

The Persistence of Tightly Coupled Conflicts. The Case of Loisaba, Kenya

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Abstract

Contributing to the debate on the multidimensional nature of resource-based conflicts in political ecology, and building upon Niklas Luhmann's Social Systems Theory, we have studied the *persistent* and *shifting* nature of conflicts as well as their *dependencies* on other conflicts in and around Loisaba conservancy. This private conservancy is situated in northern Laikipia (Kenya). For a long time, its management was focused on wildlife conservation, high-end tourism and commercial ranching. Developments and events at neighbouring ranches and community conservation areas shifted this focus. Decades of more or less peaceful regional co-existence has recently transformed into conflictual, sometimes even violent situations. At first sight, these emergent conflicts seem related to recurrent droughts, competing resource dependencies, national elections, or incitements by wealthy and influential politicians. For this study, however, we conceptualise conflicts as particular kinds of discourses that emerge, exist and change. This happens not only according to their own internal logics, but also through their dependencies with other conflict discourses. In this paper, we characterise the relations between conflicts on a range from *tight* to *loose couplings* and introduce three related forms of coupling (*overpowering*, *resisting*, and *resonating*) to provide a more detailed understanding of how conflicts may interrelate.

Keywords: Conflict, Social Systems Theory; self-reference, structural couplings, Kenya

INTRODUCTION

In this paper we analyse the shifting yet persistent nature of conflicts as situated in northern Laikipia, Kenya. Recent violent incidents received much (inter-)national media attention in the spring of 2017 (Hastings 2017; Mwangi 2017; Wachira 2017). These media mainly discussed potential causes for the outbursts of violence across northern Kenya. Related reports primarily focus on the role of powerful actors, material processes or recurrent violent events; and overlook the complex, discursive ways in which these conflicts evolve. Conflicts, as we argue

in this paper, are not just discursive, but also recursive and dependent upon how other conflicts evolve in parallel and mutual coupling. An understanding of these couplings, or so-called *interdependencies* (see Van Assche et al. 2014; Beunen et al. 2015), proves useful in understanding how conflicts may develop as persistent and (inter-) regional social processes.

To explore the interdependency of conflicts in more detail, we start our discussion with seemingly straightforward conflicts that took shape when Loisaba and neighbouring group ranches started collaborating. Loisaba is a private conservancy that borders different ranches and community conservancies with whom it aims to secure wildlife conservation, high-end tourism and commercial ranching. Decades of more or less 'peaceful' co-existence between different land users and uses, has recently become highly uncertain. Neighbouring communities have gradually made different grazing arrangements with Loisaba to secure limited access to its grasslands. These arrangements were designed to resolve older land use conflicts (Nthiga et al. 2015; German et al. 2016). However, socio-ecological change

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in the wider region of Laikipia, Samburu and Isiolo (Figure 1) added further layers of complexity to these arrangements and related conflicts over time.

In- and outsiders tend to explain the re-emergence of conflicts around Loisaba in terms of its perceived causes, such as ordinary grazing tensions, human-wildlife conflicts, recurrent droughts, national elections, or racial inequalities between black and white residents in Laikipia. Powerful external observers (media, NGOs, private enterprises) furthermore describe these conflicts as localised issues triggered by powerful local individuals wanting to increase political control over the Laikipian plateau (Anonymous 2017).

As an alternative to these predominant perceptions, our analysis is based on a perspective of ‘conflict as discourse’ (Jabri 1996; Demmers 2012), and is inspired, foremost, by Niklas Luhmann’s Social Systems Theory. According to Luhmann, conflicts play an important function in society as self-referential social systems (Luhmann 1995, 2013). This implies that conflicts operate and reproduce themselves on the basis of their own discursive logics and selective couplings they make with their environment. This Luhmannian perspective not only centres our attention on the function of conflicts, it also helps to understand and reconceptualise how conflicts persist through their interdependencies with other conflicts or wider socio-material processes (cf Van Assche et al. 2014; Beunen et al. 2015).

To advance this perspective on ‘conflict as discourse’, we empirically explored a set of related mechanisms of conflict

interdependencies as found in the context of Loisaba. We will now first expand on our conceptualisation of conflicts, starting with an examination of how conflicts are typically conceptualised in conservation and development contexts from predominant actor-centred perspectives. Secondly, we will discuss our Luhmannian approach as an alternative understanding to conflict as discourse. Thirdly, we will make a critical discourse analysis, as it is a useful methodology to recognise conflict interdependencies in practice. Fourthly, we will analyse empirical interdependencies of conflict on a continuum of *tight* to *loose* couplings. And finally, we will introduce three forms of couplings, namely: *overpowering*, *resisting*, and *resonating*.

