the MMNMR to see the ‘Big Five’ (Rhino, Elephant, Leopard, Lion, and Buffalo). Tours are taken on game drives in specially prepared four-wheel-drive vehicles or mini-vans with roof hatches for game watching. Game drives usually occur in the morning (between 7:00am and 11:00am) and evening (4:00pm to 6:30pm), with nature walks or game drives to the hippo pools in between. On several game drives with tourists, I overheard tourists suggest to their tour drivers that if they encountered all of the Big Five, the drivers would receive a large tip at the end of the safari.

Many of the popular game drive circuits are within sight of key resource areas that cattle frequent during the dry and drought seasons and tourists regular see cattle grazing inside the MMNMR. The most common response from tourists when they see cattle is, "...why are those cows inside the park? Isn't that illegal?" The question is directed towards tour drivers who sometimes respond by criticizing the herders by saying, "these young boys are breaking the law, they should be removed from the park." or "...they have been warned by the rangers not to come to this area and disturb the wild animals.”

Many of the tourists I interviewed at the lodges during the height of the drought in January 2006 were visibly upset because they had only seen cattle grazing on game drives and none of the Big Five. One frustrated American tourist from Texas remarked, "why should I pay US$40 a day to watch cows eat grass when I can do that back home!" Other tourists suggested they wanted to see the park entrance fee actually used for conservation. Another tourist from Boston who came on safari to escape the New England winter remarked:

"...What are they (the park authorities) doing with all the millions of dollars that are gathered from park entrance fees? They should not allow cows into the park. They are damaging this precious ecosystem and it is not natural. They eat all the grass and scare away all the animals that we have traveled thousands of miles to see!" - Interview December 26, 2005

Another tourist, while sympathetic to the Maasai after a tour of a cultural Maasai village, expressed dismay over the lack of park involvement in limiting grazing inside the park. She stated she wanted to see more of what the park fees were utilized for, as she saw no evidence of any conservation practices, other than signs saying certain areas of the park had been closed off to tourists to allow for ‘recovery’. At the height of the 2006 drought, several news organizations reported on the effects of drought on protected areas. For example, a BBC News Online report showed a picture of several elephants huddled underneath the shade of a tree with the headline ‘Drought a threat to Kenyan parks’ (Allen, 2006).

Meanwhile Kenya’s East African Standard newspaper ran a back page story on January 3, 2006, with the headline, "Tourists miss animals at Maasai Mara”, and quoted tourists who bemoaned the lack of wildlife (Kemei, 2006, p. 28). The article stated tourists were “disappointed because [they]...did not view all the animals [they] expected...the only animals [they] saw in plenty [were] cows grazing inside the park.”

Several tour drivers stated they have little to no interaction with local Maasai other than when they ferry tourists to Maasai villages to tour Maasai homesteads and purchase local cultural curios and
trinkets. Most of these visits take place in the mid-morning and mid-afternoon hours when cattle have already left their enclosures. Tourists therefore do not see Maasai and their cattle together while visiting villages.

**Hotel managers**

Interviews with hotel managers sought to highlight the interactions between tourists and hotel staff immediately after tourists return from their game drives. Hotel managers and front desk clerks often receive complaints from tourists who are frustrated because they witnessed cattle grazing inside the protected area. Tourists demand to see hotel managers and ask that their complaints be forwarded to the relevant authorities and ensure that cattle are removed from the park. In an effort to protect their clients, encourage repeat visitors and maintain the reputation of their establishments, many hotel managers will show tourists they are willing to comply with their demands by placing radio calls over the park network to the headquarters or to the nearest park gate. In some cases the tour drivers will also complain to the front desk clerks and hotel managers after being prompted to do so by guests. They argue that their livelihoods are at risk if visitors do not get what they have come to see.

Many tourists arrive on light aircraft at one of the many airstrips and pay their park entrance fees to rangers posted at the lodges. I witnessed many occasions where tourists refused to pay park fees when they saw cattle grazing inside the MMNR (particularly on the game drive from the airstrip to the lodge). The lodge manager has to placate tourists by assuring them that “...everything can and will be done to make sure that the cattle do not enter the park.”

I spoke to several senior lodge employees at the front desk of luxury tourist lodges, which often charge up to 500$ US a night. Many employees quietly confided that they were torn between their identity as one-time Maasai herders from the villages and as employees of the lodges that feed them and their families. They lamented that their jobs were, “just to report to the manager what the tourists are saying”, and when the manager is not there, they must report it to the rangers, otherwise they risk being fired. At the same time, many herders ask their friends who are front desk clerks not to tell the rangers when the tourists see cattle inside the park.

