Ecotourism in Kenya: The Vulnerability of Communities

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Community participation in ecotourism planning and development is often regarded as panacea for the social and environmental impacts ascribed to mass tourism. Such prescriptions for more ‘sustainable’ forms of tourism however often disregard the ways in which resource management scenarios are often characterised by inequitable patterns of access to and control over resources. In heterogeneous and politically differentiated social settings achieving equitable broad based ‘participation’ invaribly proves problematic. Such conditions weaken the capacity of local residents to negotiate equitable and sustainable relationships with other actors and agencies in ecotourism developments. This paper examines how the highly fragmented community of Kimana in southern Kenya failed to capitalise on its immense ecotourism potential virtue of political rifts between ethnic groups, clans and age sets. Broad-based participation has proven illusive. While the model of ‘community’ based ecotourism has a positive resonance the case study suggests it is naïve to believe the articulation of ‘community’ with external agencies – commercial or governmental – can emerge from purely bottom-up initiatives. Insights from neighbouring ecotourism initiatives indicate the important role external inputs can have to protect the interests of local residents.

Keywords: community, ecotourism, Kenya, natural resource management, participation

Introduction

As innumerable publications have claimed over recent years, while tourism often degrades environments and exploits communities, ecotourism has the potential to reconcile otherwise intractable conflicts between development and conservation. Normatively at least ecotourism can provide the **raison d’être** for conservation over consumption of environmental resources. In the eyes of many commentators community participation in ecotourism planning along with the equitable division of ecotourism income represent a virtual panacea for the social and environmental ills ascribed to mass tourism. Such prescriptions for more ‘sustainable’ forms of tourism however often disregard the ways in which resource management scenarios can be characterised by inequitable patterns of access to and control over resources (Peluso & Watts, 2001). Thus, while on one level ecotourism can offer opportunities for economic diversification, it can also exacerbate existing resource management conflicts which are rooted in the historical context of local power relations.

As ecotourism has become a focal point for the converging interests of geographers, anthropologists, sociologists and political economists, increasing attention is being given to the complexities of local resource management.
settings and the implications such complexity has for ecotourism development. A meaningful analysis of any ecotourism project inevitably requires an understanding of both the local context of resource management – wherein ecotourism often represents but one option for a particular subset of resource users – and the wider context of power relations which connect ‘community’ with actors in commercial and governmental spheres (Adams & Hulme, 1998).

The complexities of resource management are perhaps nowhere more evident than in the highly contested wetland environments of Kenya’s Maasailand. For the Maasai of southern Kenya, influences of ‘modernisation’ and engagement with market forces have generated considerable social, economic and environmental changes. Even the most remote corners of Maasailand have experienced agricultural expansion and land individualisation, promoted by decades of state, non-governmental organisation (NGO) and donor-sponsored modernisation programmes. A number of ecotourism initiatives have also emerged in Maasailand during the past decade. This paper will examine one such initiative in detail. As will be seen, much of the ecotourism potential of the ‘Kimana’ area has not materialised due, in part, to the highly fragmented character of the local ‘community’ – one in which the tensions between age group, clan and political allegiance combine to preclude collective action and consensus. Not only has such heterogeneity hampered community-based tourism, it has also facilitated the exploitation of ecotourism potential by commercial operators. This case study sheds light on wider issues of ecotourism politics – in particular the vulnerability of ‘communities’ in the face of ecotourism’s global reach.

**Community, Participation and Ecotourism: Theoretical Considerations**

As Hirschmann (1968) and countless others have since remarked, development interventions have often foundered because of the naïve and simplifying assumptions made by the north of the world’s complexity. ‘Narratives’ of environment and people, most notably in respect to sub-Saharan Africa, have regularly been operationalised into standard means of diagnosing Africa’s ills and prescribing (often inappropriate) remedies (Adams & Hulme, 1998). Such narratives become institutionalised as part of a ‘received wisdom’ (Leach & Mearns, 1996). As argued below, ecotourism literature is itself replete with such narratives, often naïvely advocating ecotourism as a vehicle for conservation and development with scant regard for complexities of community politics.