THEORISING ABOUT CONFLICTS

Conceptually and theoretically, conflicts have been the subject of long discussions. In the vast literature on integrated conservation and development projects and in the broader field of conflict studies, conflicts are commonly understood, conceptualised and studied in terms of their causes, as the result of rivalries, different interests, or contradictions existing between actors, discourses or ideologies (De Dreu and Gelfand 2007; Kriesberg 2007; Domingo and Beunen 2013; Vallacher et al. 2013). Such a general idea of conflicts focuses on understanding how conflicts started and the causes behind them. This understanding is believed to better equip us to resolve them in practice. Yet, as such, one runs the risk of black boxing the actual processes that constitute conflicts.

As a result, conflict conceptualisations are typically taken for granted. See for instance the discussions on clashes over different conceptualisations and uses of nature (Bosak 2008; Pellis 2011); the exclusion of humans from protected areas (Brockington 2002; Hughes 2005a); the rivalries over resources (Gillingham and Lee 1999; Homer-Dixon 1999); human-wildlife conflicts, or violent and militarised responses to wildlife crimes (Okello 2005; Duffy 2014; Lunstrum 2014; Duffy 2016; Massé 2016). In these conceptualisations, conflicts are generally seen as negative or unproductive (Young et al. 2005; White et al. 2009).

The difficulty of ‘taking care’ of conflicts, as we argue, is subject to their nature. Conflicts are generally acknowledged as complex, inevitable, recurrent, or even ‘normal’ in projects aiming to integrate biodiversity and development objectives (Idrissou et al. 2011; Le Billon 2012; Redpath et al. 2013). To understand the complex nature of conflicts, political ecologists have established a longstanding academic exploration of the multi-layered natures of conflict and/or wider social, political and historic constitution of conflicts (Peluso and Watts 2001; Turner 2004; Sikor and Lund 2009; Le Billon 2012; Van Leeuwen and Van Der Haar 2016; Kronenburg García 2017). These explorations contribute to *how* we understand that conflicts may become embedded in wider social and environmental change, moving beyond agent or structure-based determinations that aim to answer *why* conflicts exist.

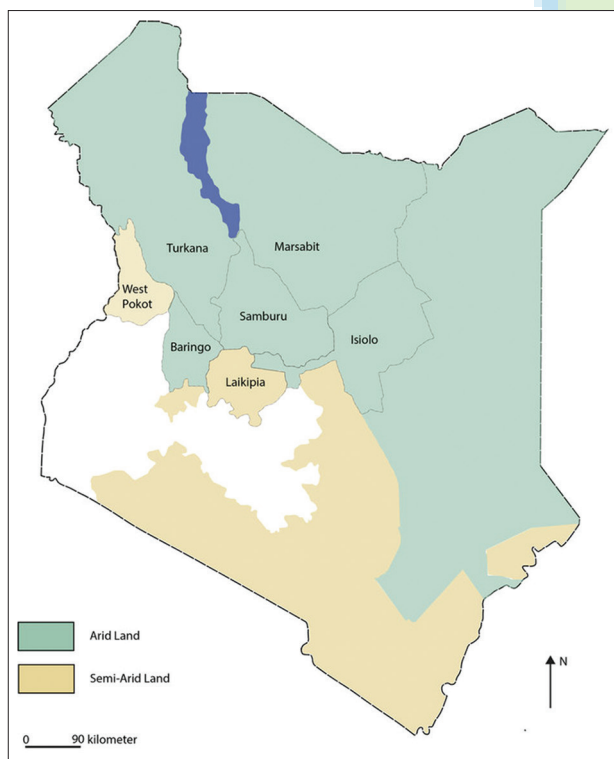


Figure 1
Position of the counties of Laikipia, Samburu and Isiolo

Conflicts as Discourses

In studying these wider socio-environmental changes and conflict transformations, one may focus on observing conflicts as discourses (Jabri 1996; Demmers 2012). Such a perspective, as Demmers explains, makes sense when the boundaries of ‘new’ conflicts and related forms of violence become increasingly difficult to trace: “war and violent conflict prevailed, but now predominantly on a local scale. Small wars turned out to have dynamics of their own... [and it seems that] they do not have precise beginnings and endings” (2012: 8).

To follow the dynamics of contemporary conflicts, scientific analysis may hence focus more on the “relations and interactions at different levels and between a variety of actors” (idem: 13). These actors may be individuals but may also become represented by organisations through which conflicts become institutionalised. By exploring conflicts as discourses, one looks at the ways in which conflicts are given meaning through a myriad of interactions at different scales. These interactions may primarily come in words and text, but as inscriptions they may be far from passive. They actually, as Jabri stressed, may have a capacity to “do things. And being active they have social and political implications” (1996: 95).

But how to define conflicts once we observe them as performative processes? In conservation contexts, we observe that conflicts are typically conceptualised as a situation “when two or more parties with strongly held opinions clash over conservation objectives and when one party is perceived to assert its interests at the expense of another” (Redpath et al. 2013: 100). Different opinions or interests nevertheless do not have to result in a conflict. A conflict is often an emotionally charged communication given shape by words, symbols, weapons, bureaucracies, et cetera (Luhmann 1995, 2013). A conflict only occurs when a difference (e.g. of opinion or stakes) is expressed and leads to an emotional or heated response, which in return may lead to a counter response, and so on (Luhmann 1995; Malsch and Weiss 2002). Strictly speaking, if nothing happens after a difference is expressed, there is no interaction, hence by definition no conflict (Luhmann 1995).