In rare cases, park authorities will ask hotel managers to take direct action against herders, especially when rangers are unable to attend to the problem. Hotel managers rarely agree to this, as they are dependent upon the goodwill of the Maasai, many of who are employees of lodges and camps, despite various cooperation agreements between hotels and the park authorities.

**Protected area managers**

Interviews with rangers and park officials sought to understand how protected area officials perceive of, and act on, cattle grazing inside the MMNR. Many rangers, who are also ethnically Maasai, indicated that the ‘problems’ with herders grazing cattle inside the park had occurred for many years. Park officials stood by the official position that livestock grazing inside the MMNR is a breach of the reserve’s by-laws and as such, “cattle must be forcefully ejected from the reserve boundaries.” They also stated that the responsible families must pay a 10,000-shilling (130 $US) fine for breaking the by-laws. “Failure to pay the fine will result in the herder being taken to Narok (the headquarters of the Narok County Council and the Narok district) where they will be charged in a court of law and face possible jail time,” stated one senior park official.

Park officials also stated that they have taken proactive steps to stop cattle from coming into the MMNR by holding community meetings and by asking herders to graze their cattle in the park at night, despite the increased risk from predators, but they must seek the official permission of the senior officials before they do so. There was little information regarding how this process would work given the large number of cattle herds that frequent the MMNR.

One park official commented on how conflicts are the result of repeated frustration among rangers:

“...Sometimes you see these young boys with the cattle and we tell them not to come into these areas and to graze their cattle outside the park. The tourists come and complain to us and threaten not to pay the entrance fees. Now, if the tourists do not pay the entrance fees, then where will I get the money to support myself? Sometimes you have to ‘chappa’ (hit) them because they are stubborn. You get frustrated that they don’t listen to you; so you have to chappa them so that they remember. When they resist us, we must teach them a lesson!” - Interview December 15, 2006

Senior park officials described how they too have received numerous complaints from tourists as they pass through the park gates on game drives. One warden narrated how an angry tourist ‘summoned’ him to the park gate from his residence. Recently employed park officials expressed their anger at herdsmen for bringing their cattle into the park. They complained that when herdsmen enter the park they are forced to stop them and sometimes:

“...It is us who have to capture the cows and herd them to the park gates, where they are put in a pen. We are the ones who have to walk the 20 kilometers to the park gate with the cattle through the park, with all the wild animals and have the hot sun eating our backs!” - Interview January 3, 2006

Many of the rangers stationed at the park gates told me they were not from the villages around the park. Many are from Maasai-dominated regions of northern Narok district where herd sizes are generally smaller and where there is greater diversification in livelihood activities in the form of subsistence and commercial agriculture. Rangers also noted that they are rotated only a bi-annually basis between the many park gates and ranger outposts distributed across the 1500 sq km protected area. Ranger rotation is largely in response to protected area management policies designed to discourage corruption practices such as pocketing of park entrance fees. Finally, none of the park officials I interviewed suggested that cattle grazing threatened the ecological integrity of the MMNR.

**Reconceptualizing conflicts between people and protected areas**

In this section of the paper I return to the literatures on place, identity and the commodification of nature in order to recontextualize the drivers of resource-related conflicts. I do this by focusing on three transformational moments that create and perpetuate conflicts. It is important to note that each of these moments does not occur separately, but simultaneously and each transformational moment influences the others. This analysis is emblematic of network approaches in contemporary human—environment geography (Robbins, 2004; Rocheleau, 2008).

‘Nature,’ ‘culture’ and the creation of the ‘safari’ as a commodity

The first transformational moment driving conflict revolves around the construction of the safari as a commodity. At the international scale, the safari is created among a network of tour actors by enforcing a separation between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’. This
Commodity protection and fetishism

Volume of tourists visiting the MMNR.

is evident from the popular imagery describing the ‘anticipated’ safari (Norton, 1996) and from the narratives of the tourists themselves. These images and narratives are attributed to the growing globalization of the ecotourism industry and perpetuated by western media outlets and aggressive marketing campaigns by international tour operators (Meletis & Campbell, 2007). These narratives portray ‘nature’ and the Maasai (and their cattle) as existing separately from one another. Anthropologist Jim Igoe explains how:

“Both African people and African wildlife are portrayed as exotic and inhabiting an unspoiled world that no longer exists in the West. Just as important, the two are portrayed as separate from one another. People exist in one realm and animals in the other. Viewers may see lions on the Discovery Channel, and viewers will see Maasai on the Discovery Channel. It is unlikely, however, that they will ever see (both) lions and Maasai on the Discovery Channel at the same time…” (Igoe, 2004, p. 13–14).

