

The martial politics of biodiversity protection

Wildlife conservation practices in northern Kenya

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Abstract

Wildlife conservation is entangled with broader conflict dynamics in pastoral and semi-arid northern Kenya and tackles livestock theft, road banditry and inter-communal conflict. The thesis aims to better understand this ‘war by conservation’, in which conservation and military-like practices address and tie into wider security issues. What is the role of ‘the military’ here, and how are such practices different from dynamics thus far explored in green militarisation literature? This dissertation further develops the concept of martial politics as a process of ordering through war-like relations, technologies and knowledge. It challenges the liberal myth that conservation is a ‘civilian’ space that is temporarily ‘militarised’ to solve the extinction crisis and argues that there is no peaceful domestic order to return to. The thesis draws on 64 interviews and analyses policy documents, legislation and National Assembly debates.

The three empirical chapters on community conservation, rangers and guns, first, demonstrate conservation’s historical interlinkage with military endeavours. Colonial counterinsurgency and anti-poaching operations shaped each other, and the historic uneven flow of guns constructed social differences and hierarchies which fed into national governments perceiving and treating pastoralists as a ‘security problem’. Second, the chapters analyse various contemporary war-by-conservation practices, such as anti-livestock theft. Rangers occupy ambiguous positions in-between social categories like ‘civilian’-‘military’ and ‘public’-‘private’, and are integrated into the state security sector as Police Reservists, while conservancies also herald rangers as community-based (civil) conservation actors in the (threat of the) use of force. Additionally, Western donors draw on a conservation-security nexus to finance conservation and open possibilities to sponsor conservation through security, rather than environmental funds.

Third, the thesis examines how the above practices order society and nature. Conservancies carve out political power by drawing on the language and the idea of the state, whereby war-by-conservation practices reorder power relations amongst conservancy residents, regional elites, County governments and the state. The thesis demonstrates the usefulness of martial politics as the contingent ordering of politics, in which dichotomies and social categories are filled with meanings that help establish social order.

Keywords:

Social order, CBNRM, community conservation, war by conservation, militarism, green militarization, environment, Samburu, the Northern Rangelands Trust (NRT)