Conflicts as Self-referential Discourses

Niklas Luhmann explains that conflicts can be observed as persistent communications that play their own role in how societal processes unfold. Society, as Luhmann theorises, consists of distinct yet evolving sets of communications, or so-called *social systems* (1995, 2013). Social systems can be seen as self-referential discourses. This implies that conflicts may be considered as discourses that refer to coherent sets of communications that develop on the basis of previous and other related discourses (Foucault 1971).

Where the term discourse is itself open to broader debate (Sharp and Richardson 2001; Hajer and Versteeg 2005), we follow a definition of discourse as a self-referential “ensemble of ideas, concepts and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena, and which is produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of practices”

(Hajer and Versteeg 2005: 175). When we speak of a conflict as a discourse, we consequentially need to recognise that a conflict may emerge and persist semi-independently, yet always interrelated with its (re)‘sources’ or ‘subjects’ (Foucault 1998). This does not mean that actors or practices are irrelevant, but rather, as Foucault would argue, that: “nothing has any meaning outside of discourse” (Hall 1997: 45). Actors in this regard are likewise constituted in discourses; one does not pre-exist the other.

When one starts to observe conflicts as discursive unities, it is important to distinguish the presence of at least two contradicting discourses that mutually reject one another in their own persistent communications. “A conflict [then becomes] the operative autonomisation of a contradiction through communication” (Luhmann 1995: 388). Only if contradictions are communicated, we may observe conflicts and their subsequent reality effects. And further, as they become part of communication, conflicts gain the same properties as discourses. They emerge, have a history of their emergence, and hence have a present and a future (cf Pellis et al. 2015). This implies that they can constitute and reproduce themselves based on their former communications and discursive structuring (see also Turner 2004).

Conflicts as Parasitical Discourses

When we recognise that conflicts function as discourses, we cannot claim that every discourse is a conflict. Instead, conflicts have several features that make them specific kinds of discourses. Luhmann explains that:

“... as social systems, conflicts are autopoietic, self-reproducing unities. Once they are established, one can expect them to continue rather than to end. Their end cannot ensue from autopoiesis, but only from the system’s environment as when one party in the conflict kills the other, who then cannot continue the social system of conflict.” (Luhmann 1995: 394)

Moreover, the persistency of conflicts is characterised by their ‘parasitical’ nature. In Luhmann’s view, conflicts do not only have the capacity to consume resources and related attention by its hosts, conflicts possibly also constrain or enable the way these hosts attach meaning to their own environment (1995, 2013). Furthermore, while some conflicts may disappear over time, others can have a “greater social career” (Luhmann 1995: 392). This depends on how related discourses become available as fuel for a conflict to endure.

The Openness or Closedness of Conflicts

Whether conflicts endure or not, depends on how other social and material processes develop in their environment (Duineveld et al. 2017). This implies that conflicts cannot function as entirely autonomous processes. At the same time external processes cannot entirely determine the evolution of conflicts.

Conflicts as Open and Closed Discourses

In principle, such openness or closed-ness can be explained in terms of so-called ‘operational closure’ and ‘structural

openness' (Fuchs 2001; Seidl 2004; Felder et al. 2014). Operationally closed means that every event external to a conflict can only be understood or observed according to the internal logics of the on-going interactions in that conflict: "There are no operations entering the system from outside nor vice versa . . . [as] the system determines, when, what and through what channels energy or matter is exchanged with the environment" (Seidl 2004: 3). In other words— conflicts are discourses that do not directly become affected by everything occurring in their environment. Conflict discourses are simultaneously 'structurally open', meaning that they would cease to exist when related bodies, materialities and other discourses in their environment disappear. Conflict discourses hence cannot exist without particular actors, resources, atmospheres, ideas, weapons or other relevant ingredients that 'feed' them. Other discourses, people, or events in the environment of a conflict may affect it, but, again, only if they resonate with the on-going internal logics of that conflict (see also Maturana and Varela 1987; Teubner 1998; Seidl 2005).

Conflicts and Coupling

Luhmann finally describes that the internal logics of discursive unities may change nevertheless by influences of the environment. The environment of conflicts namely consists of 'irritations' that may, or may not, characterise the conflict as a discourse. Irritations can be "accidental or occur more regularly" (Van Assche et al. 2014: 19). In case of more frequent and mutual irritation we can speak of 'structural couplings', where specific mechanisms determine the duration, quality, intensity and institutionalisation of the link between different discourses (Teubner 1989; Luhmann 2004). Due to these structural couplings, events in one system may act as an irritation to another, and hence may set off "a whole series of new and unexpected events" (Teubner 1998: 12). If the likelihood of making a certain difference to another discourse is low and infrequent, one may speak here of 'loose couplings'; if the likelihood of making a certain difference is high and frequent, one could speak of 'tight couplings' (Teubner 1998).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

To analyse and understand how conflicts persist through tight or loose couplings, we have explored how different conflict discourses emerged and submerged in context of Loisaba, Kenya. We observed various conflict couplings during three subsequent periods of ethnographic fieldwork conducted by Pellis and Pas between February-April 2014, February-May 2015 and August-December 2015.

