

BOOK REVIEW

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Book review of “*Conservation and Community in Kenya: Milking the Elephant*” by Carolyn Lesorogol

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Book details

Book review of *Conservation and Community in Kenya: Milking the Elephant* by Carolyn Lesorogol. Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Lexington. 2022. ISBN 9781793650290; e-ISBN 9781793650306.

This is a wonderfully grounded book, written by an anthropologist with long-term, deep-rooted engagement in Samburu communities and culture. Through her study of three ‘community conservancies,’ the author outlines and analyses in-depth the emergence, operation and implications for local communities of community-based conservation (CBC) in Samburu County, northern Kenya. The lessons from this work apply far beyond East Africa.

CBC aims for win-wins for environment and wildlife conservation on the one hand and community development on the other hand. However, livelihoods and well-being may be undermined by conservation restrictions on mobility and access and by intensified human-wildlife conflict. Hoped-for returns may not be commensurate with costs, and despite best intentions, new governance institutions grafted onto underlying sociocultural structures may foster widening inequalities. CBC in East Africa is a potential minefield, with recent critique and counter-critique exploding beyond academic journals and NGO websites into hotly contested public debate (e.g. Oakland Institute 2021; The Nature Conservancy (TNC) 2021). In a welcome reset, this low-key, very readable book delivers a profoundly thoughtful, balanced and

nuanced account and evaluation. Closely observed, quietly dissecting the complex interplay of competing interest groups, divergent aims and assumptions, actions and their outcomes, Lesorogol’s slow-burn, forensic analysis goes to the heart of the social, cultural and economic ambivalences underpinning CBC, delivering critically significant insights. There are important truths here for anyone involved with CBC, whether as a researcher, practitioner or policy-maker, critic or champion, across East Africa and beyond.

Lesorogol addresses three broad issues: what is the local Samburu understanding of conservancies and their goals? How do conservancies operate? What are the costs and benefits, and to whom do they accrue? The introduction positions these overarching questions within a light-touch theoretical framework in which institutions, collective action, community-based natural resource management and political ecology all intersect. Chapter 1 then goes on to sketch the study area, its people and their pastoralist lifeways and livelihoods. It outlines a historical overview of changes in institutions controlling land: pre-colonial socially mediated, contested and negotiated access; colonial grazing schemes; post-independence group ranches. At every stage over the last 100 years, the Samburu have experienced land losses to settlers, to commercial agriculture, to protected areas and most recently to oil extraction and pipeline developments. A rising number of communities are now accepting to establish conservancies within and/or across group

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ranches, on a model of CBC promoted by the Northern Rangeland Trust (NRT) and supported by a variety of donor and government agencies. Chapter 2 on ‘How CBCs work’ dissects the layered institutions at play—customary authorities such as the traditional council of elders, an inclusive gathering encompassing all men of that age grade; elected but unpaid group ranch officials; new, more complex, less inclusive CBC governance structures. These last are dependent on external funding, variably congruent with group ranch boundaries, committees and constituencies, staffed by paid individuals, with paid attendance for some chosen elders, whose positions are hotly contested. This layering creates a confusing mix of terminologies, structures, rules and authorities with overlapping and divergent jurisdictions, lower inclusivity and limited transparency over important decisions. For example, the CBC ‘grazing committee’ seems to echo a major function of the customary council of elders in deciding which areas are opened or closed to grazing, and when. However, its brief is to restrict grazing by livestock, to protect rangeland and wildlife through fixed core and buffer zone boundaries and not to consider flexible access to manage pastoralist needs. CBC has introduced divergent objectives, new flows of money and changed social and spatial relations.

Chapter 3 uses mixed methods, from participant observation through household survey and economic games, to understand the benefits and costs of CBC. Lesorogol deploys a nicely judged balance of light-touch quantitative findings alongside grounded qualitative contextualisation to evaluate the various strands of income and their distribution across households. Conservation-related income (tourism dividends, game scout employment, committee allowances ...) is put in perspective alongside income from livestock, wage labour and trade for households in more versus less well-established conservancies. The chapter goes on to dissect the complexities undermining the NRT’s attempted livestock trading scheme purchasing Samburu livestock, fattening and selling them on. Chapter 4 undertakes an in-depth analysis of gender and conservation, moving from a broad-brush historical overview of international shifts in understanding of women’s empowerment, through consideration of gender roles and agency among the Samburu, to an exploration of the ways in which conservation and CBC initiatives have sought to engage women. It focuses down on women’s beadwork as an important cultural activity increasingly channelled into prescribed products for sale to tourists. As with the NRT-mediated livestock trade, low returns, marketing constraints and culturally divergent priorities complicate the initiative.

Chapter 5 is really the culmination of the work, analysing the extent to which conservation and CBC objectives

map onto deep-rooted Samburu cultural values of mutual respect, sharing and reciprocity, and a desire to manage relations for peace, all fundamental to sustainable pastoralist land use and production. Despite potential synergies, CBC rules tend to be misaligned with customary norms. CBC claims to foreground community participation and peace. But CBC governance structures are not as inclusive as customary Samburu systems and may deny sharing and reciprocity, fostering competition and conflict both through the overlapping and divergent authorities they create and through designating non-members as outsiders to be excluded. CBC institutions focus on enforcement, not engagement. The spatial zonation, boundaries and restrictions that CBC introduces negate flexible, adaptive management and may trigger conflict within and between communities. They may intensify human-wildlife conflict, while systems meant to compensate for the resulting loss of life or property do not function. The seemingly natural congruence between young men’s customary roles as warriors and the new role of game scout, with its added inducements of uniform, weapons and regular pay, is undermined by the way these roles diverge. Customarily, young men protect and provide security for their families, their livestock and their wider allies, but game scouts enforce the exclusion of livestock and people. As a paramilitary force, they can be seen as aligned with suspect groups—the Kenya Wildlife Service, and the police. Finally, economic returns are low and unequally distributed, and the new governance institutions associated with heightened local suspicions, corruption and conflict. Alternative livelihoods initiatives (NRT-mediated livestock trade, women’s bead work ...) assign the ‘lowest rungs of the value chain’ to local members. Economic games add to the evidence that conservancies are reducing rather than enhancing cooperation. Overall, there is a corrosion of the values of trust and respect that have been so fundamental to this pastoralist society, its use of the landscape, tolerance of and co-existence with wildlife.

With oil extraction, pipeline construction, land and water resource grabs and the associated sprouting of ‘resource cities’ with heavy future ecological footprints, landscape level changes now urgently challenge both pastoralism and wildlife conservation in Samburu County. Shortcomings need to be acknowledged, and potential synergies fostered and built upon with far greater care and understanding. CBC and conservancies need to become institutions more supportive of communities. They need to pay more attention to people’s enduring, resilient, livestock-based livelihoods, with more community engagement, clearer understanding of cultural norms and underlying priorities, and work towards reducing reliance on donor funding, not least through

more transparent, participatory budgeting. Lesorogol's thoughtful, measured analysis points to the potential synergies, and pathways to more hopeful outcomes.

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