One such enduring narrative – ‘fortress conservation’ was for long the dominant paradigm of conservation and one that enshrined a colonial attitude towards people and nature. Conservation involved the creation of protected areas at the exclusion and expense of local residents, driven by the ‘myth’ of ‘wild Africa’ (Brockington & Homewood, 1996). In this case the narrative has been challenged by a counter narrative of ‘community conservation’ where local people’s participation is prioritised rather than avoided in the pursuit of conservation objectives.
Ecotourism literature has drawn heavily on the counter-narratives of ‘community’, ‘participation’ and ‘empowerment’, reflecting wider concerns of community vulnerability to the forces of neo-liberalism and globalisation (Duffy, 2002). Indeed such terms are integral to many definitions of ecotourism. Yet while embracing the moral and practical value of people-centred approaches to tourism planning and development, there has been a distinct reluctance to tackle the conceptually difficult task of defining what ‘community’ actually means, and an equally hesitant approach to the question who participates? Insightful works such as that of Hoggett (1997) portraying communities as heterogeneous, stratified and characterised by a multiplicity of interwoven power relations has failed to inform directions in ecotourism research. Thus as Blackstock (2005) comments, while much has been written on the issue of community participation and empowerment, the majority of writings merely acknowledge that tourism will tend to be more successful and equitable with community support.

In the clamour to embed ecotourism within the discourse of development theory, there has been a tendency to reduce the importance of power-relations within communities as a key variable and determinant of global power relations linking communities with governmental and commercial agencies. Agrawal and Gibson (1999: 634) refer to a tendency to ‘paper over’ the differences that so often prevail within communities. Too often ecotourism literature treats ‘the community’ as a homogenous entity, free of individual agency or internal divisions which may preclude collective action. As Barrow and Murphree (2002: 4) are keen to emphasise, such a model portrays communities as ‘static, giving little hint of the heterogeneity, changing membership, and composition of rural locales due to forced relocation, migration, rural/urban labour and resource flows, and changing agricultural practice’. Thus with few exceptions (such as Keogh, 1990; Scheyvens, 1999) an alarmingly large proportion of ecotourism scholars have tended to offer weak analyses of how the concept of ‘community’ translates to the practicalities of ecotourism, development and management.

If tourism scholars have been in the most part reluctant to critically analyse the essence of community participation – however readily advocated, this has not been so elsewhere. In respect to the counter-narrative of community conservation, one challenging the assumptions and modus operandi of ‘fortress conservation’ more probing questions about the variables and characteristics that impinge upon community function and performance have been asked. Thus, writing about community involvement in conservation strategies, Barrow and Murphree (2002: 4) write, ‘[t]he definition of community is rarely addressed explicitly in approaches which seek community involvement in wildlife management’. The authors add that community, ‘is one of the most vague and elusive concepts in social science and continues to defy precise definition’. In analysing the key factors influencing the success of community conservation initiatives, the authors stress the importance of cohesion, legitimacy, delineation and resilience – criteria defined in Box 1.

In summary, an understanding of community-centred approaches to either conservation or tourism, or indeed the interface of the two in ecotourism,
must be predicated on an appropriate comprehension of community itself; the multiple fissures that characterise its structure; the specific social relations and historical events which define its character and the variables that determine community function and performance. All these determine access to channels of participation and opportunities for accumulation. Participatory models of development, and the associated methodologies of donor-community engagement, have been embraced by NGOs and lauded in academic circles (Chambers, 1983). The currency of northern ‘expertise’ has been devalued by increasing attention to indigenous knowledge (see for example Leach & Mearns, 1996). Emphasising the essential role communities can play in evolving development strategies from the ‘bottom-up’, IUCN (1991) writes that ‘properly mandated, empowered and informed, communities can contribute to decisions that affect them and play an indispensable part in creating a securely-based sustainable society’. Likewise Brohman (1996: 568) writes that ‘[d]eveloping countries may avoid many of the problems that have plagued past tourism … by involving diverse social groups from the popular sectors of local communities in decision making’.

While the normative concept of participatory development has been enthusiastically embraced by scholars of tourism development in the South (see for example Simmons, 1994), the ‘practicality of participatory tourism

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**Box 1—Community Characteristics**

**Cohesion:** This refers to a sense of common identity and interest which serves to bring people together for collaborative action, and leads them to collectively differentiate themselves from others. Its source commonly arises from a shared history and culture, although it may be a product of political and economic factors which force people to share a finite resource base.

**Demarcation:** Cohesion sets social boundaries and determines membership. A parallel requirement is demarcation, which sets the boundaries of jurisdiction for the collective regime. This demarcation is commonly based on spatial criteria, a delineation of a fixed land area and the resources on it.

**Legitimacy:** Just as collective organisation requires demarcation, it also requires legitimacy for its processes and leadership which needs to relate to both power and authority. Legitimacy can be conferred by external authority but this on its own is not sufficient. More important is internal legitimacy arising from socio-cultural and socio-economic criteria.

**Resilience:** In the rapidly changing world of rural Africa the components of organisations are dynamic. Boundaries of jurisdiction and affiliation may shift. Effective organisation must accommodate this change evolving over time. Resilience, that is the right and capacity to adapt in content and structure, permits it to do so and is a key tool to the management of risk in uncertain environments and livelihood systems.

development approach in developing countries seems not to be considered in
detail’ (Tosun, 2000: 613). Too often ‘participation’ is seen as a remedy for the
ineffectiveness of externally planned and delivered development. Much of
the ecotourism literature tends to advocate ‘community participation’
without due analysis of differing forms and levels of participation, nor
whom within a community should constitute the participants.