The first fieldwork period focused on the role of multiple conservation arrangements in the Laikipia County, particularly Private-Community-Partnerships (PCPs) in and around Naibunga conservancy. This PCP is characterised by a dynamic landscape hosting exclusive wildlife tourism experiments as a tool to overcome on-going conflicts related to competing conservation objectives and local economic development (Pellis et al. 2014, 2015). Twenty-one semi-structured and

in-depth interviews with different (non-)governmental experts revealed uncertainties related to the overlapping, and at times contradicting, institutional arrangements targeting the integration of conservation, development and tourism (Pellis et al. 2015).

One particular conflict development was identified in the context of the Loisaba ranch and its neighbouring Koiya Group Ranch (Koiya GR). Getting to understand past and present conflict discourses tied to these two ranches became gradually complicated in light of broader events unfolding elsewhere. This became evident in a second strand of fieldwork undertaken in the wider context of Laikipia, zooming in on different land use patterns of governmental and non-governmental programmes, as well as actions of various pastoralist groups and tourism entrepreneurs. We conducted 35 in-depth interviews alongside four focus group discussions about current issues of pastoral migration, rules and regulations concerning resource sharing, and related conflicts.

A third fieldwork period took place in the more northern Isiolo and Samburu counties. Another 35 interviews and four focus group discussions were held to understand changing mobility patterns within the wider area, as well as relations to natural resources, historical pathways, and clan and family-based relations.

Our empirical observations were triangulated with other longitudinal studies on private-community conflicts and related partnerships developed in and around the Loisaba and Koiya GRs since 2010 (Lamers et al. 2014; Nthiga et al. 2015), as well as parallel accounts of an upsurge in nature conservation alongside traditional pastoralism in the context of Laikipia (Greiner 2013; Letai and Lind 2013; Little 2013; Akker 2016; Evans and Adams 2016; German et al. 2016). And finally, while writing this paper, we used an abundance of articles in national and international newspapers reporting on the increased and disruptive outbursts of violence throughout Laikipia in 2016-2017.

Our observations of conflicts were first identified as different conflict discourses constituted in different locales. We then looked into different ways multiple discourses interrelated, circulated and provided meaning to different actors using them. Besides interpreting their meaning, we were interested in studying the wider implications of found conflict discourses.

Finally, we have been wary of the use of sensitive, and at times, controversial statements made by individuals. Understanding the potential performativity of these statements and the role these may have in unleashing further conflicts, we have anonymised references to respondents in the following reconstructions of conflicts.

CONTEXT: GRAZERS AND PASTORAL MOBILITY IN KENYA'S ASALS

Under both colonial and post-colonial rule, pastoralists in Kenya's Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASALs) have been socially, politically and economically marginalised. As a result, their integration into national development

programmes is limited and the Rift Valley has high poverty rates (GoK 2012; Elmi and Birch 2013). Although not all pastoralists are as mobile as they used to be in northern Kenya (Fratkin and Roth 2006) and southern Kenya (Rutten 1992; Butt 2011), mobility is still one of the most important features of pastoral livelihoods and therefore demarcates a substantial form of land use in Kenyan ASALs (Butt et al. 2009; Galaty 2013). Pastoralists nevertheless face new challenges. These are, for instance, changes in land tenure and land use, rainfall variability, limited economic opportunities, food insecurity and landscape fragmentation (Hobbs et al. 2008; Galvin 2009; Butt 2011). They are also faced with violent conflicts amongst semi-nomadic groups within and beyond Kenya's national borders (Adano et al. 2012; Greiner 2013; Galaty 2016).

The conditions of ASALs in northern Kenya make pastoral mobility both necessary and highly complicated. The Laikipia County has presented itself as an increasingly important area that is attractive for migrating pastoralists in need of safer and greener pastures. It has a diverse and semi-arid landscape, and significantly differs in terms of ecology, politics, economy and society from the arid landscapes situated on its northern (Samburu County), western (Baringo County) and eastern (Isiolo County) borders. Partly resulting from different micro-climates characterising the 'wet' highlands and 'dry' lowlands, Laikipia is a complex mosaic of various land uses, land users and land tenure systems ranging from small-scale farming and horticulture in the sub-humid zones, to large-scale ranching and private nature conservancies as well as semi-nomadic pastoralism in the semi-arid zones (Lane 2005; Lamers et al. 2014; Evans and Adams 2016).

