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Spatial and Political Factors in Forest Resource Conflicts: The Eastern Mau Forest Case 1992–2014

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines conflicts and forest resource politics in Eastern Mau, which is part of the Mau forest complex in Kenya. Conflict hotspots are mapped based on geo-coded transect walks, observation points derived from a combination of qualitative interviews, and informal conversations with local residents. Conflicts are categorized in terms of their temporal, spatial and substantial dimensions; and connections between conflict hotspots and forest resource politics are discussed. The study documents drivers of conflict such as forest and land resources access, political patronage and competition among ethnic groupings. Political patronage related to the voter sourcing seems to be a key underlying driver of forest and land use conflict. There is need to improve forest resources governance in order to water down patronage and reduce conflicts.

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Forest conflict; political ecology; political patronage

Introduction

One of the most significant natural resources at the center of conflicts globally is the forest. Across different regions of the developing countries forests have provided habitats for military warfare between governments and militia as center of resource politics (McNeely 2003). Forest destruction has also been associated with violent conflict, for example, in West and Central Africa (Richards 1998; Draulans and Van Krunkelsven 2002; Fenske 2014; Burgess et al. 2015), Asia (Le Billon 2000) and British Columbia (Hayter 2003). Conflicts in forestry contexts often jeopardize conservation efforts and threaten them with degradation (Burgess et al. 2015; Baumann and Kuemmerle 2016). Since forests serve both ecological and socio-economical roles, their degradation threatens livelihoods of not only the adjacent communities but those dependent on their ecosystem services. Disrupted livelihoods can be precursor for violent conflicts. Eastern Mau forest in Kenya's Rift Valley presents an example of forest degradation in light of ethnic conflict. This forest has experienced a complicated natural resources and political history, characterized by illegal excisions of the forest, irregular and ill-planned settlements and strained relationships between ethnic groups between 1990s and present time

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(Klopp and Sang 2011; Klopp 2012). The political aspects of these conflicts place ethnicity at the center of the scene with (national-level) elite-voter dynamics (Oucho 2002; Amanor and Moyo 2008; Klopp 2012). As a result, violence and ethnic disputes have taken place around electioneering period from 1992 at the introduction of multi-party politics and peaked during the 2007 elections (Ajulu 2002; UNDP 2008).

Several conflict situations have been documented within the Kenyan Rift Valley (Ajulu 2002; UNDP 2008; Anderson and Lochery 2008). The various studies and documentaries on Rift Valley conflicts address the subject from a general political perspective. Within this perspective, conflicts in the Rift Valley are understood as an indicator of the wider political conflicts in the country especially related to the Kenyan election process. Hitherto, only few studies have been carried out to understand these conflicts from a political ecology perspective with the forest resource being at the center (Government of Kenya 2009; Klopp and Sang 2011; Klopp 2012).

Generally, political ecology is about politicizing environmental problems and phenomena where the nexus is drawn between environmental changes, political, economic and social factors (Peet and Watts 1996; Bryant and Bailey 1997). Resource politics in the context of political ecology helps us to understand such concerns as degradation and conservation, natural resource access, marginalization and environmental conflict (Robbins 2012). The concept also helps us to understand how political decisions are made based on geographical factors, e.g., to get access to resources and amass political power (Peluso 1992; Peluso and Watts 2001; Paulson, Gezon, and Watts 2003). In this paper we commit to an inclusive complex conception of resource politics in line with Paulson, Gezon, and Watts (2003), considering possible sources of power and many forms of access to resources - understood in a democratic context as being characterized by many co-existing influence-seeking stakeholders. In the context of Kenya, and in particular the Rift Valley and Mau forest complex, co-existing stakeholders are often grouped and organized around ethnic lines. The relationship between the stakeholders is at times characterized by severe conflicts related to access to land and natural resources (Oucho 2002; Amanor and Moyo 2008).

This study was planned to understand the use of political power in relation to geographic space and access to natural resources in Kenya. Geographical factors were understood herein as variables that have spatial attributes, i.e., those that relate to space and location. The political factors are delimited to factors of particular importance around national elections that is factors related to the complex elite-voters dynamics in Kenya, such as ethnicity. An analysis was done to explain the role of politics in increasing or reducing access to natural resources like land and forest in Eastern Mau forests and consequent role in stirring up ethnic tension and conflict escalation. The role of resource politics in sustaining intractability of conflict in the Eastern Mau forest complex of Kenya was investigated covering the period from 1992–2014, as 1992 marked the beginning of the multiparty democratic system, a period associated with triggering of ethnic groups conflicts. Within this political ecology framework, the study takes a novel approach of using geographical information system (GIS) along with qualitative research methods to achieve a more detailed geo-spatial and temporal analysis of the different dynamics across space and time at the local level to see how they come into play in the forest related conflicts.