Participatory management styles give voice to local people but do they
give voice to everyone? ... Are there people who are negatively affected
by something that benefits others? Can all different groups be consulted?
The more varied a community is, the more difficult this is. Participation
cannot be merely wished upon by rural people. It must begin by recogniz-
ing the powerful, multi-dimensional, and in many instances, anti-
participatory forces which dominate the lives of rural people. (Barrow &
Murphree, 2002: 7)

Neumann (1998) adds to this much needed critical perspective, pointing out
that facilitators of participatory conservation projects are most often outsiders,
themselves unfamiliar with local political structures and all too ready to
embrace the participation of ‘traditional’ people at the expense of progressive
farmers and immigrants.

Participation in summary is commonly employed as little more than a
public relations exercise (de Beer & Marais, 2005) treated as a technical or
managerial solution to problems of an essentially political nature (Gujit &
Shah, 1998). Such problems, central to the equitable and sustainable basis
of ecotourism, revolve around embedded power relations and differentiated
levels of access to resources. In reducing the significance of the political
dimension of participation, those most often excluded from channels of
local governance, especially women (Mohan, 1998) are further marginalised
through a process of superficial or ‘veneered participation’ (Heeks, 1999).
While among critical development theorists the rhetoric of participation is
at last being treated with some caution (Cooke & Kothari, 2001) a widely
shared acceptance that participation is necessarily a good thing still pervades
much ecotourism literature.

Community and Participation in Ecotourism in Kenya’s
Maasailand: The Historical Context

If Maasai communities are somewhat suspicious of external agencies
expounding the virtues of participation it is perhaps of little surprise. The
Maasai themselves were subject to one of the most glaring examples of non-
participatory intervention by colonial authorities in the early 20th century
when 10,000 pastoralists were moved from their traditional homelands and
confined to the Southern Maasai Reserve – the area popularly referred to as
‘Maasailand’ today (Okoth-Ogendo, 1989).

During these early years of the 20th century the Maasai were to be the main
victims of policies often founded upon naive understandings of Maasai land
use practice. Thus in respect to Maasai rights to land, Sir Charles Elliot
(Governor), in a memorandum written in 1903, stated,
I cannot admit that wandering tribes have a right to keep other and superior races out of large tracts merely because they have acquired the habit of straggling over far more land than they can utilize. (Kenya Land Commission, 1933: 187)

Policies towards wildlife conservation also shaped land and natural resource policy during the colonial era. Initially, confinement of wildlife and pastoralists in the Southern Reserve exacerbated competition for grazing and water resources in the remaining accessible parcels of productive land. Subsequently, the creation of exclusive game conservation areas (‘fortress conservation’) further denied the Maasai access to key resources. Indeed during the past century the Maasai and their cattle have been confined to increasingly small areas of over-exploited land, resulting in intense competition and often conflict between Maasai and wildlife (and more recently those associated with the related tourism industry).

Following the confinement of the Kenyan Maasai to their current areas of occupancy in Kajiado and Narok Districts a series of initiatives were undertaken in attempts to sedentarise them and encourage more commercially-oriented livestock production. These schemes met with little success. For example the first ‘group ranches’ in Kenya, and probably Africa (Munei, 1990), were established in Kajiado District under the Kenya Livestock Development Programme (KLDP), sponsored by the World Bank. Subsequently Hardin’s (1968) *Tragedy of the Commons* thesis clearly found an enthusiastic audience amongst the ranks of rangeland development planners. A total of 51 group ranches were adjudicated under three phases of KLDP. In retrospect few of the objectives amongst the ranks of rangeland development planners.

Over the past decade (not least because of the acceptance that group ranches had failed in almost all respects) a process of subdivision (individualisation) has commenced. This, however, soon started to deplete further the areas of range available to pastoralists. ‘It is now clear that the major problems of livestock development in Kajiado District are no longer those of management of group ranches but those of coping with the breakdown of group ranches’ (Munei, 1991: 2). Sub-division, and the inevitable erection of fences and barriers to wildlife movements, also has potentially grave implications for wildlife and the tourism industry dependent upon it.

**Economic Change and the Raison d’Être for Ecotourism in Maasailand**

Notwithstanding the above, the majority of Kenya’s Maasai remain dependent upon cattle, sheep and goats. The shortage of income generating opportunities and poor infrastructure preclude many from obtaining alternative
sources of livelihood. Much of the area has also been very susceptible to drought. In 1994, following a prolonged dry period, some 75,000 people were said to be, ‘in dire need of emergency relief supplies’ (Daily Nation, 1994) and were being targeted by government and NGO relief agencies. The need for economic diversification was apparent.