The term ‘safari’ is synonymous with the East African wildlife watching experience (Norton, 1996). The variety of charismatic megafauna found across East Africa has helped propel wildlife and nature tourism as one of the main income generating sources for national and local governments. In Kenya, the tourism industry accounts for 40% of gross domestic product and the government aggressively markets the safari experience by specifically citing the experience of watching the Big Five within MMNR (KTB, 2007).

At the local scale, the safari is created through the networks of circulation between tour operators, luxury camps and lodges, and tour drivers. More specifically, the commodity is created through the movement of tourists between camps and lodges and game drive circuits. These movements are in tour vehicles within and around the protected area, and often bypass local villages, further enforcing the nature-culture binary.

The safari as a commodity is predicated upon the representation of the protected area as a ‘natural’ place for a number of inter-related reasons. First, the MMNR is one of the few places on earth where tourists are able to experience all of the ‘Big Five’ in their ‘natural’ habitats. Ironically, the landscapes of the Mara, which form the habitat for the ‘Big Five’, are the product of thousands of years of human interaction with the environment, including grazing and burning by Maasai pastoralists (Dublin, 1995; Robertshaw & Brown, 1990).

Second, the infrastructure in and around the MMNR facilitates the creation of the safari as a distinct commodity, through the numerous tourist camps and lodges and the game drive circuits that tourists navigate in search for the ‘Big Five’. Beyond the charismatic megafauna associated with the MMNR, the commoditization of the safari is also attributed to the global rise in ecotourism (Carrier & Macleod, 2005; Meletis & Campbell, 2007). As a result, there has been a rapid increase in the number of camps and lodges and corresponding bed nights within and around the protected area (Walpole et al., 2003) in order to accommodate the increased volume of tourists visiting the MMNR.

Commodity protection and fetishism

The second transformational moment driving conflict occurs through the protection of the safari experience. As tourism grows, it becomes financially important to protected area managers and to national and local governments. The protection of tourism revenues is therefore tied to protecting the authentic ‘safari’ experience, which is predicated on the presence of the Big Five and the absence of cattle. As a result, protected area managers have become increasingly concerned about tourist satisfaction and protecting the safari experience. This shift has come at the expense of the well being of communities who reside around the MMNR.

Narratives from elders suggest that rules of enforcement regarding grazing inside the protected area were spatially and temporally patterned in ways that reflected the changing seasonality of tourist visitation. Before wildlife tourism became economically important, park managers were cognizant of the grazing needs of pastoralists and understood the constraints herders faced during periods of stress. Tourists, the majority of whose own culturally and politically determined environmental attitudes (Akama, 1996), tend to equate the presence of cattle with an inauthentic safari experience (Kemei, 2006, p. 28). George Monbiot, writing in Britain’s premier wildlife magazine about the possibility of allowing pastoralists into their ancestral lands, highlights this attitude:

“…Every conservation official I have spoken to has argued that one factor above all others keeps them (park authorities) from considering the possibility of letting the nomads back in (to protected areas): that tourists do not want to see them there (emphasis mine).” (Monbiot, 1994, p. 12)

Protection of the authentic safari experience occurs through the strategic spatial and temporal placement of rangers within the tourism and park infrastructure, notably park gates and hotels/lodges. Rangers oversee the safety and security of tourists and wildlife. Their visibility is enhanced through distinctive military camouflage, accouterments and vehicles. Narratives from rangers, herders and hotel managers demonstrate that the primary reasons rangers forcefully prohibit cattle from entering the protected area are the complaints by tourists, and not the supposed environmental destruction caused by cattle grazing.