Historical Context and Theoretical Underpinnings

By analyzing and understanding the conflicts in Eastern Mau through the lens of forest resources politics, considering geographical as well as political factors, we intend to help understand new and better ways to address and help solve some of the existing and quite severe natural resource conflicts in Kenya. An important aspect of resource politics is the political and democratic culture and practice. We therefore need to take a closer look at the particular political-democratic practice in Kenya, which seem to be part and parcel of the recurring conflicts and clashes among different ethnic groupings about land, resource access and other issues.

Historical-Political Context

To fully understand the resource politics of forest related conflicts of Eastern Mau, we need to understand the political context across scales around the repeated violence, e.g., as it occurs around national elections. Political patronage as it unfolds along ethnic lines in Kenya seems to be a prominent aspect of this context. It started as early as 1960s and became more pronounced between 1990s and early 2000s when land was used as a main patronage resource, as supporters pressed for grants of farmland in Rift Valley and along the coast (Kanyinga, Lumumba, and Amanor 2008). Because patronage politics develop along ethnic lines in Kenya, underlying factors such as resource competition between ethnic groups/tribes and social identity issues become relevant. Evidently, postcolonial Kenya presents an almost perfect case of political patronage and conflict in relation to forest resources utilization and destruction (Klopp and Sang 2011; Klopp 2012).

The issues of resource politics and political patronage started to play out significantly with the introduction of multi-party systems in Kenya in early 1990s, which posed a threat to single party rule of KANU¹ party that had been in power since independence in 1963. There was need to consolidate voting blocs, which was done by using mainly natural resources like forests in exchange for votes (Barkan 1993). To increase political patronage and woo voters the ruling regime (under KANU political party) started by de-gazetting parts of the Mau forest to reward loyal politicians and entice some members of the Kalenjin community to vote for KANU in the 1997 elections (Kagwanja 2005). According to Arriola (2009), use of state resources is common among regimes threatened by political change. To counter the growing threat of opposition parties and consolidate the Kalenjin voting bloc, the KANU regime triggered ethnic clashes to punish, uproot and disenfranchise non-Kalenjin opposition supporters in Rift Valley (Lynch 2008). Some Kalenjin were then allowed to occupy the forest land left by the displaced Kikuyus, Kisiis and Luos (Kagwanja 2005; Chege 2008). Based on the above historical and political context, we argue that the patronage dynamics around resource politics seem to trigger violent social conflicts along ethnic lines, based on strong in-group out-group dynamics.

Theoretical Underpinnings of Political Patronage along Ethnic Lines

Political patronage is a well-described phenomenon from many parts of the world at different times in history (Shefter 1977, 1994; Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007; Bustikova

and Corduneanu-Huci 2017). In Kenya the phenomenon has been described in a context of ethnicity and access to land and natural resources (Kanyinga 2000; Kanyinga, Lumumba, and Amanor 2008; Klopp 2000, 2002) and documented in greater detail in the context of ethnic favoritism in terms of paved road construction (Burgess et al. 2015). The linkage between ethnic groupings and political patronage and, in particular, why ethnic parties succeed, has been studied by Chandra in India (2004). Her study (2004) and the theory of voter-elite behavior (2007) seem to be relevant in Kenya where political parties, patronage and favoritism seem to develop around ethnic fault-lines.

At the general level, *patron-based democratic models* are distinguished from the *responsible party government model* that describes the political dynamics of typical affluent capitalist democracies, where democratic accountability results from politicians' ability to deliver collective goods like economic growth, jobs, stability and healthcare to the voters (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007). In patron-based systems the accountability is based on the direct exchange of a citizen's vote in return for direct payments, access to employment, land or other goods and services. Under this system politicians must identify resources they can extract and offer to their clients (voters) as "payment" for their vote (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007). In Kenya, access to land and natural resources has been used as the currency for such exchanges (Boone 2007, 2009, 2011).

The long-term function and success of this "political machine" depends on: (1) the clients (voters) ability to actually bring the patron into power; and (2) the patron's (politician) success in delivering goods and services to the actual voters. Patrons must build organizational devices to monitor the loyalty of the constituencies at the elections. Over time the success and viability of the mutual exchange is confirmed by iterations (election periods). In viable cases the repeated exchanges lead to predictability and low risk in the relationship and mutual exchanges between the patron and his/her clients (voters) (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007). In Kenya, such dynamics with repeated exchanges have developed over time. In particular after independence, government land became a main asset mobilized by the politicians for the patronage (Throup 1993; Klopp 2000; 2002; Kanyinga, Lumumba, and Amanor 2008; Boone 2011).

Based on her study of patronage and ethnic head-counts in India (Chandra 2004), Chandra's *theory of voter and elite behavior in patronage-democracies* (2007) set out to explain the synergistic and self-enforcing association between voters and (political) elites that develop in patron-client systems. In particular the theory seeks to explain the mechanism behind the general observation that patronage politics and expectations of ethnic favoritisms tend to go together as documented in places like Sri Lanka, Nigeria and Zambia (Chandra 2007) as well as Kenya (Boone 2011). Chandra's theory suggests that the association between voters and elites in patronage systems has a strong tendency to follow ethnic lines.

