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Parks, 36 Kingfisher Court, Hambridge Road, Newbury, RG14 5SJ, UK
Fax: [+ 44] (0)1635 550230
E-mail: parks@naturebureau.co.uk

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- ensuring that protected areas are placed at the forefront of contemporary environmental issues such as biodiversity conservation and ecologically sustainable development.

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Cover, *clockwise from top: Dangejheri women patrol and protect their local forest. Dawid Kruiper and David Kariseb of the Khonami San discuss tracks on their land in the Kgaladagi Transfrontier Park, S. Africa.* Phillipa Holden. *Blackbuck* Antelope cervicapra *at Bentnoi, Orissa benefit from CCAs. The unique ecosystem of the coastal range forests of Mapu Lahual IPA, Chile.* Gonzalo Oviedo. *Burning spinifex grass for regeneration, Walalkara IPA, Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands, South Australia.* Bruce Rose.

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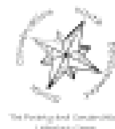

Community conserved areas in the Horn of Africa

MARCO BASSI

The Horn of Africa holds an extraordinary mosaic of diverse peoples and subgroups. In their interaction with the environment several have developed cultural features and indigenous governance mechanisms to assure the sustainable use of natural resources and the conservation of biodiversity.

In this region indigenous conservation is often totally informal and unrecognised. It is in great jeopardy, but still constitutes an extraordinary conservation asset in a context where conventional approaches are failing to achieve relevant results. Applying a community conserved areas (CCAs) approach here mainly means recognising, supporting, valorising and formalising indigenous (or customary) governance and customary tenure systems based on common property. Unfortunately collective rights are hardly recognised in the legislation of these countries.

Using the case of the Borana conserved landscape, the paper illustrates the mechanisms of indigenous conservation and the current challenges. It also accounts for some interesting initiatives that have helped to valorise indigenous conservation even in the absence of specific country-level policies favouring CCAs.

CONSERVATION POLICIES in the Horn of Africa have long been characterised by a strong top-down approach. Concern about the efficacy of the conventional approach to conservation, along with consideration for issues of equity and participation from the late 1980s (Barrow *et al*. 2001; Rutten 2002), have not yet produced significant results. Local communities are still legally denied access to national parks, are excluded from their management and are marginal to sharing benefits (Beltràn 2000; Bassi 2003).

The Horn of Africa holds an extraordinary mosaic of diverse ethnic groups. In countries such as Ethiopia, where formal protected areas are so ineffective, or in Somalia, Eritrea and southern Sudan, where protracted civil wars diminished the State's role in protecting biodiversity, valuable biodiversity still exists in harmony with livelihoods and cultural needs. Communities that for centuries lived in a certain territory, or perceived themselves as more or less permanently associated to it, have a simple reason to care about the sustainable use of natural resources: the need to survive and to assure the group's reproduction. The long-term survival of the group must be combined with the immediate need of the productive units to gain access to the natural resources for their livelihoods. Over time the natural landscape is shaped by ecologically compatible human action, while culture develops in association with the modified environment and the need to preserve key resources[1]. The interaction with the environment thus determines the definition of groupings co-operating in productive activities, and defines norms of access to and exclusion from natural resources.

We can identify a dominant ethnic group or nation in this region who share not only a mother language but also values and beliefs, rituals, norms, procedures, political models and, of course, a territory. The size of these communities may vary from a few thousand individuals (for example the small linguistic groups in South-Omo in Ethiopia) to 30–40 million in the case of the Oromo of Ethiopia and Kenya, the largest nation in the Horn of Africa. The largest groups are clearly highly segmented, and their governance of natural resources makes sense only at a lower level, such as the Somali clans or lineages, or the localised Oromo identities of the Borana and Karayu pastoralists. It is especially at the level of such 'ethnic groups', 'tribes', or Somali 'clans', that specific devices such as norms on circulation of people and access to resources, decision-making councils, rituals and myths are elaborated in association with the environment.

1. The positive link between natural resources and livelihoods has been especially recognised for pastoralism, a key ecological factor for the growth and survival of large and diverse wildlife (Berger 1993: 23–4).

Indigenous conservation – defined as the direct or indirect action of environmental conservation based on culture and a collective identity – is often totally informal and unrecognised in the Horn of Africa. It survives, but is in great jeopardy. Of course, not all localised cultures are equally effective from the point of view of biodiversity conservation. But in contexts where we can clearly identify environmentally friendly patterns of resource use and where associated biodiversity is conserved, it is possible to link global biodiversity goals with the values and practices of the local and indigenous communities, respecting the basic principles of equity and building on local cultural notions and models. In this region, CCAs still constitute an extraordinary conservation asset in a context where conventional approaches are failing to achieve conservation results.