The process of protecting the authentic wildlife experience results in the safari becoming fetishized. This occurs primarily because there is little or no interaction between local productive peoples and tourists. In the few instances where there is contact between local peoples and tourists, it often takes the form of ‘staged authenticity’ (Bruner, 2001; Bruner & Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1994) where cultural performances are reenacted within hotel lobbies, around campfires and within cultural villages. There are important spatial and temporal dimensions to this particular type of commodity fetishism. For instance, tourist visits to cultural Maasai villages usually occur during the mid-morning or early afternoon (either after or before game drives) when cattle have already departed for grazing. As a result tourists do not witness Maasai herders with their cattle in their homes. The only place tourists see Maasai with their cattle is during game drives while inside the protected area. This spatial and temporal disconnect further strengthens the ecotourism bubble which misses important elements of the cultural landscapes that tourists operate within. As a result the identity of Maasai as transgressors in a pristine wilderness takes precedence over Maasai as livestock keepers who have been dispossessed through the creation of the protected area. These findings echo recent evidence within literatures in people-environment geography that highlight how the spatiality and temporality of particular human-environment interactions influences the forms, tactics and repertoires of resource conflicts (Peluso & Watts, 2001; Roth, 2008).

Identity construction, the changing micro-geography of interaction and the felt value of ‘place’

The third transformational moment driving conflict builds on the other two moments and concerns how different groups create and enforce identities for other groups. These processes of identity construction arise from the changing micro-geography of interaction between various actors. In this section, I describe processes of
identity construction and discuss how conflicts arise when these identities are confronted and contested.

First, both rangers and tourists identify herders as transgressors in a natural ‘pristine’ landscape, and are therefore a threat to the authentic safari experience. As I have described previously, tourists witness cattle grazing inside the park and become uncomfortable with the sight of cattle within protected areas. These attitudes and perspectives are vociferously expressed to tour drivers and park officials. Similarly, rangers regard herders as wilderness transgressors when they apprehend herders grazing their cattle in the protected area. The changing spatial and temporal nature of everyday interactions between rangers and Maasai herders is partly responsible for driving this process of identity construction. Narratives from elders suggest rangers once had frequent contact with the vast majority of productive Maasai because many villages were located along the main arteries of roads connecting ranger outposts and regional urban centers. As tourism grew, these road linkages changed due to the growth of village centers around park gates. Today many of the roads bypass local villages and lead directly from one park gate to another and towards market centers. Rangers, who once frequented Maasai villages, no longer do so today and this has altered the nature of interactions protected area officials have with local villagers.

The spatiality of people—park conflicts has been the subject of recent research. Roth, for instance, demonstrates how, “when state management space is asserted, it is often to the exclusion of, or at the expense of, local spatialities, thus creating conflict” (Roth, 2008, p. 374). Such processes of spatial reorganization associated with the establishment of protected areas, as Roth has argued, not only privilege abstract spaces over local productive spaces, but also alters the nature of everyday interactions between agents of the state and local peoples.

Second, rangers are the ‘gatekeepers’ of the protected area and the visible representatives of the state. Tourists identify them as the agents responsible for nature protection. While this identity has always been part of how duties of rangers were defined (beginning with the creation of the protected area in 1948), nature protection was primarily associated with reducing acts of poaching (Neumann, 1998), which were rampant during the 1970s and 1980s. Despite this, elders highlight how park officials in the 1960s and 1970s had an intimate understanding of the foraging constraints faced by the local Maasai. Part of this is evidenced by knowledge of particular niche grazing areas that park officials and elders would recognize as suitable drought grazing locations. Today, rangers are often unaware of the localized constraints faced by pastoralists who reside around the MMNR. As a result, there has been a shift in the demands of nature protection from the protection of game animals in the past, to the protection of wilderness as envisioned by outside agents.

There are two primary reasons for these changes. First, rangers are constantly rotated between the six different park gates and several interior ranger posts distributed across a wide area. This frequent rotation afforded rangers little time to understand and appreciate the felt value of ‘place’ (Tuan, 1977) and the importance of the protected area as a historic drought coping zone for the local community (Butt et al., 2009). Second, rangers are recruited from outside the local area and are unfamiliar with the rich histories of interaction between Maasai herders and niche grazing areas that are today located inside the protected area. The shift in ranger recruitment from outside the local area is influenced by a larger political economy where regional ethnic politics drive the selection of rangers from certain areas within the region. Collectively, these two findings suggest that the temporality of protected area management does not allow for an appreciation of the temporality of rural livelihood production strategies.

Understanding these processes of resource management benefit from Tuan’s (1977) arguments about the centrality of visibility to place. Tuan notes that, “many places, profoundly significant to particular individuals and groups, have little visual prominence. They are known viscerally…and not through the discerning eye or mind” (Tuan, 1977, p. 162). The frequent rotation of rangers and their recruitment from outside the area results in the failure by rangers to visibly recognize the varied spatio-temporal nature of resource access strategies and resource constraints among resource users.

