Lisa Elena Fuchs examines the effort to promote conservation in Kenya’s Mau forest over the last two decades. The forested area has served as a managed forest since colonial times, producing timber and other forest products as well as serving as a home to the Ogiek people, a traditionally foraging community. While the problem of over-exploitation of forest resources and deforestation has long been an issue, it came to a head when in its latter stages the Moi government declared large sections of the forest open for settlement. The influx of new settlers opening land for agriculture resulted in both rapid deforestation and national and rising international concern. Under the Kibaki government a national push to “save the Mau” led to dramatic changes and heated conflict in the region as multiple actors sought to define what saving the forest meant and their rights to resources as a result.

Fuchs begins by proclaiming a political ecology approach to the crisis. She wants to show that the issues raised in the struggle over the Mau arise in part from the way different actors construct its landscape. She does an excellent job in identifying the stakeholders in the effort to promote conservation of the Mau. She worked with members of the local Ogiek community, among the settlers, with the forestry service, with local and national politicians who sought to influence the course of the program, with other government organs and officials who became tasked with conserving the forest among NGOs, and especially their local agents, and with the timber industry—both large-scale firms and small independent sawmillers. She identifies the central struggle at the state level as the drive both to promote development and to promote conservation of resources.

Fuchs does not over-privilege a putative Ogiek perspective on the situation. She notes that the forest had long been managed by the colonial and independent forest service. Much of it was in fact tree plantations, with the timber regularly harvested by large, politically connected firms. Local communities did not manage the forest in isolation. However, she does not do justice to the history of local communities, subsuming her analysis under a generic rubric of “invention of tradition” and dismissing local leaders as cultural entrepreneurs who promoted indigeneity as a stepping stone to wealth and power. A more nuanced analysis would reconstruct both long-term use and contestation of control in the forest.

The author connects the struggle over land and resources to national politics in Kenya. The push for conservation in this situation comes not only from international, especially NGO, actors but also develops out of the Green Belt Movement associated with Nobel laureate Wangari Mathai.
That movement, in turn, became part of the anti-Moi political movement which led to the introduction of multiparty politics in the country in the 1990s. The critical event for the Mau forest was Moi’s opening of previously controlled forest land for agricultural settlement, a move widely seen as an attempt to garner support for his reelection. With his defeat and the inauguration of the Mwai Kibaki government headed by Prime Minister Raila Odinga, the drive to “save the Mau” became government policy. Central to this effort was an attempt to rescind the land grants made to agriculturalists in the forest. Conflict resulted on multiple fronts, with Ogiek claims of indigeneity, forest service efforts to restore lost areas as productive agro-forestry sites, and recently arrived farmers claiming their land titles valid. The author touches on, but does not highlight, the powerful political trope of control over land in the colonial and post-colonial politics of Kenya.

Running throughout the situation and in the author’s analysis is a confusion of goals. On the ground different groups had competing goals, many of which could be said to be a version of “saving the Mau.” The author faithfully reflects this confusion, without adding her own perspective of what saving the Mau should actually look like. At times, the author seems to adopt an indigeneity approach centered on local communities, but in turn points out the long history of social and economic change among the communities of the area and the prevalence of cultural/political entrepreneurship among local leaders. She is quite aware of the claims of more recently arrived settlers. She emphasizes the push-pull of state goals of both conservation and development. She is steeped in the language, goals, and acronyms of the global conservation movement—so much so that some of what passes for analysis in the volume relies on setting up conflicts between competing acronyms.

There is another way, though, one that the author follows only half-heartedly, despite the impressive depth of the research behind the book. The author begins the volume by declaring the study one of political ecology. As she notes, political ecology analysis is grounded in environmental history, which, to put it simplistically, treats the environment as both constructed and an autonomous force in human affairs. This approach, in this case, would require much more attention to the history of the forest and people who lived in it and shaped it over time. In particular, the colonial-era development of the forest and the integration of local communities into a colonial social formation helped determine the contours of the struggle over land and resources in the forest. This type of analysis would include much more attention to the actual landscape changes in the forest. Such a perspective would have deepened the author’s analysis and provided the opportunity for a more complete explanation of the failures and successes of the drive to save the Mau.
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