

# MAMBO !

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## Amboseli: caught between political competition and wildlife protection

**A**mboseli National Park, situated in Olkejuado District (South Kenya) has been embroiled in a controversy concerning its status since 2005. This brings to light several political challenges linked to its existence. As it is both a natural and a political resource, the case of Amboseli shows that wildlife protection measures are highly dependent on political stakes, both locally and nationally.

### The challenges of conservation in Kenya

The question of wildlife conservation in Kenya is not new. From a geographical point of view, it has long been characterised by protected areas—parks—which exclude the surrounding populations. However, this conservation is not ideal for wildlife; indeed, wild animals evolve within ecosystems and migratory passages, whose area is much vaster than a park, a region or sometimes even, a country. Therefore, it seems necessary today to guarantee migration corridors between parks, in order to preserve huge tracts of the ecosystems.

Nevertheless, this idea comes into collision with the community's economic development, at several levels. On the one hand, the protection of parks and corridors restricts human activity within them, particularly agriculture, which is more profitable than the subsistence livestock-rearing as practised by the pastoralists. Additionally, the wildlife often cause as much damage to plant-life—havoc caused by elephants—as to livestock, that are victims of predators. These man/wildlife conflicts attract the wrath of the surrounding community who receive no compensation for their loss, while at the same time, they barely benefit from the income remitted by tourists who visit the Park. The fact that a large proportion of wildlife inhabits the same areas as Kenya's poorest people increases the contrast between a profitable income from a touristic point of view, and the pastoral communities that are its victims.

The dilemma between wildlife protection and human development is a problem for the heterogeneous conservation sector in Kenya. The organisations can be classified by type, according to the critical degree of autonomy that they have in view of the State and political authorities. The Kenya Wildlife Service<sup>1</sup> (KWS), a parastatal organisation, plays the role of "wildlife police", furnished with armed rangers who are responsible for preserving the integrity of protected areas. Dependent on political authorities, the KWS cannot always act in the best interests of conservation. However, there are several non-governmental organisations (NGOs) active in Kenya, many of which are Kenyan or East African organisations that have been in existence since the colonial era.<sup>2</sup> They have the advantage of greater legitimacy on the national scene as well as a certain amount of autonomy from the government, due to their substantial international funding. They play the role of lobby group, local project managers or research institutes. Two major types of international NGOs<sup>3</sup> can be identified—from small organisations specialised in local project implementation,<sup>4</sup> to large organisations such as International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), whose structural collaboration with the Kenyan government prevents it from direct political criticism.<sup>5</sup> Several of these NGOs have decentralised units within the parks for example in Amboseli, which increases their research capacity and local action but limits the possibility

of political criticism likely to go against the opinions of the local populace in the locales in which they work.<sup>6</sup>

### A controversial national park in Maasailand

Amboseli National Park, an offshoot of the old colonial Southern Game Reserve, is the product of a turbulent history, which caused splits and exclusions unique to the relationship between Kenya and the Maasai from the foot of Mount Kilimanjaro. This history can only be understood by first broaching the structure of the regional political stakes of Maasailand.

From a political point of view, Maasailand is basically divided into two large sub-regions, comprising Kajiado District, in the east, and Narok District, to the west. These regions each have their leaders—currently George Saitoti and William ole Ntimama respectively—who are often rivals in the national political arena. These regions are divided into constituencies<sup>7</sup>, whose MPs are clients and vassals of one or the other of the two main regional leaders. Today, while George Saitoti is President Kibaki's<sup>8</sup> closest ally, Ntimama rallies towards the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM), benefiting from more solid local politics. His support-base has strengthened as a result of the income received from Maasai Mara National Reserve, from where the Narok County Council collects revenue. This strength accords Ntimama a certain autonomy towards the President, as in 2005, he was opposed to the constitutional reforms.

Initially a reserve managed by the Olkejuado County Council at independence, Amboseli was classified as a National Park by President Kenyatta in 1974 for

political reasons. Under the guise of improving management through a reinforced state control, the County Council got considerably reduced funding, which in turn slowed down the political ascension of the council's chairman. This threatened President Jomo Kenyatta's Maasai allies and hence his leadership in the region. The Olkejuado County Council, among the richest in the country, was thus staring poverty in the face. On the other hand, the status of Amboseli denied the region's pastoralists a water point that they required for their herds. And despite the promises of compensation—these were partly kept—the pastoralists massacred huge numbers of wild animals in protest. The political exclusion of Maasai leaders from Kajiado thus doubled the economic exclusion of its inhabitants. Since then, there has been a latent demand from the Kajiado Maasai concerning the copious profits generated from Amboseli. They people barely gain from these gains as the money is only marginally redistributed. The lack of infrastructure in the region, along with the man/wildlife conflict at the park borders contributes to stirring up these demands. Consequently, the desire to see Amboseli returned to the County Council is part of the laundry list for Kajiado politicians who envy the riches of their Narok counterparts. In Narok, political ascension has been linked to the funds obtained from tourism in the Maasai Mara.

