

What kind of resource is it, really? Relations and contradictions underpinning inter-communal and state-community conflicts in Mau Forest, Kenya

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Abstract

The Mau Forest Complex in Kenya has been the site of different kinds of conflicts over the past decades: election-triggered ethnic cleansing, violent evictions of forest dwellers, irregular settlers in conservation areas, and resource-based intercommunal clashes, which have intensified over the past years. In those conflicts, the interests in the Mau Forest are mobilised differently by different actors. In instances of 'ethnic conflict', the resource at stake is land, and conflict-lines run between communities who consider the Mau Forest territories their 'homeland' and migrant communities who are cast as 'outsiders'. In the case of state-operated evictions, the resource that the state and environmental agencies attempt to protect, is the forest and its water-generating functions. In resource-based intercommunal clashes, resources fought over are water, pasture, and again, land. The paper takes this puzzling complexity of conflicts and resources as its starting point to analyse the political and economic dynamics that connect the different kind of conflicts surrounding the Mau Forest. We inquire into the question of what key determinants and relationships are underpinning conflicts over different resources in the Mau Forest region in Kenya.

Instead of taking an analytical lens that focuses on a specific resource, such as 'land', 'water' or 'forest' conflicts, the paper looks for determinants and relationships that connect the respective resource-specific political arenas. The argument is that the framing of conflicts along specific natural resources sometimes rather shrouds certain political dynamics more than it illuminates the forces sustaining conflict. For instance, framing conflicts in the Mau Forest area as a matter of forest protection hides from view that the Mau Forest nowadays contains large settlements and a range of related economic activities, and that its governance as a state forest has been contested by forest-dwelling and pastoralist communities from the outset. Landscapes are mobilized as different 'resources' in different kinds of conflict constellations and in different public arenas: electoral, forest, mining, land and infrastructure policies. Arguably, this compartmentalization of reality is characteristic for a wider social transformation process towards commodification and state-making that is underlying these conflicts. The human-nature relationships are re-worked and re-defined in the process, which leads to the unsettling of existing social and power relations. Conflicts, violent or not, ensue. Thereby, environmental politics often become an arena for struggle over authority and state-citizen relations (Sikor and Lund, 2009; Muok et al., 2021). Conflicts are particularly acute at frontiers of resource exploitation, where this process of social transformation is intensified (Rasmussen and Lund, 2018).

The paper is based on research visits by the authors undertaken in the Mau Forest and its surroundings in Narok and Nakuru counties between 2018-2022 in the framework of the collaborative research consortium "Future Rural Africa" (CRC: 228), run by the Universities of Bonn and Cologne, in collaboration with partners in Kenya, Tanzania and Namibia, and funded by the German Research Foundation DFG. Methods comprise semi-structured interviews, group discussions, document analysis of commission reports and court cases relating to Mau Forest land, transecting across the Mau Forest

area in Narok and Nakuru counties. The main part of the research was undertaken in August-September 2018 and February – July 2019 by the first author, with follow-up visits by the second author. The study focuses on violent conflicts in Narok and Nakuru County between 2018-2022 for a qualitative analysis of conflicts, including a more longitudinal perspective analysing ACLED conflict event datasets for the time period 1997-2022, enabling observations about the parallel development (or not) of economic frontiers and conflict locations.

The paper starts by describing the development of settlements in Maasai Mau forest and a Nyayo Tea Zone in Narok County, followed by a political economy analysis of Mau Forest protection in the last two decades. After this contextual background, we provide a conflict analysis, based on our own interviews with different state and non-state actors and a GIS analysis of ACLED conflict data in a relational database developed by BICC.

Conclusions tentatively emphasizes state violence, social transformations towards commodification and state-making, and ambiguous discourses of autochthony and indigeneity in fostering empowerment and exclusion, as key determinants for a political economy of land access and related conflicts. One central contradiction is between the logics of economic development and nature protection, which has a grip of many resource governance actors.

Literature

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