Chandra's theory delivers a cogent argument, explaining the apparent gravitation towards politics of ethnic favoritisms in Kenya and elsewhere. Chandra argues that the strength of the gravitation towards ethnic favoritism is so strong that it will develop, even in the absence of other possible incentives to build patronage on ethnic groups, such as existing networks and institutions that pave the way for "the political machinery". However, it seems clear that such incentives are at work in Kenya with the

overall result of strong and well-established politics along ethnic lines that effectively seem to resist change.

Albeit there are many studies on patronage and land resources, less attention has been paid to forests as resources within patronage networks (Klopp 2012). We consider this a critical gap in existing research and literature. To address this gap we applied a fine grained spatial analysis to better tease out the different conflict dynamics across the forest. Recent cases of forest related conflicts have been analyzed in the context of Kenya's political history representing a backdrop of a well-established practice of political patronage using forest resources as the currency.

Materials and Methods

Study Design

The research was designed as a mixed methods exploratory and explanatory case study. The exploratory part was based on a descriptive mapping-approach involving geospatial mapping of conflict hot-spots by use of geographical information system (GIS) techniques in combination with geo-coded transect walks, community mapping and qualitative interviews with selected community members. The outcome of the exploratory part was a map indicating land-cover and use, community borders and conflict hot-spots. The explanatory part took a qualitative approach based on a series of in-depth key informant interviews and focus group discussions. The aim was to explain why these conflicts emerge, why so many and why each of them repeatedly seem to erupt into high escalation levels including violence and death. The outcome of the explanatory part was a systematic description of the conflict hot-spots discovered and an analysis of the possible drivers behind them. Finally, a broader analysis was carried out in order to explain possible overall, crosscutting or common patterns across the hot-spots.

Study Area

The study area was in Eastern Mau forests block, which is one of the largest forest blocks in the Mau forest complex, initially covering about 66,000 hectares, out of which 35,301 hectares were excised in the year 2001 for settlements (UNDP 2008). The study area covered some 125,389.2827 hectares including areas outside the forest (Figure 1).

A cool and wet climate with deep fertile volcanic soils of Eastern Mau has made the region very attractive for a wide range of agricultural practices. The Eastern Mau landscape is ideal for growing of maize, potatoes, peas, and wheat, grazing of cattle, shoats and building of homesteads. As a result the area has witnessed an increasing influx of migrants into the region for the last two decades. These economic activities sometimes are in competition with land for forestry. The Eastern Mau highlands have been heavily and destructively logged, with specific targets to high value trees like Parasol Tree (*Polyscias kikuyuensis* Summerh), high red cedar (*Juniperus virginiana* L.) and *Podocarpus* and *Oleaspecies* (Birdlife International 2013).

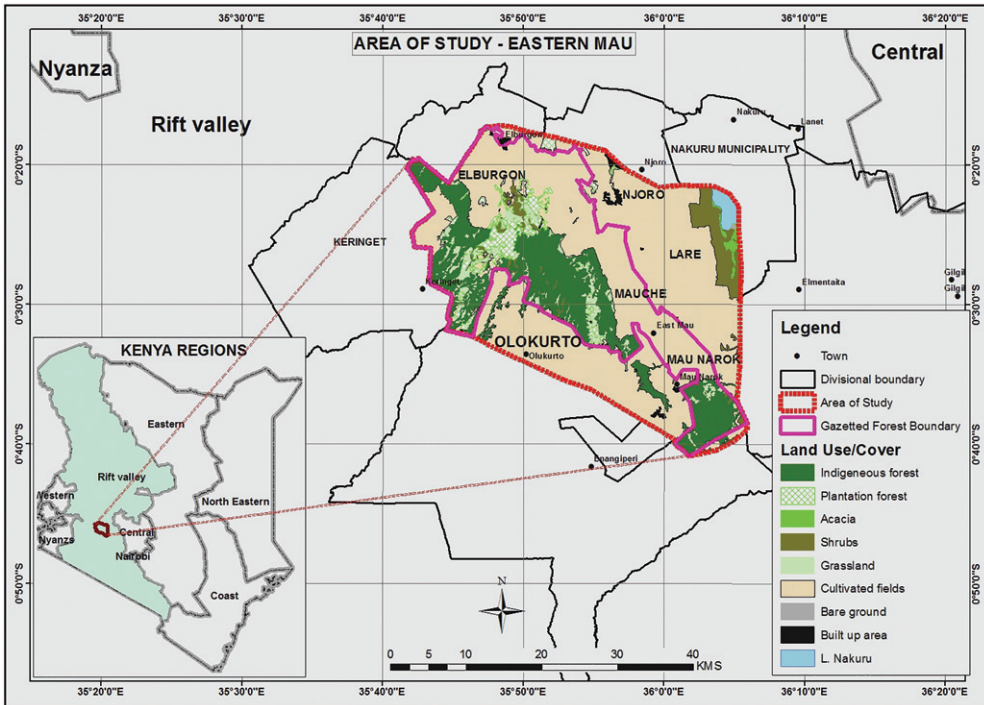


Figure 1. The study area – Eastern Mau.