### Amboseli and the 2005 constitutional referendum

In September 2005, President Mwai Kibaki announced the degazettement of Amboseli National Park during a meeting at State House, attended by several key Maasai leaders. This decision accorded one of the Rift

Valley's most famous and profitable regions the status of a National Reserve, managed by the Olkejuado County Council. This automatically gave the council rights over the Amboseli Park entry fees, and it was at liberty to use these as it saw fit. The County Council inherited an extra responsibility to organise and maintain the Park, as well as the duty of wildlife protection, to the detriment of the Kenya Wildlife Service, which was formerly charged with these tasks. This decision was highly controversial: taken during the height of campaigns for the constitutional referendum, it was immediately considered by Kibaki's detractors as a goodwill measure, destined to cajole the restless Maasai voters to support the reforms proposed by Kibaki. Having lost ground according to several opinion polls, the President had to win the 'YES' vote, by hook or by crook. More specifically, William ole Ntimama had just invited all Kenyan Maasai to Mount Suswa, where he appealed to them to vote against the constitutional reforms. He deemed these as aimed at further marginalising the pastoralists.

The presidential decision collided with the interests of the conservation sector. Firstly, this was against the objectives of the parastatal body KWS, which had just launched a business reform programme on the Park. Additionally, several NGOs in the conservation sector pointed out the lack of competence in wildlife protection by members of the Olkejuado County Council, who were viewed as being particularly corruptible. Some of these organisations even went as far as contesting the degazettement of Amboseli at the High Court in Nairobi.<sup>9</sup> Several weeks later, the decision was suspended, pending judgment.

## Amboseli on the agenda of the 2007 General Elections

In his desire to support his ally Katoo ole Metito in Kajiado South, President Kibaki launched measures to win his cause towards the electorate who, up to this point, had been hostile. For example, funds for renovating the road between Loitokitok and Emali<sup>12</sup> were made available and a tender notice put out. As for Amboseli, the KWS management was forced to sign an agreement which anticipated a sharing of park revenues: 60% of the revenues would go to the County Council, 40% to KWS.<sup>13</sup> In order to handle public opinion and a conservation sector generally hostile to endangering the country's wildlife, it was decided that a new district be created, which would cover the areas around Loitokitok<sup>14</sup>, and

which would more or less slice into Katoo ole Metito's constituency. Finally, the new district would lead to an ousting of the Maasai leaders from the Olkejuado County Council, who had turned to the ODM opposition in 2006. The first county councillors of Loitokitok are to be elected in December 2007.

Currently, the conservation sectors appear to be more cautious than hostile towards government reforms which do not seem to substantially compromise their interests. The revenue-sharing principle between the County Council and KWS has been maintained despite the reluctance of the parastatal to part with funds which would allow them to finance its non-profitable parks.<sup>15</sup>

In essence, the Amboseli controversy of these past years appears to exist cursorily on the conservation agenda independent from political games, of which it is often a pawn. Amboseli bears witness to these often forced unequal to-and-

Nevertheless, despite the difficulty in contesting the initially clientilistic nature of the degazettement, its effectiveness, such as it was, was paradoxically third-rate. Indeed, almost everywhere in Maasailand, the 'NO' vote to minimum constitutional reforms prevailed, including in Kajiado South, the constituency of Amboseli National Park. The legal suspension of the degazettement following NGO action barely had any bearing on the Maasai vote as, at local level, the information was poorly communicated. On the other hand, the weakness of the President's Maasai allies within the region led to almost no effect in inciting voters to support the constitutional project. George Saitoti as MP for Kajiado North, was powerless to win the

cause of the 'YES' team in a political base that was not really his own. Of the other two MPs in the district, one was opposed to the reforms,<sup>10</sup> and the other was rather weak. Indeed, in Kajiado South, Katoo ole Metito, having been weakened by his poor management of development funds, suffered from a lack of leadership due to his youth and lack of political experience.<sup>11</sup> He was also not able to counter Ntimama's declarations. He barely managed to relay the information on the degazettement issue and gain true political mileage from it. Despite the political ineffectiveness of the clientilistic announcement, it kindled up the demands of the Maasai considerably, and heightened their criticisms on a conservation area that was often accused of ignoring their needs.