The third process of identity construction occurs when Maasai who reside around the MMNR interpret rangers as contemporary ‘cattle raiders’. This is primarily because the processes of apprehending herders and locking cattle away from the Maasai are historically similar to the ways cattle were stolen from the Maasai by Kuria cattle raiders. These acts evoke social memory and histories of violence (Shetler, 2007; Stewart & Strathern, 2003). The shift in conservation priorities to protecting wilderness has altered the nature of everyday interactions between rangers and Maasai pastoralists.

Conclusions

This paper has sought to better understand conflicts between people and protected areas by relying on literatures on place, identity and the commodification of nature. By employing actor-oriented approaches with long term place-based fieldwork, which embrace the spatiality and temporality of local Maasai livelihoods and the management practices of protected area officials, I have demonstrated how three transformational moments create and perpetuate conflicts.

The first moment concerns the creation of the safari as a commodity, which is predicated upon a separation between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ where nature is equated to essentialized notions of the wildlife-rich savanna landscape and culture is reduced to the livelihood strategies of Maasai pastoralists. This binary has lead to situations where tourists are dissatisfied when they witness cattle grazing inside the protected area. The second moment concerns the strategic spatial and temporal placement of protected area officials to protect the safari experience, which reinforces the binary between nature and culture. Protection of the authentic safari experience limits tourists’ interactions with local productive peoples, deepens the nature–culture binary, obscures tourists’ understanding of the way the safari has been created, and forcefully evicts and fines herders caught grazing inside the protected area. The third moment is concerned with how the creation, protection and fetishisms surrounding the safari experience leads to processes of identity creation. Tourists and rangers regard herders as transgressors of pristine wilderness; tourists identify rangers as protectors of nature and herders view rangers as contemporary cattle raiders. Rangers see cattle grazing inside the park as a threat to their identities as protectors of nature.

This analysis of conflicts between people and protected areas focuses on the power relationships within the networks of spatial relationships between different actors within particular places. By situating the safari experience at the center of this analysis, I have demonstrated how the production of the Maasai Mara National Reserve as a distinct ‘place’ is instrumental to the creation, marketing, and protection of the safari experience. Collectively, these moments demonstrate how the rapid rise of wildlife tourism, and the commoditized form the safari has taken in recent years, has effectively reworked the micro-geography of interactions between park-adjacent dwellers and protected area officials. The commoditized safari therefore creates new social milieux that isolate rangers from most productive Maasai who reside around the
protected area. As a result, the various elements of identity, that is, herders as ‘transgressors’ and rangers as ‘contemporary cattleraiders’, have become increasingly dependent upon a geographical imaginary based on western notions of the wilderness. This analysis illuminates how the identities are constructed and how threats to identity, real or perceived, drive and perpetuate conflicts.

There are some generalities that can be drawn from this study. First, as Neumann has argued, violence and conservation conflicts persist long after the initial periods of violence associated with the displacement of native peoples from ancestral lands (Neumann, 2001, p. 321). As I have demonstrated, these conflicts are motivated by the increasing ways nature is commoditized such that conflicts are tied to the consumption of the wilderness experience. Efforts to protect this experience have led to the further marginalization of local communities and altering the nature of everyday interactions between various actors at the local level.

Second and related, this paper has shown that seemingly well-intentioned tourists, with predisposed notions of ‘wilderness’ and ‘nature’, construct and strategically deploy identities of local peoples by altering the geography of interactions that ultimately result in conflict. Despite efforts to create a culturally and environmentally sensitive safari experience, global travel and tourism expectations are increasingly unaware of the unintended effects of their activities and interactions in promoting conflict and exacerbating violence. Iconic landscapes are often portrayed as static and apolitical to outsiders, however the reality is that landscapes have always been political and dynamic. An investigation of the changing spatiality of actor interactions, alongside a critical focus on the power relations inherent both within and between these interactions, works to destabilize preconceived notions of wilderness landscapes and help to better unveil the complexities associated between people and protected areas.

While recent contributions to the literature on sustainability and conservation have commented on the shifting alliances between conservation practices and capitalism (Igoe et al., 2010), there has been comparatively little research examining how conservation, capitalism, and commodity fetishisms are linked to the instigation and propagation of violence in and around protected areas. This paper contributes towards this important, socially relevant and growing body of literature. Moreover, as other studies of the politics of national parks elsewhere have also indicated (Schwartz, 2006; Veron & Fehr, 2011), the relationships between ideology and the state management of protected areas demands further research, especially in an era where conflicts between people and protected areas continue to accelerate both in frequency and intensity.

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