The varied ecology of much of Kenya’s southernmost quarter of Maasailand sustains a diverse and abundant wildlife population, and the promotion of wildlife tourism has become central to Kenya’s development policy for the country’s semi-arid districts. The close parallel between conservation and tourism development has been explicitly stated by Kenya Wildlife Service responsible for operationalising wildlife tourism policy. Indeed, as Miller (1986: 112) has observed, ‘tourist revenues provide the raison d’etre for officially supported wildlife protection’.

In order to understand local attitudes towards both wildlife, and the tourism it attracts, it is necessary to reflect on recent history. Since 1945, a number of National Parks and game conservation areas have been created in Maasailand (Table 1). The prime reason for creating these areas was to protect wildlife populations from what were thought to be the damaging impacts of Maasai pastoralism and over exploitation by foreign hunters. Maasai and their cattle have, until recently, been excluded from many of these conservation areas.

With Amboseli National Park (situated in the heart of Maasailand) attracting in excess of 200,000 annually the service industry associated with wildlife tourism has become an important source of wage employment. But with as much as 70% of Amboseli’s wildlife regularly migrating beyond the borders of the National Park in search of pasture and water, wildlife tourism has also become an additional source of competition and conflict over key natural resources. Few Maasai have derived any substantial benefits from the thriving tourism sector. While some local men and youths have gained employment as waiters and guards, many jobs are filled by non-Maasai Kenyans. Even the traditional Maasai dances which entertain safari tourists each evening are often performed by Kenyans from other ethnic groups.

The creation of the Amboseli and Tsavo Group Ranches Conservation Association (ATGRCA) in 1994 provided a platform for the Maasai communities to express their resentment at the minimal tourism revenues allocated

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reserve or park</th>
<th>Area (km²)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maasai Amboseli Game Reserve</td>
<td>3248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maasai Mara Game Reserve</td>
<td>1671</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olorgesailie National Park</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nairobi National Park</td>
<td>117</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kitengela Game Conservation Area</td>
<td>583</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Chyulu Game Conservation Area</td>
<td>368</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tsavo West National Park*</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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*Tsavo West is not now in Maasailand but was previously a Maasai-occupied area.
them by central government, the local authority and the private sector. An advertisement placed in a national newspaper expressed these concerns,

> It is we the Maasai who suffer from conservation. Wild animals eat our grass, kill our animals, destroy our shambas and kill our people...yet KWS only gives us a token compensation. The [County] council makes millions of Shillings from the lodges on county council land...but gives us no money for development. We are therefore forming our own wildlife association to push for our rightful recognition and share in wildlife income.... We will not sub-divide the land if wildlife is profitable to us, but will do so if it continues to be a burden on us. *(Daily Nation, 1994)*

Over the past decade, spurred by the tourism potential that had long eluded the Maasai, and in part due to the increased control over resources bestowed by group ranch legislation, the Maasai have become increasingly proactive in initiating tourism development initiatives. Supporting the idea of 'community participation' in wildlife conservation, the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) has actively supported ecotourism initiatives around Amboseli National Park. Under the Wildlife Development Fund Programme introduced by KWS in 1990, community and enterprise development projects totalling £350,000 have been approved and disbursements totalling £250,000 made. A number of community-run game sanctuaries have been proposed and with KWS's technical assistance, these projects, have come to form the first ever community run game parks in Kenya. They include the Kimana Wildlife Sanctuary just 40 km from the borders of Amboseli National Park, one initiative championed as a genuine example of ecotourism in Kenya.

**Ecotourism in Kimana**

Kimana has long been regarded a prime location for wildlife tourism, and for much of the colonial era was a celebrated location for game hunting. Yet in 1970 a solitary camp site generating an annual lease of £30 provided the sum of its tourism revenue. By the early 1990s Kimana Group Ranch officials were becoming increasingly aware of the income tourism could potentially generate. By this time three camp sites were generating £900 annually.

Recently, due mainly to the initiatives of younger and commercially-oriented group ranch officials in Kimana, tourism has begun to contribute more to the group ranch. Campsite rents, for example, have increased almost six-fold since 1987. Kimana Wildlife Sanctuary was established in 1996 when Kimana Group Ranch leaders designated the only wetland area within the ranch a 'conservation zone'. The creation of the Sanctuary was funded by USAID Conservation of Bio-diverse Areas project, the Kenyan Government and KWS. Such was the significance of the Sanctuary – being Kenya’s first truly community-run ecotourism venture – that the Kenyan government and international organisations marked its opening by sponsoring the Royal Ballet to perform a specially choreographed production in the middle of the Sanctuary.