In the period immediately after the referendum, the situation appeared to have calmed down. Nothing had actually changed in Amboseli; the KWS management encouraged its

troops to stay put. This policy to maintain the *status quo* benefited from the ambiguity resulting from the degazettement process, which had been suspended and continuously postponed. Nonetheless, during a visit to Maasailand, President Kibaki reiterated his wish to have Amboseli degazetted. Because of this, KWS entered into negotiations with the Olkejuado County Council. However, these discussions were carried out in a manner as to drag them on for as long as possible, such that the matter was bogged down. On their part, the conservation NGOs present in Amboseli accelerated steps towards

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Amboseli was classified as a National Park in 1974, mainly for political reasons.

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multilateral cooperation with all conservation stakeholders in the region by giving politicians just a marginal role. A comprehensive management plan was adopted in April 2007, sharing out roles between the different actors with a particular insistence on establishing a system of compensation for the man/wildlife conflict suffered by the Maasai. Politicians were sparingly integrated into the project, due to the long-held distrust towards them by the conservationists. However, the impending General Elections of December 2007 resulted in great apprehension among the conservationists while President Kibaki, under these circumstances, could only seek to consolidate his support in the region. Once again, the degazettement of Amboseli took centre stage.

fro struggles between politicians and conservation activists. In order for their respective strategies to be effective, they must take into account the figures of the sector which has, to all intents and purposes, been hostile to them, and adjust to this. Surprisingly, this chaotic situation sometimes results in rational systems, from the conservation point of view as well as from power strategies, such as what is currently designed around Amboseli to the point of it becoming a reserve as well as a political constituency. A Maasai candidate for the Kajiado South parliamentary seat, Paul Ntiati, previously a manager at African Wildlife Foundation for the Kilimanjaro region, is symbolic of this transformation. This situation testifies to the strange modernity of hybrid careers—both political and conservationist—of those who will soon have the monopoly of decisions on the controversial natural areas and resources.

### Notes

- 1 It is placed under the Ministry of Wildlife and Natural Resources.
- 2 For example, East African Wildlife Society or Nature Kenya (formerly known as East African Natural History Society).
- 3 This means that their headquarters are based abroad, often in Europe or in the United States of America.
- 4 An example is Bornfree Kenya.
- 5 They therefore carry out more lobbying and consultancy, aimed at modifying the legal frameworks on conservation within the country.

- 6 An example is the renowned Amboseli Elephant Research Project, which since the 1970s, has carried out a large-scale programme of research and classification of the elephants in Amboseli.
- 7 North Narok [MP and party: Ntimama, first in NARC then moved on to ODM] and South [Ole Ntutu; first in KANU then ODM]; Kajiado North [Saitoti, NARC], Kajiado Central [Nkaissery, KANU then ODM] and Kajiado South [Metito, NARC]. Amboseli is situated in Kajiado South, between the border towns of Loitokitok and Namanga. This is more than 150 kilometres from Kajiado town, the seat of the District County Council.
- 8 Despite a debateable ethnicity, Saitoti was born of Kikuyu parents, but for political reasons, claims to be Maasai. This bizarre trait accords him the benefits of a political base comprising wealthy Kikuyu farmers, and more specifically, a regional leadership from the Maasai in his constituency.
- 9 Nature Kenya, the East African Wildlife Society, Bornfree Kenya and Youth for Conservation all participate in this legal action as well as in an impassioned press campaign against the government.
- 10 The ODM leader of Kajiado Central, Nkaissery.
- 11 A beneficiary of the “NARC wave”, at 29 years of age, Katoo ole Metito was the youngest MP elected to the Kenyan Parliament. He holds a BSc degree and a Higher Diploma in Management of Information Systems.
- 12 This road provides Loitokitok with a link to the Nairobi-Mombasa highway. It has been in such bad shape and impractical for public transport, that

the residents of Amboseli preferred to go to Namanga, tens of kilometres to the west, from where they could gain access to Nairobi.

- 13 It is noteworthy that among the members of the KWS Surveillance Council, apart from the KWS Director, only two others are conservationists by profession. This explains why conservation interests are not always a priority in various decisions made within the organisation.
- 14 Hence a new County Council. This provides support for this political step through practical and incontestable arguments: proximity to government services for Amboseli residents. Previously, they had to travel almost 150 km to access these. For the park, a new small-size district next to it allows for easier control of reinvestment of park entry fees.
- 15 Entry fees for the three largest parks in Kenya—Nakuru, Amboseli, Tsavo—actually finance the several other rarely visited non-profitable protected areas, which nonetheless shelter rare or endangered species. For example, Saiwa Swamp, near Kitale, was created in order to protect swamp antelopes.



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### Editor's note

*Mambo* is a Kiswahili word, which strictly speaking, means “news” or “information”. However, current usage, and specifically colloquial speakers will recognise the word as a form of greeting, loosely translated as “what’s up?”

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