Applying a CCA approach here mainly means recognising, supporting, valorising and formalising indigenous (or customary) governance and customary tenure systems based on common property. Unfortunately collective rights are hardly recognised in the legislation of the countries in this region. Collective rights are sometimes implicitly considered as a secondary claim in some sectoral law or policy document, usually under the heading of 'community' or 'local community'. However, the concept of 'community' or 'local community', lacking any reference to the environment-specific cultural elements, is too broad for indigenous conservation to have meaning.

Figure 1. *Location of community conserved areas mentioned in this paper.*

The Borana conserved landscape

The Borana-Oromo, a pastoral group of about 400,000 people living in Southern Ethiopia and Northern Kenya, provides a model case study of a threatened community conserved landscape. It includes diverse ecological zones and a variety of key natural and human-modified resources. Different resources are subject to differential access rules, but all are fundamentally conceived as strongly complementary and as an indivisible heritage of the whole ethnic community, that contribute to the viability of the pastoral system. The Borana conserved landscape, very effective until the late 1970s, includes open rangelands, traditional wells (*eela*), the three largest juniper forests (*baddaa sadeen*) and other scattered patches of forest, three volcanic lakes and correlated hydro-geological systems (*boqee*), and ceremonial grounds (*ardhaa jilaa*). It hosts several species of birds with highly restricted ranges (Borghesio and Giannetti 2005; EWNHS 1996; Borghesio 1997).

The sound management of the rangeland is promoted through norms of inclusion/exclusion designed for pastoral activity and known as *seera marraa bisanii* – 'the law of grass and water', which shares the basic principles of most East African pastoral groups. It requires maximising the use of wet-season pasture (with good grass but only accessible during rains) whenever possible, to minimise pressure on the most intensely utilised rangelands served by permanent water points.

The 'law of water' also imposes rules regarding traditional wells (*eela*), gathered in the localities where the aquifer can be reached. Nine of these well complexes – the *tulaa sallan* – have a special ritual and symbolic relevance, for the particular qualities of the water and the surrounding environment. The wells have differential norms regulating the investment required for digging and rights of access, providing for priority to clans and families that have actually

Site of traditional wells in the vicinity of a volcanic lake; the wells are marked by lines on the ground. Photo: Marco Bassi.

Crater lake producing minerals for livestock (and wildlife) consumption. Photo: Marco Bassi.

invested in it, but also a limited quota for outsiders, including members of other ethnic groups and wildlife (Bassi 2005: 10–12 and 145–163; Gufu Oba 1998: 19–36). There are also special provisions to ban any permanent or temporary human settlement in the vicinity of the wells. Thus, the 'law of water' ensures sustainable use of water and other resources.

The *baddaa sadeen* are three dry evergreen forests with juniper *Juniper procera*. While being too humid for permanent pastoral settlement, some open patches contain excellent dry-season pasture and permanent springs. The forests have an important function as last refuge for grazing in case of drought, and are a reserve for medical and ritual plants. They were never subjected to special management provisions, with the exclusion of a very strict prohibition to start fires inside them, but have a high symbolic value (Boku Tache, pers. comm.).

The *booqee sadeen* are three volcano craters, providing different salts and high quality water for both humans and cattle. Access by the community is regulated in accordance to a balance between customary and statutory laws, the latter imposing a tax on salt extracted by the local community. When the government announced in national newspapers a public bid for their industrial mining, the entire community mobilised and managed to conserve the customary use, and therefore the conservation values, of the *booqee*.

Borana governance is built around the highly complex *gadaa* system of generation classes (Asmarom Legesse 1973). Every eight years a new generation class, represented by elected leaders from the major clan divisions, takes the leadership of the *yaa'a*, the mobile ritual villages of the Borana, and perform a number of national ceremonies in different sacred sites scattered over the landscape. Most *gadaa* rituals are performed in the shade of a Sycomoro (*Ficus sycomorus* – vernacular: *odaa*) tree. The tree and the surrounding area, known as *ardaa jilaa*, are fully protected and should be maintained in a pure natural state (Taddesse Berisso 1995). The representatives of the *gadaa* generation class also have the responsibility to organise once in eight years the Gumi Gayoo, the month-long general assembly of the Borana, an event involving thousands of people in democratic debates. The assembly also serves as supreme court of the Borana and the legislative body (Bassi 2005).