Data Collection

Geospatial Data

The study utilized participatory mapping techniques to locate ethnic distribution and hotspots of conflicts related to forest resources. Maps are instrumental in addressing local resource use conflicts (Kyem 2004; Bryman 2008). Community participatory mapping was done with the help of the villagers. Community mapping has been done before in the Mau forests complex but involved only one community, i.e., the Ogiek (Rambaldi et al. 2007). Participants in this study were selected based on desired qualities such as involvement in village leadership, longevity in the village, women representatives, involvement in community activities such as Community Forest Associations (CFA), willingness and availability as suggested by Shrestha (2006). The mapping made use of geocoded transect walks, which involve systematically walking with local people through the area they use, and observing, asking and listening (Waters-Bayer and Bayer 1994). This technique has been used by other social-scientists like Mohammed and Ventura (2000) in documenting indigenous tenure systems. In this study, a geographical position system (GPS) device was used to record positions of resources, type and nature of conflict. These included grazing areas, water points, as well as roads and junctions. Two transect walks were carried out across each of the four forest blocks making up the Eastern Mau forests namely; Sururu, Likia extension, Longoman and Nessuit.

Table 1. Category of respondents.

| Category | Number of respondents | | |
|--|-----------------------|--------|-------|
| | Gender | | Total |
| | Male | Female | |
| Community key informants (village elders, youth and women representatives, teachers) | 18 | 9 | 27 |
| Government Agencies (forestry sector) | 6 | 1 | 7 |
| Administration (police) | 5 | 0 | 5 |
| Administration (Chiefs, Assistant Chiefs) | 6 | 1 | 7 |
| Nongovernmental organizations and CFA leadership | 8 | 1 | 9 |
| Total | 43 | 12 | 55 |

Qualitative Data

Qualitative data from key informants meant for gaining in-depth understanding on conflict dimensions both spatial and temporal was collected using an interview guide. Key informants who were particularly knowledgeable about conflicts and forest resources in the study area were picked through snow balling among the community members. The key informants also involved parties who were thought to be either internal or external to the communities and were nonetheless parties to the conflict, or had influence in changing patterns to conflict for instance, government and non-governmental organizations working towards peace and/or conservation of the forest. These included local government officials, police officers, and Community Forest Associations (CFA) leaders. The total number of respondents who participated in the interviews was 55 (Table 1).

In order to triangulate information received from key informants, one focus group discussion was carried out in each of the four forest blocks of Eastern Mau. The FGD participants were drawn from forest adjacent community members including women, men and the youth.

Data Analysis

The spatial data collected with the help of GPS was imported into ArcGIS10.0 and overlaid with current land cover map of the area so as to determine the relationship between hot spots of conflicts, ethnic distribution and natural resources. While the qualitative data was organized in a computer program (NVIVO 10) and analyzed based on significant concepts and themes as suggested by Gibbs (2007) and Flick (2007). In the process of open coding, comparisons were made and a specific set of questions were asked keeping in mind the original objectives of the research. Each of the identified conflict hot-spots was analyzed separately in order to identify the temporal, spatial and substantial dimensions of the conflicts. The temporal analysis was as a result of key informants' inclination to narrating events historically. Hence, during the FGDs, members were asked to draw sketch maps of the intensity of conflict across time (1992–2014). The sketch maps were superimposed and a composite map of conflict escalation was generated (Figure 2). The result of this analysis was discussed against the selected theories of resource politics and political patronage.