Such was the celebration of Kimana’s potential contribution to conservation and community development, the British Guild of Travel Writers (BGTW)
awarded the prestigious ‘Silver Otter’ award to Kimana Wildlife Sanctuary 1996. Soon after opening to the public, the Sanctuary was attracting £2600 in gate receipts. More recently income from the Sanctuary has reached KSh2.4 million (£17,000) annually. With additional income from bednight fees, some £27,000 is generated annually.

Despite this the recent history of Kimana Wildlife Sanctuary has been one characterised by institutional failure, of corrupt governance, and of increasing resentment amongst community members to the very principle of ‘ecotourism’ which captured international attention less than a decade ago. To understand this we need look no further than the very character of ‘community’ in Kimana and the associated problems of local governance.

**Governance and Legitimacy in Kimana**

As already stated, central to the functioning of any community is the legitimacy of authority. As Blank (1989, in Reed, 1997: 568) observes, ‘community leadership is heterogeneous ... drawn from a number of power bases’. Consequently resistance to a community tourism ‘product’ may emanate from political factions within communities, as much as external agencies (a dominant industry or residents for example). Jamal and Getz (1995: 190–191) argue that ‘power imbalances and legitimacy issues related to the stakeholder can inhibit both the initiation and the success of collaboration’. Such has been the case in Kimana.

Kimana Group Ranch was established in 1972, enclosing 25,120 ha of Maasai territory. As elsewhere in Maasailand group ranch registration introduced the concept of Western democracy, something with which the Maasai had not been familiar (ole Kipuri, 1991). Almost from the outset the democratic process floundered. Only one election was held during the 1970s, and as one elder member recalled, ‘people did not know the importance of group ranch elections at the time’. Annual General Meetings would often fail to achieve the necessary 60% quorum required for elections to be legally binding. Thus elections prior to 2000 were only successfully conducted in 1980, 1986 and 1993.

The powers legally vested in the group ranch representatives give them considerable autonomy over the control of resources within the group ranch borders. The powers to designate which land should and should not be available for communal grazing, and who should be given rights to cultivate alongside the springs and streams, are vested in the ranch Committee. Local rules pertaining to the felling of trees and burning of charcoal, for example, are also set and implemented by the Committee.

Group ranch leadership has become a means of establishing profitable patron–client relationships with those above, with political resources (power) to allocate, and those below (group ranch members) seeking access to land. It is clearly in the interests of politicians and bureaucrats to maintain the ‘young elite’ as clients in control of group ranches, through whom land can be acquired in return for promises of political promotion and a share of the fruits of land sub-division. It is also in their interests to keep the less easily manipulated out of power. Little wonder then that group ranch elections are rarely the annual, democratic events they are supposed to be. And little wonder that
the legitimacy of the group ranch leadership has been increasingly challenged over the years. In research conducted on members’ perceptions of group ranch leadership, many offered hostile views and rejected the authority legally vested in their leaders (Southgate & Hulme, 1996).

Community and Disunity in Kimana

In context with Kimana’s recent history of changing land ownership and local governance, the very essence of Kimana’s ‘community’ will now be explored in detail, illuminating as it does the complexities that tourism investors have confronted in respect to ecotourism planning in the area. To exemplify the complex nature of Kimana’s ‘community’, the divisions of ethnicity, age and clan will be briefly explore. To even embark on an examination of gender divisions and their implications is beyond the scope of this article.

Ethnicity, economy and change in Kimana

In response to changing patterns of land tenure, Kimana has witnessed a rapid immigration of Kikuyu and other non-Maasai Kenyans. During the first decade after the creation of group ranches, the non-Maasai population increased by 7.6% annually. Some have purchased land within the pockets of ‘individualised’ land holdings. Many others reside as tenants on Maasai-owned group ranch land, at the whim of Group Ranch leaders and living a perilous and vulnerable existence. Today Maasai and non-Maasai reside in Kimana in almost equal proportions, and the cultural landscape reflects the ethnic heterogeneity. A once unbroken expanse of semi-arid savanna is today characterised by numerous small scale irrigation schemes capitalising upon a shallow water table and fertile volcanic soils. Kimana is now the third largest irrigation area in Kenya. Within it an estimated 3200 farmers irrigate 1300 ha in 12 small-scale farmer-managed schemes. The most tangible consequence of this social and economic diversification is the wide-scale cultivation of once ‘pristine’ savanna. Open landscape has been replaced by a patchwork of farms, fields and fences. Water resources, scarce as they are, are now vehemently fought over between cultivators and those whose very existence depends upon the conservation rather than consumption of water resources and fertile land. Stakeholders in Kimana’s tourism sector are amongst them.