From the mid-1970s onwards the Borana environment has been confronted with major land use changes. The socialist government limited mobility within the ethnic territory and promoted agriculture. The situation degenerated further after the change of government in 1991 followed

by the political marginalisation of the Borana. UN-backed returnee programmes and other development initiatives supported by international funds meant that entire portions of Borana territory, were entrusted to neighbouring groups. Large ranches were acquired by international investors and extensive portions of critical dry-season pastures were assigned to town dwellers and to non-Borana immigrants for cultivation. Since common property and indigenous land rights are not recognised in Ethiopia, the Borana's territory has been treated like 'no-man's land', to be assigned to whoever claimed it. The Borana have been squeezed into the driest pockets where their grazing land was bound to deteriorate, and deprived of their drought grazing reserves (Gufu Oba 1998: 62–63 and 75–6). The only possible survival strategy for the Borana has been to engage in farming in the remaining places, both to obtain some food during years of good rain and to secure some land rights.

The Borana institutions and norms appear unable to cope with the development and resettlement policies; decisions are simply imposed by the State administration. In addition, massive immigration of persons not sharing the values attached to Borana governance have delegitimised their landscape level effect. The negative impact on biodiversity is also tremendous, despite the establishment of some formal protected areas within the Borana territory (Bassi 2003).

Recognising CCAs

Norms and enforcing mechanisms of indigenous governance are based on values and conceptions that are shared only within the ethnic communities that have developed mutual adaptation locally, and not by outsiders. As such, they cannot cope with extra-cultural elements. This is particularly problematic since many cases of rapid environmental deterioration in the Horn of Africa occur with situations of competing claims between the autochthonous communities and other encroaching groups or opportunistic newcomers. In this context, CCAs can only be recovered if they are recognised through modern institutions. Even in the absence of specific country-level legislation and policies, some interesting attempts to valorise indigenous

A Sycomoro tree marking a ritual ground. The Borana only managed to protect the tree itself, while the surrounding area is now cultivated by newcomers. Photo: Marco Bassi.

The gadaa *leaders moved to Gayoo to organise the General Assembly of the Borana.* Photo: Marco Bassi.

conservation by harmonising it with national legislation have been made, mainly in relation to collaborative forest management[2].

An example of formal recognition of the conservation capacity of a CCA is that of the *kaya*. These are surviving patches of the coastal forest of Kenya conserved by elders for ceremonial reasons. A group of concerned professionals have secured financial, institutional and legal support to improve the capacity of traditional leaders to protect their sacred forests. The weakness of the process is, that due to the lack of specific legal instruments, traditional leaders are not directly empowered to manage the forest, and project mediation is required (Robertson and Luke 1993; Bassi 2003).

In the Horn of Africa many traditional leaders have formal titles, gained through specific rituals and training processes. They have the responsibility to guarantee the well-being of the community as a whole, on the basis of traditional wisdom, customary norms and local knowledge. The experience of SOS Sahel in its attempt to improve the management of the three juniper forests of Boranaland shows that in a CCA approach, reference to the customary leadership is crucial (Boku Tache and Irwin 2003).

Indigenous conservation is based on mutual adaptation between culture and environment and is primarily motivated by the need to assure a sustainable use of natural resources. This is fully compatible with IUCN protected area Category V, Protected Landscape. The Lorugum area of Turkana District (Kenya) provides a success story of reforestation by adopting a landscape approach based on the recognition of customary collective and individual rights (customary

2. Some efficient networks of NGOs have been established (the Kenya Forest Working Group and the National Forest Management Working Group, Ethiopia) with the objective to promote the participation of local communities in forest management and to enhance their sense of ownership and responsibility.

tenure), customary sanctions (elements of ethnic governance) and legal recognition by the local governmental institutions (empowerment) (Barrow, *et al*., 2002).

Another interesting example is Forole Mountain, a totally informal but fully protected community area, engaging two neighbouring Oromo pastoral communities of Kenya and Ethiopia in complex socio-economic and symbolic relations (Bassi 2003: Box 11) (Tablino 1999). Many indigenous and mobile groups in fact do not necessarily have rigid boundaries, and indigenous conservation does not necessarily work through a univocal association between one ethnic group and a defined territory.

In the southern part of the Ethiopian Rift Valley, the Arbore elders are hoping to establish an inter-ethnic committee to manage the wildlife of Chew Bahir, an Important Bird Area (EWNHS 1996) at the confluence of the Weito and Sagan rivers, and an area of intense interaction among several ethnic groups, often in conflict among themselves. The same committee would also serve as a permanent inter-ethnic forum to solve ethnic disputes at an early stage (Bassi 2003: Box 17). Unfortunately, the initiative has no follow up, mainly because of lack of a clear policy in favour of CCAs.

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Marco Bassi *is adjunct professor of Political and Applied Anthropology at Bologna University. He has specialised on issues of pastoralism, ethnicity and biodiversity conservation with main research in Ethiopia and in the Horn of Africa. He is a member of the Core Group of the IUCN WCPA-CEESP Strategic Direction on Governance, Communities, Equity and Livelihoods (TILCEPA). E-mail: bassimarco@tiscali.it*