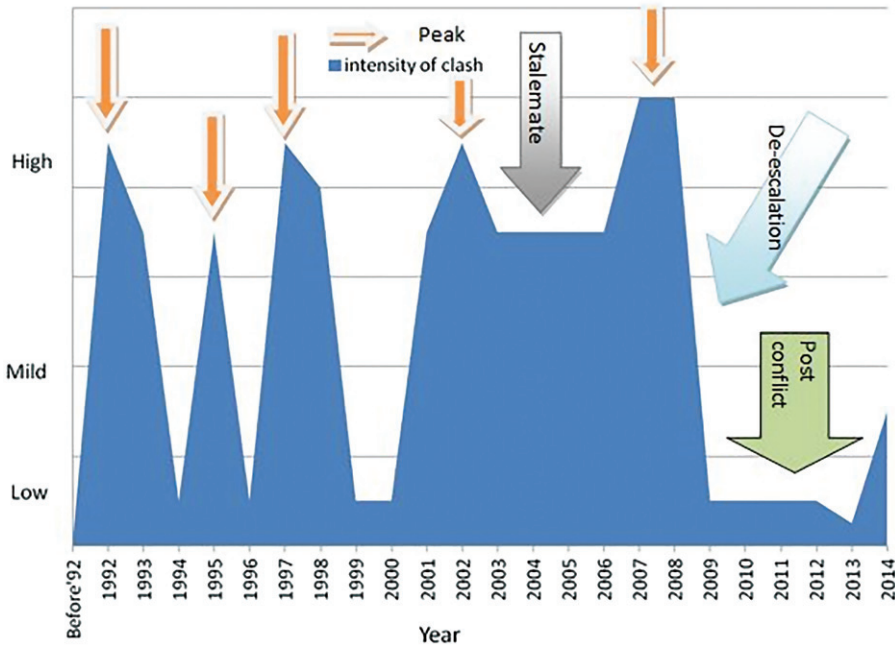


Figure 2. Visualizing the intensity of violent conflicts through time in Eastern Mau.

Results

Political Dimensions of Conflict

Study findings indicate that violent conflicts started occurring in the 1990s characterized by ethnic dimensions. In the years that followed, conflict escalated and de-escalated at different times, in different locations and to different levels of violence. The violent clashes are reported to have started in the run up to 1992, the year that Kenya held her first democratic elections under multiparty politics (Figure 2). The years that followed also witnessed violent clashes, which reached their crest during the subsequent general elections (that is in 1997, 2002 and 2007). Between 1992 and 2000, the conflicts seemed to sharply vacillate between escalation and de-escalation. That is, during these periods, violent conflicts erupted in a spontaneous manner and ended fast as indicated by sharply rising and falling peaks. However, between year 2001 and 2007, the conflicts peak in Eastern Mau forest seemed to have been sustained (stalemate). This period coincides with national elections that is, 2002 and 2007 with a constitutional referendum in between in year 2005, thus the high sustenance.

The year 2007 is considered by the various respondents in Eastern Mau to have had the highest intensity of violent conflicts with many lives being lost, property destroyed and people displaced from their homes. Several respondents reported that inter-ethnic conflict in the area was linked to elections as politicians influenced settlement of their kinsmen on illegally excised forest land. The kinsmen would later vote for them. This perspective is captured by an FGD extract below;

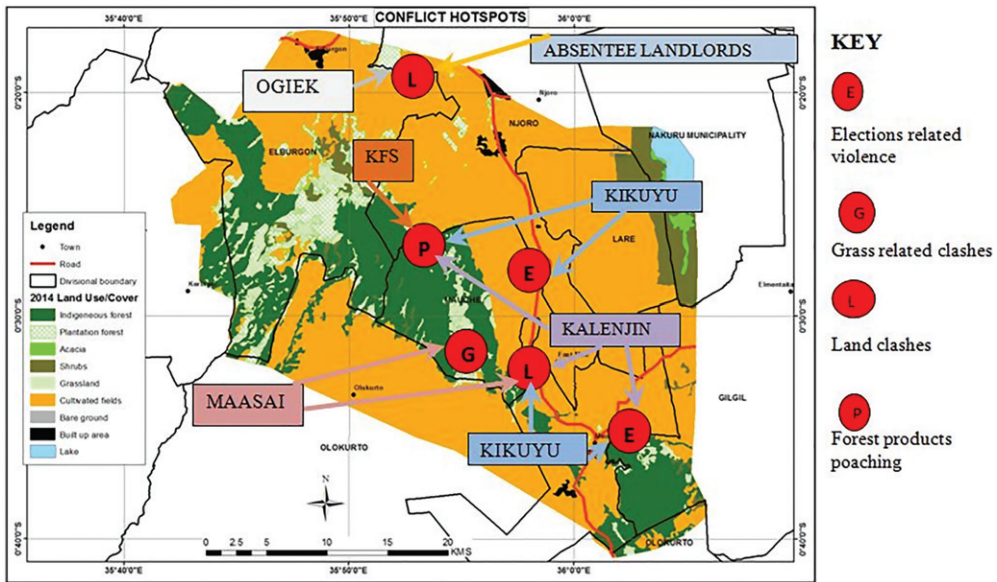


Figure 3. Conflict hotspots (red circles), their contexts and parties involved in Eastern Mau.

.....1992–1993 was purely a tribal clashes period. When the clashes were over more Kalenjin were brought in this area as voters. At Sururu forest block, they were chased away by the Maasai and they eventually settled in Mauche settlement scheme

Extract from an FGD in Likia bordering Likia Forest block (dated 17-03-2014)

The study results also revealed that violent clashes in Eastern Mau involved different ethnic groups fighting against each other. However, in early 2014, clashes were witnessed though at lower intensity between the rich farmers, mainly from the Tugen sub-tribe of Kalenjin community and land squatters (mainly from Turkana and one Ogiek clan) over ownership of land in Ngongongeri area.