The Laikipia County furthermore has an ill-reputed colonial past, including the large-scale relocation of the *Maasai* (a small group of Maa speaking people that traditionally live a nomadic lifestyle) in favour of European settlement. Treaties signed by the British Colonial Administration and the *Maasai* in 1904 and 1911 included a forced migration of *Maasai* people from the Central Rift Valley into Laikipia followed by their eviction to Native Reserves in the south of Kenya (Hughes 2005b; Letai and Lind 2013). The colonial government intended to make Laikipia an economically important area and therefore cleared the Laikipian Plateau to make place for a European settlement. These large-scale properties were increasingly used for cattle ranching when the Europeans realised that the arid conditions were not ideal for farming (idem).

After Kenya's independence in 1963, a number of the European settlers in Laikipia left Kenya after selling their land to either the government, politicians or farming communities. Different plots of land often became abandoned, whereas other settlers stayed and continued ranching. Slowly, *Maasai* pastoralists from within Laikipia and Samburu pastoralists started to make use of Laikipian properties to allow their livestock to graze, and as such became increasingly reliant on Laikipia's grasslands (Lane 2005; Evans and Adams 2016).

During the 1970s and 1980s, when the beef industry collapsed and elephants demolished more and more fences, cattle ranching became less profitable in Laikipia. Instead,

ranchers gradually integrated cattle enterprises with forms of wildlife conservation and tourism as an alternative land use (Letai and Lind 2013). This novel conservation logic in the Laikipian landscape included a further removal of fences, and more frequent human-wildlife conflicts (Akker 2016; Evans and Adams 2016). On the other hand, this development simultaneously facilitated easier access to private properties for migrating pastoralists and their livestock. Nowadays, pastoralists enter private ranches and conservation areas (LWF 2012; Letai and Lind 2013), at times using claims to seasonal-grazing or ancestral rights that refer to historical injustices of the Anglo-*Maasai* treaties in 1904 and 1911. These claims are typically rejected by current property owners who call on the legally recognised institutional system of property rights and fixed boundaries in modern Kenya (Evans and Adams 2016).

RESULTS

Introduction

Before we describe how multiple conflicts became coupled in and around Loisaba, we will describe a range of selected conflicts used for our analysis, namely: an emerging grazing conflict in Loisaba and Koiya; large-scale grazing invasions by upland pastoralists; and broader political claims to land found in relation to recent violence in Laikipia. In tracing interrelations between these conflicts, we identify that conflicts every so often have an effect on other conflicts, implying that if one conflict discourse changes, this may trigger parallel changes in another conflict through loose or tight coupling.

Grazing Conflict in Loisaba and Koiya

Loisaba Conservancy, in the north-western parts of Laikipia (Figure 2) is a former cattle ranch that has gradually developed into an integrated private conservancy including cattle ranching and exclusive high-end tourism. This conservancy does not operate in isolation but has gradually established multiple PCPs with surrounding communities. The Koiya GR is one of

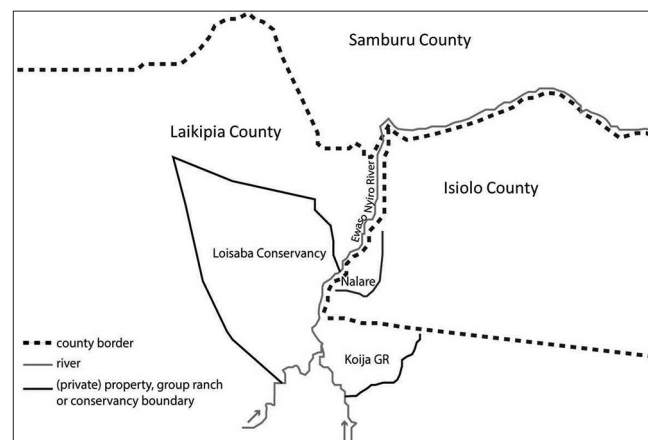


Figure 2
Loisaba as situated with neighbouring ranches, conservation areas and counties

the communal partners on Loisaba's eastern border and covers an area of 7,500 ha next to the 25,000 ha of Loisaba.

The *Maasai* in this group ranch occasionally feel forced to 'trespass' the border to Loisaba to allow their cattle to graze on its pastures. This happens especially during seasonal droughts as group ranches are allotted a limited area, namely 7 per cent of Laikipia's total land surface, for grazing purposes (Evans and Adams 2016). While trespassing became earmarked as a form of 'illegal grazing' by private ranch managers in Laikipia, the *Maasai* argue that they have little choice but to protect their herds.

This seemingly resource-based disagreement evolved into a set of related yet more complex conflict discourses over time. In the Loisaba case, an attempt to overcome conflicts over illegal trespassing became institutionalised by the establishment of a PCP between Oryx Ltd (OL), a private investor managing the tourism enterprise Starbeds® in Loisaba, and pastoralists residing in Koiya GR. The partnership was signed in 1999 to establish a community-based tourism venture named Koiya Starbeds Lodge (Koiya SL). The Koiya SL was run as a satellite enterprise of OL's Loisaba Starbeds with financial support from the Conservation of Resources through Enterprises programme (CORE) of USAID and further brokering support from the African Wildlife Foundation (AWF) (Nthiga et al. 2015).