Age and the shifting balance of control over key resources

The male age-grade system has customarily played an important role in the management of rangeland resources, determining the locus of authority and the distribution of duties and responsibilities. With the imposition of Group Ranch management institutions came a concerted effort on the part of the state to install young, educated Maasai into group ranch leadership positions. Such positions bestow considerable power to allocate land and environmental resources within group ranches. Such positions, therefore, also convey considerable political power. While customary leaders remain highly respected, their power is increasingly inferior to that vested in group ranch leaders. While senior elders continue to comprise a permanent body on group ranch committees, equivalent to the customary council of elders and ensuring
‘a guarantee of respect for tradition’ (Peron, 1984: 65), ‘junior’ elders are increasingly attaining control over group ranch resources virtue of their generally higher levels of education.

The authority vested in age-set leaders, and the social cohesion maintained by the age-set system, have diminished as those in formal positions of authority have attained greater control over the management of local resources. The Maasai proverb proclaiming that ‘the neck [of a cow] cannot overtake the head’ – that one age-set cannot gain a higher status than the one before – no longer holds true. Nothing has undermined the perceived legitimacy of local governance as much as the subversion of traditional leadership by group ranch leaders. As control of group ranch resources has become concentrated in the hands of young, educated clients of local and national leaders in a vertically-integrated patron-client hierarchy, relationships between neighbouring clans, once nurtured to ensure continued access to resources, have become increasingly irrelevant.

**Clanism and control over natural resources**

Kinship is generally regarded as the essence of cooperation, reciprocity and equitable resource distribution within customary Maasai society (Galaty, 1981). During recent years Kimana has experienced an escalation in inter- and intra-clan dispute, and a perceptible demise of relations between, and within, clans. This poses a considerable threat to cooperative resource management. For instance, discussions over the development of ecotourism initiatives which transcend group ranch boundaries have repeatedly foundered – in part because of the nature of group ranch governance, in part because of the territorial divides between clan groups which the ranches have exacerbated. Such a situation contrasts markedly with the customary role served by kin-mates in transcending territorial boundaries and facilitating access to key resources.

The contest for Kimana’s commercially valuable resources is being fought between clans as vehemently as it is between age-sets. Consequently clans have become vehicles through which key political figures elicit support, in much the same way as they have exploited the age group system. The escalation of clanism is a complex phenomenon, and can best be understood by considering four ordinal levels within a simplified hierarchy of Maasai kin relations.

**Level 1: Kisonko and other iloshon**

That the ‘Maasai’ themselves are a homogenous socio-cultural group is itself erroneous. Galaty (1981), for example, reports that at least three armed clashes occurred between different Maasai ‘sections’ (iloshon) during the 1960s due to the unauthorised encroachment of herders into pasture controlled, and now ‘owned’ by other sections. In context with governance in Kimana, this has proven less important than divisions within the Kisonko clan – the dominant iloshon in this area.

**Level 2: Orok-kiteng and Odo-mongi**

The two major clans of the Kisonko Maasai are Orok-kiteng and the Odo-mongi. Broadly speaking, the former are concentrated to the west and north
of Kimana while the majority of the latter occupy areas to the south and east. As is the case within other iloshon, both clans have customarily been dispersed throughout the Kisonko territory.

The salience of this political divide can be seen in contested control over water resources – something pivotal to ecotourism potential in Kimana. For example, despite the numerical dominance of Orok-kiteng, the control of water rests almost entirely under the control of Odo-mongi. The explanation for this lies in historical roots of Odo-mongi agriculturalists’ influence outside Kimana. Suffice to say here that the consequence has been a protracted debate and conflict about water use and management – in its most simple form manifest in a pro-agriculture vs. pro-conservation/ecotourism divide.

This very same divide has also been well rehearsed during battles for Group Ranch leadership. Indeed such was the conflict in 1994 that resolution could only be achieved in the High Court of Kenya, where it was noted ‘Orok-kiteng and Odo-mongi are poised for war’ and that there would ensue ‘fighting, lawlessness and a breach of law and order unless [the election] is stopped by order of injunction’ (High Court of Kenya, 1994). Little wonder why authority is widely perceived to lack legitimacy, and why management of natural resources is fraught with conflict.

**Level 3: Ilaitayiok and Ilaiser**

In this discussion attention will focus upon the Orok-kiteng, the numerically dominant clan in Kimana. The Orok-kiteng comprises two sub-clans, Ilaiser and Ilaitayiok. Southgate and Hulme (1996) exemplify how Orok-kiteng sub-clans have become embroiled in a political contest for control in Kimana – most notable through a well publicised confrontation between the incumbent Ilaitayiok Chief of Kimana and the Ilaiser MP regarding the expansion of cultivation into Kimana’s important wetland. This case proved highly significant in the evolution of ecotourism in Kimana, not least because it represented another dimension of the pro-agriculture vs. pro-conservation dispute.

