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"Eco-ethnic identity": Being an indigenous agriculturist in Nairobi and Mumbai national parks

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ABSTRACT

Protection policies and their implementation vary depending on the status of the area, national legislation, location, etc. also on the local people's activities and social identity. The last two points shall be developed in this paper. Which identity (that proclaimed by the ethnic group itself, or that attributed by the others) can cause a group to be expelled or tolerated in a park? What I call the "eco-ethnic identity" of the group is a key factor explaining the level of tolerance the group is shown. If the relationship between environment and the group (eco-identity) is deemed mostly protective and sustainable, and if the group image is endowed with striking, emblematic traits (ethnic identity) that make it attractive for tourism, the conservation policies will be more liberal and socially inclusive than if the group is not iconic.

1. Introduction

"*At stake* [*for the rights for the tribal inhabitants of the Mumbai forest*], *I would argue, was the problem of recognition. The invisibility that had so long defined the tribal condition was no longer a refuge; once the forest zone had been absorbed within the realm of polity, it became incumbent on resident Warlis to claim recognition as fellow subjects in whatever terms were practicable or be consigned to abjection. The opening move … was to enumerate the populations whose homes had been brought under threat.*

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> *The next step was then to establish connections between those abstract representations and constructions of tribals already circulating in legal discourse and other privileged channels—images, ideas, and narratives that could frame the forest's inhabitants as a certain kind of community whose relation to a certain kind of space gave them legitimate rights of occupancy*."
>
> Elison (2010, pp. 194–5).

> "'Tribal' *is a term for foreign tourists used at Mayers* [a private ranch near Nairobi that employed Maasai dancers], 'traditional' *is a term for domestic tourists used at Bomas* [a cultural centre in Nairobi], *and* 'ethnic' *is a more neutral term used by some Kenyans and anthropologists to avoid the derogatory or misleading connotations of* 'tribal' *or* 'traditional'".
>
> Bruner (2005, p. 80).

All national parks are not located in remote rural areas. Some are near or even right in large urban agglomerations as is the case with Mumbai, India and Nairobi, Kenya which both have national parks. Between the conflicting objectives of nature conservation and urban recreation, the sprawling city is often seen as a threat. Indeed, there is a heavy anthropogenic pressure on these protected areas. Note however that the city may consider the park a treasure to be protected (Trzyna, 2005): the value attributed by the urban dwellers to the park makes the city the "best enemy" of the park. While the spatial identity of these urban national parks is obviously complex, so is the identity of the people living near or in them, all the more since many of them are indigenous peoples such as the Maasai in Nairobi and the *Adivasis* ("tribals") in Mumbai. Since the 1990s many papers have credited the word "indigenous" of positive values in the field of environmental conservation (e.g. Beltran, 2000).[1] "Conservationists, including some park managers, are finally learning what indigenous and ethnic people… have known for a long time: categories, electric fences, fire trucks, and armed guards do not protect parks and the diversity of nature; people do" (Kemf, 1993, p. 11). Yet other scholars have shown that indigeneity is a very debatable notion with definitions that are equally controversial (Bellier, 2007), (about India, see Karlsson (2003), Rousseleau (2003)). According to them, international environmentalist NGOs have mostly adopted a positive position towards indigenous peoples that is excessive or naive. "Whatever the political inspiration, the conventional lines of argument currently used to justify "indigenous" land claims rely on obsolete anthropological notions and on a romantic and false ethnographic vision. Fostering essentialist ideologies of culture and identity, they may have dangerous political consequences" (Kuper, 2003, p. 395). In my case studies the blurred identity of the indigenous peoples is even further complicated by the fact that they live in a space caught between nature and the city: an urban national park. And analysing their identity is not only a matter for academics. This paper argues that this analysis is also crucial for understanding the limited rights of access to the natural resources that are conceded to indigenous populations. Understanding their identities is essential, whether for the social activist trying to increase these rights, or the biocentric environmentalist attempting to push these populations away from the park.[2]

Why are there tribal hamlets in Sanjay Gandhi National Park in Mumbai, but no Maasai settlements allowed in Nairobi National Park? Why are herders neighbouring the Nairobi National Park paid for ecosystem services, while there is no support for agriculture around the Mumbai park? Population density (Nairobi 4509 km^{-2} as opposed to 22,937 km^{-2} in Mumbai) and the level and frequency of visitation to the parks by the local and international tourists are relevant factors that shall be briefly addressed in this paper. I shall rather focus, however, on another factor: local people's activities and

[1] "Governments and protected area managers should incorporate customary and indigenous tenure and resource use, and control systems, as a means of enhancing biodiversity conservation" (Beltran, 2000, p. 4).

[2] This paper was written under the UNPEC research project (Urban National Parks in Emerging Countries and Cities) (upa-network.org) funded by the French Agence Nationale de la Recherche. During my mission trips to Mumbai (about 12 weeks since 2007) and Nairobi (3 weeks in 2012), my mixed methodology was based on semi-structured interviews with Adivasi and Maasai households, decision makers and various stakeholders, added to the other materials collected or written by the UNPEC collaborators, in particular Tiwari (2008), Mohanty (2011) and Edelblutte (2012). Thanks are also due to TISS, Mumbai, and IFRA, Nairobi.