However, although the Koiya SL was initially designed as a financing mechanism to resolve 'past' grazing conflicts, its resolution formed a basis for the development of further conflict. When the PCP became commercially successful, new income led to cattle reinvestments for some pastoralists in Koiya GR, paired with more frequent incursions into Loisaba's pastures.

Grazing Conflict and 'Invasions'

The PCP introduced novel land use zonings, including limited use of pastures. These pastures were not just of importance to pastoralism or wildlife tourism, they gradually also attracted more distant pastoralists who became aware of such lush pastures. This resulted in shifting grazing conflicts as pastoralists from nearby, particularly northern counties, began organising bigger cattle 'invasions'.

Large numbers of more than 10,000 heads of cattle, owned predominantly by Samburu pastoralists, were coming in by night at various sites along the northern and eastern borders of Loisaba conservancy. These numbers would at times add up to 40,000 heads of cattle. Although such 'invasions' did happen before in 1994, 2000 and 2004 (Mkutu 2001; Kariuki 2004; Hughes 2005b; Letai and Lind 2013; Akker 2016), Laikipian ranchers had never seen it happen at such a scale and intensity as between 2015 and 2017. This led to further fuelling of conflicts in the region:

"[The Samburu's] have overstocked, overgrazed and environmentally degraded millions of acres of Samburu County and Isiolo County, which has put a huge pressure on Laikipia, which for many years has been traditionally and correctly ranches and managed, and we have got the grass and they don't." (Laikipian rancher 2015)

"We really do know that it is prohibited to graze on Loisaba, but drought forces me to graze inside because I can really feel the heart of the cow when it is hungry, it seems [I] am also hungry." (Samburu pastoralist 2015).

Politically Incited Land Claims

This trespassing by pastoralists from Samburu and Isiolo, who we will henceforward refer to as 'upland pastoralists', is an interesting point of departure to further our understanding of the interplay between different conflicts. One particular discourse is related to a longstanding portrayal of Samburu pastoralists as 'backwards' by Laikipian pastoralists, ranchers, conservationists, and some local and national politicians.

"Right now, the Samburu culture is very much in direct conflict with the modern world. And yes, the argument you'll hear from them is 'what else are we going to do, we can't keep goats, we can't grow crops, we don't have the rainfall, we can't be farmers'... they want to carry on with this lifestyle of having hundreds of cows, there is a lot of status involved in having hundreds of cows, so there is a lack of desire to change and there is a lack of mechanics that will allow that change to happen." (CEO private conservancy and cattle ranch, Laikipia, 2015).

Although Samburu pastoralists would generally agree that a large herd of cattle is of high socio-economic importance to them, they would reject the related belief that their way of pastoralism is relatively more destructive to rangelands than that of other ranchers/pastoralists in Laikipia. Furthermore, Laikipian ranchers, conservationists and outsiders (particularly voices in the media) increasingly speak of the presence of so-called 'cattle barons'. Conservancy managers and supporting conservation NGOs in Laikipia use this term to refer to the destructive presence of large herds of cattle (1000+ heads) owned by local Samburu politicians who are said to whitewash black market income through large-scale cattle investments.

In addition, it is stated that these large herds have limited access to grassland and therefore become forced to enter Laikipia. In an anonymous report this recently became referred to as politically driven 'Samburu expansionism' ('Cattle barons' 2017). Members of the Samburu County Executive Committee, however, reject this statement: "The reason why we are going to Laikipia and Isiolo is not because we are expanding. We just come to put our cattle out to pasture. The real issues are drought and the markets. Maybe some politician in Laikipia is taking advantage of that, but we are not expanding" (Samburu CEC member 2015).

This politicisation of pastoralism is accompanied by a proliferation of arms (Leshore 2006; Greiner 2013). Laikipian ranchers frequently call on local and national police or politicians to intervene or stop this development. Insiders are not just anxious about the political nature of recent land grabbing of Laikipian properties, but are also aware that "illegal guns, mistrust between ranchers and local herders, and criminal elements are fuelling conflicts in Laikipia" (Waitthaka and Kiplagat 2017; emphasis added).