**Level 4: Iloodokishu and other Ilaiser sub-clans**

Finally, if only to demonstrate the significance of intra-clan dispute, mention should be made of infighting amongst the Ilaiser which has precluded the establishment of ecotourism ventures in Mbirikani Group Ranch, neighbouring Kimana to the north. Iloodikishu Group Ranch leaders have always drawn on the support of Ilaitayiok group ranch members due to a local political alliance between the two groups. The political alliance between Ilaitayiok and Iloodikishu thus poses a political threat, not least to the MP, preventing him as it does from establishing a clientage within Mbirikani as effectively as he has done elsewhere.

During the late 1990s a rift emerged between the Iloodikishu and the other three Ilaiser divisions. A number of meetings were held during which the MP sought to pitch members against Iloodikishu who were publicly derided on account of their relationship with Ilaitayiok. Planned elections were cancelled, and much of the remaining legitimacy of Group Ranch authority dwindled.

It is evident then that where kinship obligations once provided the very basis of collaboration and cooperation, the clan has become the medium through
which political support can be harnessed, and patron-client networks established. By vesting the power to control environmental resources in the hands of young, educated and ambitious group ranch leaders, prominent figures are gaining access to some of Kenya’s most prized land and key natural resources. The 900 families who constitute the membership of Kimana Group Ranch have, with very few exceptions, derived nothing from the potential economic opportunities ecotourism has brought to the area.

**Disunity and Implications for Kimana’s Ecotourism**

The above has served to portray a highly fragmented community, one lacking clear consensus on the value of conservation. Natural resource management decision making resides in a complex of customary and modern institutions, where the most influential, group ranch committees, have little legitimacy. The heterogeneity of Kimana’s community manifests itself wherever collective action could offer opportunity.

The prospects for Kimana Wildlife Sanctuary were perhaps never great given what has been described. In a brief reference to Kimana, Mowforth and Munt (1998) mention the ‘mild success’ achieved by that time by the Kimana community, an example of ecotourism that ‘highlights the deep divisions among the Maasai over the wisdom of involvement in tourism projects’ (Mowforth & Munt, 1998: 266). Such divisions reflect the diversity of attitudes and values, but perhaps more so the broader political context where ecotourism potential (where collective action and common purpose is so important) has succumbed to internal divisions and the often conflicting agendas of opposing groups.

That the African Safari Club (ASC) signed an agreement in 1996 to lease the Sanctuary for its sole and exclusive use with the Group Ranch committee, with no prior consultation, without broad based participation, and indeed without many in Kimana being aware of the companies interests, should be met with little surprise. Within weeks signs appeared around the Sanctuary warning local Maasai that the land had been designated ‘private’ property and that they were to stay clear – a stark throw back to colonial times when so much of Maasailand was designated private property. The spear holes and scratches concealing the word ‘private’ on the signs provides evidence of local feelings. Many Maasai members of Kimana Group now resent the very idea of ‘ecotourism’ and their own leaders who are accused of misappropriating the income received from African Safari Club. Kimana Wildlife Sanctuary today is no closer to the ideal of ecotourism than any of Kenya’s many tourism operations. Profits flow into European bank accounts, tourists arrive and depart in the main ignorant of the environment and culture of which they have a fleeting glance, and only a wealthy local elite claim any benefit from the tourists’ presence.

Commentators have asked inevitable questions about the intent of ASC, about the ‘exploitation’ of Kimana at the hands of this multinational tourism juggernaut (see for example Kanene, 2000). Few questions have considered the ways in which the lack of legitimate governance or shared support contrived to allow ASC to derive (what might be seen) as a neo-colonial hold over Kimana, its people and its tourism potential. That the squandered potential was due as much to ‘institutional failure’ as any intrinsic relationship
between Southern community and Northern operator has also been stated by Kanene (2000).

In a bid to conclude on a more positive note, mention should be made of another Group Ranch-based ecotourism venture in Eselenkei, neighbouring Amboseli National Park to the North. The Eselenkei Group Ranch is one of the most arid in Maasailand, but is of great ecological importance. It has most notably long been recognised as an area of immense ornithological importance – ornithologists and hunters have visited the area since the 1920s. In 1988 a 20-acre camp site was constructed on Group Ranch land, allowing the community to capitalise on the new opportunities that group ranch status had designated. Here in October 1995 the seeds of one of Kenya’s first community-based tourism ventures were sown when a British tour operator, Tropical Places (now Porini Ecotourism Ltd) entered into a formal agreement with the Eselenkei community to stage ecotourism on group ranch land. Today the ‘Selenkay Conservancy’ occupies 15,000 acres within the 180,000 acre Eselenkei Group Ranch bordering Amboseli National Park to the north.