Spatial Dimensions of Conflict

When considered on a spatial scale, two types of conflict pattern emerge. The first pattern represents conflicts that occur at locations within or near the forest. This category is represented by letter “L” that is, land related clashes, or “G”-grass or pasture related clashes and “P” representing poaching of forest products such as poles (Figure 3). The second category seems to occur at some relatively far off distance away from the forest when compared to the first pattern. However, they seem to be situated along the highway or at the administrative boundaries. This set of conflict is represented by letter “E” since unlike the first category, the conflicts were reported to occur during election periods. Thus, they are designated here as “elections” related conflict.

Resource Politics and Conflict in Eastern Mau

Several case studies of conflicts escalation in the hot-spots identified in [Figure 3](#) were documented during the field study. All these cases show manifestation of resource politics in inter ethnic conflict occurring across forestry landscape at different times.

Territoriality Conflict

First case: the Metta village in Mau Narok division; a region dominated by members of the Kikuyu community, and is sandwiched between Sururu forest block and Sururu village. Sururu village, although located in Mau Narok division administratively, lies in Mauche ward² (however, Mauche division is a Kalenjin zone). This spatial placement of the two communities presents a potentially fertile ground for violent clash in the event of conflict. Sururu forest was among the forest blocks that suffered from government excisions that started in early 1990s and peaked in 2001. The Mau Narok-Gilgil road traverses Metta and Sururu villages, and is used by both Kikuyu and Kalenjin members. Metta farm, in Metta village has been designated as a hotspot because of the recurrent violent clashes between the Kalenjin and the Kikuyu. For example, during the 2007/2008 post-election violence, the village suffered from inter-ethnic clashes with loss of lives and property destruction being witnessed.

Forest Land Access Competition

The second case: involved one of the blocks making up the Eastern Mau forests in the south known as Likia extension. The forest is bordered by three communities, that is, the Kalenjin to its north, the Kikuyu in the south and east, and the Maasai to the western side. Astride the Likia forest extension, is the Likia market center, which is located along the Mwisho wa Lami-Njoro road. The forest extension suffered from massive encroachments by members of the three communities. Individuals and groups of people competed in hiving off portions of the forest for farming purposes in what was popularly referred to as “Witemere in Kikuyu language” (self-allocation) among residents in the study area. Some Kikuyu respondents however, reported that fighting during the “Likia clashes” were meant to repulse the Kalenjin from settling in the Likia extension and thus encircling the Kikuyu. They argued that if the Kalenjin were left to encircle them, the Kikuyu would lack escape routes in the event of future attacks from their neighbors. In Likia, fighting was also witnessed between the Maasai and their neighbors. Whereas the Kalenjin and Kikuyu converted the land to crop farming, the Maasai grazed through the remaining parts of the forest, and sometimes their livestock would stray into the farms destroying crops and triggering violent clashes between the grazing community and their neighbors.

Pasture Competitions

Third case: the violent clashes between the Maasai and the Kalenjin were reported to have occurred inside Longoman forest. The study findings point to competition over pasture and stock theft inside the forest as factors that triggered the conflicts between

the Maasai and Kalenjin. It was reported that when the Kalenjin settled next to Longoman forest in 1995, they had a cordial relationship with the Maasai (the two communities lived opposite each other with the Longoman forest block separating them). However, with time, the forest area reduced and therefore herders from both sides had to move deeper in the forest in search of pasture and water. Thus, from the year 2001 just before forest excisions were stopped officially by the government, the Maasai and the Kalenjin started clashing with much of the fighting occurring inside the forest. During transect walks inside Longoman forest, members of both Kalenjin and Maasai communities separately identified a region called “Roshina”, which they described as the place where there had been intense fighting between the two communities between 2005 and 2009. Elders from the two communities in trying to put an end to the recurring conflicts held a meeting in the year 2009 and decided to demarcate the forest with a boundary at Roshina. The Roshina boundary was meant to separate the Maasai herdsman from the Kalenjin herdsman. The Maasai respondents however explained that should one community herd their animals across the boundary into their neighbors’ territory, then fighting could easily erupt.

Forest Land Ownership and Rights Dispute

Fourth case: during key informant interviews, government respondents reported that 200 hectares of land, which had been hived off from the forest reserve in an area known as Ngongongeri had been allocated to some senior civil servants by the ruling regime during the 1990s. However, the officers who were mainly from the Kalenjin community did not move into the land to settle immediately. Over time, some members of the neighboring Ogiek community moved into the land and settled. In the 2000s, the formerly “absentee landlords” started moving into the land with the aim of setting up farms. However, they met resistance from the local Ogiek members who would attack them with arrows. The local Ogiek members however, explained during an interview that the disputed land belonged to their fore fathers and that the “rich” farmers had grabbed it and were using the police to shield them as they forcefully farmed the land. In early 2014, there were reported snippets of violence involving the rich farmers, the police and the Ogiek squatters. In one incidence, the police burnt down the settlements to local squatters who had been residing on a 50 acre piece of land. The police argued that the land belonged to one of the rich farmers who possessed a title deed and that by the locals squatting on the said land they were trespassing. In another incident, some local squatters attacked and injured a farmer who had visited the land with an intention of cultivating. The police moved in and arrested the suspected locals who had attacked the farmer. Following the tension that had been building up in Ngongongeri, the rich farmers sought the shielding of the police as they cultivated their land.

