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“Austere Conservation: Understanding Conflicts over Resource Governance in Tanzanian Wildlife Management Areas”

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We explore how the regime of rules over access to land, natural, and financial resources reflects the degree of community ownership of a Wildlife Management Area (WMA) in Tanzania. Being discursively associated with participatory and decentralised approaches to natural resource management, WMA policies have the ambition to promote the empowerment of communities to decide over rules that govern access to land and resources. Our purpose is to empirically examine the spaces for popular participation in decision-making over rules of management created by WMA policies: that is, in what sense of the word are WMAs actually community-based? We do this by studying conflicts over the regime of rules over access to land and resources. Analytically, we focus on actors, their rights and meaningful powers to exert control over resource management, and on accountability relationships amongst the actors. Our findings suggest that WMAs foster very limited ownership, participation and collective action at the community level, because WMA governance follows an austere logic of centralized control over key resources. Thus, we suggest that it is difficult to argue that WMAs are community-owned conservation initiatives until a genuinely devolved and more flexible conservation model is implemented to give space for popular participation in rule-making. (Text from authors’ abstract)

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