In negotiating the contract with Tropical Places, the community received keen support from KWS, and the process of negotiation was further aided by the broad support from Eselenkei’s 5000 Maasai members.

Rutten (2002) recounts anecdotes from community members, detailing frictions that quickly emerged between operator and community. In brief these seem essentially due to perceived infringements by both parties on the agreement, especially regarding Maasai incursions on land designated ‘conservation area’. Indeed, as with Kimana, clanism, political allegiance and age group membership all proved divisive at times. This is acknowledged briefly by Rutten, though treated as a relatively minor impingement on the development of ecotourism here, one insignificant compared to the perceived exploitative nature of operator–community relations.

In judging relative success or failure of ecotourism projects, the complexities of community–operator interaction are easily reduced to the point of irrelevance, and a portrayal of tour operators as being invariably exploitative perhaps does injustice to the difficulties associated with forging mutually agreeable solutions to highly complex problems of negotiation and communication. Yet in Eselenkei the collaboration has yielded improved water supply, the construction of school class rooms and a number of bursaries for community children. Elephants have returned to the Group Ranch after a 10 year absence – in part due to the provision of water holes, in part due to increased tolerance towards wildlife. The Porini operation occupies approximately 10% of the Group Ranch and provides virtually the only income and employment in Eselenkei. Earnings for Eselenkei Group Ranch are approximately £13,000 annually. Employment for 41 community members has been provided by Porini’s six unit campsite, and this number is expected to rise to 80 when the projected 50% occupancy is reached. Income flowing into the community as wages exceed KSh240,000 monthly, equivalent to over £20,000 annually.

Eselenkei Group Ranch is notable for its apparent success in staging participatory community-based ecotourism, despite the intrinsic socio-cultural divisions which have hampered the collaboration. Such divisions though have not precluded effective negotiation with the operating company. The legal
expertise provided by KWS was vital in supporting the community’s capacity to achieve an agreement generally regarded as fair and sustainable by all stakeholders. Community support has been promoted by a high level of transparency, on the part of both Group Ranch leadership and operator. Accountability has been maintained by involvement of external institutions – governmental, non-governmental and commercial. Above all, while far from homogenous, the Eselenkei community continues to collectively support ecotourism.

**Conclusion**

In Kenya, governmental and non-governmental agencies have expounded the value of ‘partnerships’ and emphasised the pivotal role to be played by those who bear the costs of wildlife activity (Western & Wright, 1994). The increasing popularity of ecotourism enshrines this principal. Northern operators have become aware of the immense potential ecotourism holds, and with the virtual non-existence of governmental or non-governmental organisations in Maasailand, operator–community collaborations are becoming increasingly commonplace. In exploring ecotourism on the periphery of Amboseli National Park it is clear that the extent to which potential is realised locally depends on the extent to which communities can effectively compete and negotiate equitable and sustainable relationships with operators. This though, rests much on the capacity of communities to engage in such negotiations. The example of Kimana highlights the institutional weaknesses which precluded collective action – collective action that may have retained communal access and control over key natural resources.

In identifying generic issues arising from this article, the following points should be made. While the model of ‘community’ based ecotourism has a positive resonance, it is naïve to believe the articulation of ‘community’ and ‘industry’ can emerge from purely bottom-up initiatives. The initiation of such partnerships is perhaps less important than the subsequent process of negotiation and communication. Had communities in both Eselenkei and Kimana been better served by external support (especially of a legal nature) the perception of operator as exploiter would perhaps not exist. Rutten (2002: 15), in drawing conclusions from Eselenkei writes, ‘broad based discussion of the issues and whether or not to get involved in a particular project among all members of the community is essential’. While a normatively sound statement, it is quite clear that achieving broad-based agreement on any issues of Group Ranch affairs has proven illusive in all but the most socially, culturally and politically homogenous Group Ranches. As Barrow and Murphee (2002: 5) contend, ‘the concept of “community” while attractive can be misleading’. And so too can the assumptions we draw about community power relations unless used with prudence and caution.

Claims of neo-colonialism have predictably been levelled against operators which seek exclusivity and control over land. Experience in Kimana suggests however, that the exclusion of ‘community’ from the rewards of ecotourism has been fuelled more by the majority’s exclusion from negotiations and their lack of access to channels of participation. As Reed (1997: 569) writes,
‘in emergent tourism settings where interests are not collectively organized, the identification of legitimate stakeholders may itself be a contestable task’.

Unfortunately the mere fact that the exclusion of the minority contrasts so glaringly with the wealth generated for the group ranch ‘elite’ provides rich and easy pickings for those keen to portray ecotourism in negative terms.

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