Discussion

The analysis of conflict hotspots in Eastern Mau provide an overarching picture of the various underlying dynamics and drivers that are related to forest resource politics. These dynamics include not only the temporal, spatial, ethnic conflicts but also some

underlying drivers strongly related to forest resource politics, as exemplified by the dynamics of political patronage along ethnic lines. While such dynamics seem to be very strong in Kenya and show up as strong contextual conflict drivers that cut across many of the seemingly natural resource related local conflicts, they vary at local scenario due to ethnic composition, resource at play and political patronage involved.

For example in terms of ethnic dimensions in Eastern Mau between the year 2001 and 2009, the Maasai and Kalenjin communities were involved in ethnic fighting over pasture within Longman forests. The two communities both kept free ranging livestock and thus had the same interests in the forest that is, pasture needs, which in turn trigger conflict for competition of the resource. Vindeløv (2012) reckoned that conflicts of interest occur not because parties have different values but rather because they share the same view of the worth of the resources under dispute. Thus, the period of peace (i.e., no conflict) between the Maasai and Kalenjin could be attributed to sufficiency of pasture within Longoman forests and little contact between herders from the two communities that would have led to competitions. The conflict between the Maasai and the Kalenjin can therefore be explained in part by two possible factors, namely; competition over resources occasioned by scarcity and the juxtaposition of the two communities. Apart from pasture competitions, the area has also experienced conflicts over land and extraction of forest products.

Reduction in pasture meant that the two communities had to compete over the limited resource in the forest, a situation that is likely to have led to conflict. Each group felt that their interests (ample grazing grounds) in the forest were being threatened by the presence of the other party. These interests represented the underlying (hidden) needs, that is, pasture for livestock. Inter group conflict can stem from threatened underlying needs or what Burton (1990) referred to as unsatisfied human needs of one or both parties. The findings in this study are consistent with the Collier and Hoeffler (2012) model that stresses the significant relationship between strains on natural resources and the outbreak of violent conflict.

Apart from competition for pasture, changes in forest coverage played an important dimension. For example, prior to the forest excision in 1990s, the two communities were separated by the vast forest (bordering the Longoman on the eastern side were the Kalenjin in Mauche division, while to its western side were the Maasai from Narok County). Forest excisions and encroachments that peaked from mid 1990s until early 2000s, led to the physical distance between the two communities being reduced and thus the herders from both sides of the forest would meet often than before, a situation that led disputes. Apart from reducing the distance between the Maasai and the Kalenjin, the excisions and encroachments led to the shrinking of the forest as well as the forest resources such as pasture. One of the early works by Hardin (1968) contended that “complete competitors cannot coexist”. When the grazing area shrank and there was limited space forcing the Kalenjin and Maasai to share the same space, they became fierce competitors and hence frequent physical confrontation.

The land cover change analysis in Eastern Mau indicated that about 60% of forestland was lost to agriculture and settlements between 1995 and 2014 (Kweyu 2015). This figure is consistent with several works reporting on the general forest loss in the entire Mau forest complex (Lambrechts et al. 2007; Oyieke 2009). The allocation of the forest

area through illegal excision was mainly attributed to political activities, and led to loss of 25% of the forest land which is well documented in Mau task force (GOK 2009). The 2009 report notes that the encroachment benefited politically well-connected individuals and government officials. Over the years, settlements tended to precede de-gazettements due to political expediency. The entry of multi-party politics in Kenya in early 1990s triggered re-alignment within political cycles and political patronage become even more important. The need to increase loyal voting blocs meant that politicians saw the forest as an important resource to use in patronizing the emerging voting blocks. Part of the patronizing process involved getting some ethnic communities to displace others, setting in conflicts mainly in excised forest areas. Thus, apart from the Maasai versus Kalenjin traditional conflict over pasture in the forest, inter-group conflicts involving the Kalenjin and the Kikuyu consistently occurred at the boundary of the two communities where such shared resources as market centers and roads were found. For example, one of the hotspots for violence between the Kikuyu and Kalenjin was NDEFFO market, located along the Njoro-Mau Narok road. The market center was situated at the boundary of Mauche division (predominantly Kalenjin) and Mau Narok division (Kikuyu territory). The settlement alignment of communities may not constitute root causes of conflict *per se* but could have provided conditions that encouraged conflicts.