Conflicts that ‘Overpower’ Other Conflicts

On basis of these different conflict discourses, we now discuss how these conflicts were subjected to three forms of structural couplings. A first form is the *overpowering* of one conflict by another. Since one conflict may be given priority and increased attention and resources, it may (temporarily) push other conflict(s) out of its way. This became the case when tensions mounted due to upland invasions into Loisaba. Previously institutionalised conflicts related to Koiija GR were, as such, temporarily set aside. This development came about in two ways:

First, the management of Loisaba decided to change their grazing arrangements with Koiija GR, as Koiija members were considered unable to stop the ‘illegal’ flow of upland pastoralists. Legal grazing of Koiija-cows in Loisaba, from that moment onwards, would only be possible if Koiija GR managed to keep Samburu cattle out of Loisaba property (German et al. 2016; Pas forthcoming). Second, greater priority was given to the northern neighbour of Koiija GR in Isiolo County, called Nalare. This community conservancy also borders Loisaba, but since it is mostly home to Samburu pastoralists, the management of Loisaba decided that the Nalare community would receive strategic priority in new community-grazing arrangements. This is also due to the idea that Nalare functions as an important geographic gateway through which upland pastoralists may head towards Laikipia. Where the Nalare community was pleased to be granted rights to legal grazing opportunities inside Loisaba for the first time in 2015, members of Koiija GR felt overtaken by these new arrangements.

“Loisaba even decided to give Nalare some cows to graze in Loisaba [in 2015] . . . in the pretence that Nalare would prevent the Samburus from coming, to prevent them from coming to Loisaba. And denied Koiija access and said that there was not enough grass. And Loisaba now even wants to work very closely with the Nalare conservancy, more than with the Koiija group ranch.” (Koiija GR resident 2016).

In light of these developments, we argue that the intensity and priority of an eminent conflict related to upland pastoral invasions dominated over other conflicts that were related to local land use conflicts. On closer inspection, it is not simply a conflict purely over resources that dominated conflicts in and around Loisaba, but rather a shifting attention to conflicts connected to upland invasions. As grazing arrangements with Koiija GR were in part designed to overcome potential upland invasions, we can argue that a failure to succeed here led to a (temporary) decoupling of the Koiija grazing conflict.

Conflicts that ‘Resist’ Other Conflicts

The domination, and related decoupling, of conflicts might also be reversed. A second specific and related coupling of conflicts illustrates a process where conflicts resist domination of other conflicts. This may imply a form of recoupling in which conflicts persist despite the influential and disruptive presence of alternative conflicts in their environment.

To illustrate, the resistance against the past coupling and decoupling of grazing conflicts in Koiija led to interesting recoupling of this conflict over time. The preceding decoupling of conflict hampered longstanding multi-actor interests as institutionalised in previous and internationally praised PCPs such as the Koiija arrangement. These PCPs depend heavily on international conservation and donor support (Pellis et al. 2014; Pellis et al. 2015).

Koiija SL is argued to open a way for potential benefits for the wider community, such as primary education, bursaries, a healthcare centre, water infrastructure, and less tangible gains such as a sense of “pride, belonging and identity” (Nthiga et al. 2015: 415). This intense interrelatedness of Koiija and Loisaba is typical for this conservation-oriented arrangement in comparison to wider social processes developing in the region of Naibunga, Laikipia and adjacent counties—“Vested interests of investors and group ranches prohibit [wider landscape interventions] from happening. They have created a feudal system that is challenging to get out of.” (manager regional NGO in Samburu and Laikipia 2014)

These vested interests eventually forced the Loisaba management to reconsider formerly decoupled conflicts:

“With Koiija . . . we have seen . . . that you win and then you lose again. There is no immediate solution; it will take a long time . . . When there is a crisis, change happens as a result, you always have to go all the way down to the bottom.” (CEO private conservancy and cattle ranch, Laikipia 2015)

“Koiija Starbeds is being put up again. They have [restored tourism infrastructure] and are planning for an electric fence so as to keep the Samburus out. This is paid for by the donor.” (Koiija GR resident 2015)

Since conflicts related to upland invasions into Loisaba are, in part, connected to the way conflicts play out through interactions within the Koiija PCP, we can describe their relation as a loose coupling. These events took place infrequently, and the effect of this recoupling has played a minor role in keeping the disruptive and gradually more persistent nature of upland invasions at bay.

Conflicts that ‘Resonate’ with Other Conflicts

The persistency of conflicts tied to upland invasions becomes clearer if we consider a third form of coupling, namely the ways in which one conflict may resonate with other or earlier conflicts. In this particular case, we observed resonance through the emergence of different conflicts related to fears from particularly people working in conservancies across Laikipia.

The increasingly frequent series of ‘pastoralist invasions’ in 2004, 2012, 2015, 2016 and 2017 are often categorised as events driven by political opportunism, followed by narratives of rangeland degradation and overpopulation of community land:

“They were not invading here because it was the grass that they wanted . . . but it was the land they wanted, politics, et cetera. But they wanted land owned by white people . . . I

don't actually think there is a huge drought out there and, actually, they also have too many heads of cattle out there. That's their business, that's their own life." (Laikipian private rancher 2015)

Just as during the political tensions in Kenya in 2004, parallels are quickly drawn between farm invasions in Zimbabwe and the recent 'invasions' in Laikipia (cf Kariuki 2004; Akker 2016): "There were moments when I was worried, that this was like Zimbabwe. The government is not saying it is okay, but they are not doing anything about it either." (CEO private conservancy and cattle ranch, Laikipia 2015).