Within this area political patronage was aimed at displacing some community members perceived as not supporting the establishment thus creating conflicts, which escalated within election periods. Political patronage is evidenced in Eastern mau by conflict recurrence that coincided with electioneering periods (seasons of high political patronage), starting from 1992. Other research findings also record that violence and ethnic cleansing in Kenya has taken place around electioneering periods like around 2002 and 2007 elections (Ajulu 2002; UNDP 2008). These conditions are seen as correlates of inter-group conflict. Hoeffler (2012) suggests that to prevent conflict, it is better to understand the correlates of conflict rather than causes. In this case, political patronage seems to be a strong correlate and influencer of conflict pattern in Eastern Mau. The political aspects of these conflicts place ethnicity at the center of the scene with (national-level) elite-voter dynamics, which echo the roles that political patronage and ethnicity have had in Kenyan history of politics, land-use change and ethnic violence (Oucho 2002; Amanor and Moyo 2008; Klopp 2012; Di Matteo 2017).

The present study confirms the impression that postcolonial Kenya presents a perfect case of political patronage and conflict in relation to forest resources utilization. Eastern Mau has been one of the most active theaters of conflicts that are closely related to forest and land resources pitting different ethnic groups in Kenya. These conflicts are closely synchronized with national political elections. The excising of forest land with an aim of creating settlement schemes especially as voting blocs has been characterized by conflict incidences among the different ethnic groups. According to Kanyinga, Lumumba, and Amanor (2008) political patronage and land grabbing creates social tensions and conflicts leading to “resistance and public outcry” as well as “struggles to defend our land”. These conflicts can be complex and intractable and at times they seem almost impossible to resolve. It can also be noted that when politicians and government functionaries use natural resources such as forest land as a currency for political patronage they not only cause ethnic competitions (i.e between favored and non-

avored groups) but also contribute to resource degradation. Resource degradation leads to more conflicts due to competition over perceived scarce resources. Part of the intractability of environmental conflicts relates to such spiraling dynamics that produce circular causality of motivations, cognitions, affect and behavior. This in turn leads to destructive shifts in focus from substantive interests to annihilation of the other party (Putnam and Wondelleck 2003) which certainly seems to be the case in this study of forest related conflicts in the Eastern Mau forest.

Similarly, other countries like Zimbabwe have experienced this type of exchange between politicians and citizens, where land has been central in political patronage so as to maintain regime grip on power (Scherlis 2013). Resources like forests and land are easy to provide to citizens as reward by politicians. Scherlis (2013) further states that deployment of patronage has also been used to explain the exceptional durability of some African regimes. The evidence from Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, and Senegal suggests that leaders can achieve a degree of stability for their regimes by using state resources to facilitate intra-elite accommodation. However, such an arrangement is often characterized by conflicts that escalate during voting periods as resource allocation is mainly skewed towards creating voting blocs, thus excluding those perceived as not being loyal.

Conclusion

This paper illustrates the significant relationship between political patronage, natural resource management and social relations among communities. The type of democracy that has been performed in Kenya can clearly be characterized as a *patronage-based, party-voter linkage type*, that exist in many countries including parts of Africa, under which a citizen's vote is exchanged in return for direct payments, employment, goods or services. In Kenya such patronage has certainly taken place along ethnic lines, where a political party in power would reward certain ethnicities for their electoral support. In particular after independence, government land became a main asset mobilized by the politicians for the patronage (Throup 1993; Klopp 2000, 2002; Boone 2011). Forest reserves were not spared as the need to allocate public land increased. As a result, forested areas were highly degraded especially during the advent of multiparty democracy that was associated with increased political competitions. Consequently, ethnic tensions were created among different communities residing adjacent to the forest reserves. The tensions escalated during national elections and in most cases violent inter-ethnic clashes were experienced.

The study shows that different conflict hotspots have varying characteristics including the spatial and temporal dynamics as well as substantial dimensions. However, despite these variations, all Eastern Mau conflicts have some common underlying drivers closely related to political patronage driven from the national level party politics seeking voters by ethnicity. The identification of spatial, temporal and substantial dimensions behind conflict escalation/de-escalation as well as the cross-cutting underlying drivers can help to predict likely eruptions and identify possible preventive actions. The complex interaction between the different dimensions and drivers clearly suggests that there is no single answer on how to address the conflicts in question. This study captures, describes and contributes to the understanding of the complexity of conflicts and specifically

draws a link between conflicted space, local access to natural resources, ethnic groups and national level resource politics.

Knowledge about cross-cutting underlying drivers, e.g., political patronage related to political ecology, may in particular help understand the connections between seemingly disconnected conflicts—and in turn ease the identification of entry points for possible interventions at a larger (national) scale. To this end, the study recommends that more work is needed to improve our understanding of how and when the citizenry can “resist” political patronage as part of the efforts of breaking ethnic conflict intractability in Kenya and similar contexts.

Notes

1. Kenya African National Union.
2. A ward is made up of several villages, several wards make up a division, several divisions make a district.

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