This Zimbabwean postcolonial memory of racial conflict is a fear amongst some white farmers within Laikipia. This is strengthened by a wide belief that a Member of Parliament of Laikipia North, a Samburu politician from Isiolo County, frequently incited Samburu and *Maasai* pastoralists to enter private properties in Laikipia in return for political votes in the August 2017 elections. This MP argued the Anglo-*Maasai* treaties had expired in Laikipia and referred to historical injustices made in these treaties (Kariuki 2004; Hughes 2005b; Letai and Lind 2013). Such incitement arguably played an important role in the recent violence in Laikipia North that is furthermore said to be fuelled by the national elections in 2017.

While such violence resonates with discourses of wider white dispossessions unfolding across Southern Africa, they also resonate with claims made during previous invasions into Laikipia in 2004. *Maasai* pastoralists organised these invasions among the Maa-community, including Samburu pastoralists. These events were mainly related to political discontent over the current property distribution in Laikipia where these communities feel that 'white people' unlawfully own the land.

To overcome potentially dramatic outcomes for private ranchers and related conservation interests in Laikipia, many resources have been invested in securing land ownership across Laikipia in 2017, often under the umbrella of biodiversity conservation.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

In this article we offered a different and more nuanced analysis of conflicts that differs from many mainstream and instrumental readings of, or interventions to solve, conflicts. We argued that conflicts are more than internal disputes between actors over resources. Instead, conflicts should be studied as interdependent discourses that emerge, develop and persist semi-independently of their 'sources' or 'subjects' (Foucault 1998). Conflicts are not simply 'caused by' certain things. They are performative and trigger change in the places where they become performed over time. Methodologically, this paper is a plea to observe the 'social life of conflicts': how they are shaped and fed by means of multiple (conflict) discourses in their environment, so we can deepen our understanding of their dynamics and enactments over time.

We found that conflicts, when conditions for conflict in Loisaba changed, became both tightly and loosely coupled,

decoupled and recoupled. We observed the presence of tight couplings where the dynamics of one conflict led to (counter-) reactions in the dynamics of another, and vice versa. But also, loose couplings in case of temporary decoupling and recoupling events. Based on both theoretical and empirical insights, we introduced a typology of three forms of coupling—1) 'overpowering' when one conflict temporarily becomes more manifest at the expense of other conflict(s); 2) 'resisting' when a conflict persists, and recouples, despite the influential presence of irritating alternative conflicts; or 3) 'resonating' when a notion of conflict resonates, and possibly becomes intensified, with other notions of conflict that are observed elsewhere or before.

These couplings support our call for more research on conflicts that is not centred around isolated and place-specific actor interactions only, but instead highlights the interrelatedness between conflict processes. In practice, conflict dynamics in northern Kenya are commonly addressed negatively in the media in terms of their potential causes such as climate change, overpopulation, landscape degradation, resource scarcity, lack of government, or national elections (Hastings 2017; Mwangi 2017; Wachira 2017). By emphasising loose and tight couplings amongst conflicts, we counter-intuitively did not search for their causes or solutions, nor did we study their histories in great detail. Instead, we argue that the nature of conflicts, as parasitical discourses, makes them hard to manage or capture entirely. This once more suggests that no single actor has clear agency to steer its developments, nor can we trace a clear linear historical development given the complex triggering of irritations in the mutual couplings and communications of conflicts with other issues at stake (see also Van Leeuwen and Van Der Haar 2016).

Acknowledging these findings, we may start to wonder why so much research, resources and time are invested in attempts to manage, mitigate or avoid conflicts, despite the widespread acknowledgements that conflicts are rather persistent in these situations or may paradoxically become persistent due to these attempts (Myerson and Rydin 2014; Frerks et al. Muller 2016). In fact, at times it may make more sense to not act upon conflicts in an ad-hoc fashion. If one nevertheless desires to form strategies to cope with conflicts in practice, we instead advise a thorough understanding of the socio-material context in which these conflicts evolve. That includes a better understanding of how and under which conditions it has evolved over time, of its interdependencies (how does it relate to parallel developments in the present?), and how related actors/discourses anticipate future conflict developments (Van Assche et al. 2014; Beunen et al. 2015; Pellis et al. 2015).

That conflicts relate to wider societal change is nothing new. Similar discussions are found in political ecology, particularly debates over the multi-layered character of conflicts. These debates show how conflicts are correspondingly conceptualised as spatial-temporal processes that are structured in wider social, economic and/or ecological change (Peluso and Watts 2001, 2003; Turner 2004; Le Billon 2012). Our analysis differs

nonetheless by emphasising the ways in which conflicts persist as parasitical entities that are able to form couplings with other conflict discourses found in their environments. By emphasising discursive interdependency, we contribute to a further understanding of how conflicts *become structured* by, or help *structure*, socio-material change (Peluso and Watts 2001).

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