

**The Intersection of Environment, Conservation, and Subdivision: An Ethnographic
Case Study of Maji Moto, Kenya**

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Summary

Pastoralists have been confronted with challenges since time immemorial and continue to face those challenges and persist despite the odds. This paper will introduce readers to the cultural practices of Kenyan pastoralists in Maji Moto, and Samburu, to bring about an understanding of the central role that land and livestock play in maintaining their livelihoods. Observation through field studies conducted found that these groups faced three main challenges: environment and resource depletion caused by drought, government institution of subdivision motivated by market and personal interests, and lastly, development narratives that assert unidimensional blueprints of conservation and harm essential actors. By fleshing out these three factors, this paper will demand an examination of the flip-side of conservation efforts, the consequences, and advantages of subdivision, and to challenge preconceived notions about pastoralists. The goal is to make readers aware that cultures are ever changing and multifaceted, and so respond well to influences only if they are transmitted in the same local understandings and suit cultural, political, and environmental realities.

Thesis: The Maasai have endured external encroachment, degradation, and threats to their way of life for decades, yet in the face of this and imperial assumptions that seek to illegitimate, and nullify their livelihoods, they have remained the true keepers of the land.

Introduction

Pastoralism is a livelihood practice that has been present in Kenya since time immemorial. Pastoralism is ‘a mode of subsistence which involves raising domestic animals on natural pastures’ (Galaty 2015). It is the linchpin of socio-economic relationships and governance structures amongst those who practice it, for many will say “a man’s wealth is measured by the heads of cattle and children in his household”.

The pastoralist village called Illetukunyi hosts what is to be understood as one of the remaining pastoral villages untouched by the gaze of tourists, anthropologists, or foreigners of any sort since missionaries arrived during the colonial period. Nestled among the sloping hills are groupings of homesteads not yet bordered off by subdivision, a practice which had and continues

to spread across the Maji Moto Group Ranch (MMGR) of which Illetukunyi is apart. However, the prospect looms overhead as temporary, natural barriers made from thorny acacia branches have been found in increasing numbers. The field research conducted in this area inquired into five key elements from which the group sought to establish what the main concerns in the area were, and from there to drive further investigation. The study inquired into: the history of the region, livelihood practices among men and women, methods and changes to livestock management and governance structures.

Through participatory observation and interviews conducted over the span of five days, three key themes were highlighted throughout the study: the issue of subdivision and corruption currently unfolding in MMGR where officials place their personal as well as foreign investment interests ahead of the needs of the bodies they have promised to govern. Second, is the increased occurrence and duration of droughts which have, at times, decimated livestock populations, and placed increasing strain on the life and financial wellbeing of pastoralists. Lastly, the increased presence and duration of droughts, and the imposition of conservancies which exacerbate the plight that pastoralists currently face regarding access to resources. Analysis of these issues, through speaking to locals, reviewing literature and organization documents, it was found that despite the adversities that the pastoralists and indigenous groups have faced, their populations have remained strong, their institutions of education and health have expanded and the culture has persisted.

This paper will analyse the intersections of environmental change, conservation, subdivision, and adaptation, and the way the Maasai have adapted throughout these issues. However, such adaptation cannot be reviewed without noticing the role that local organizations have played in bridging these intersections, educating researchers, and assisting locals in their battles. Indigenous Livelihood Enhancement Partners (ILEPA), has played an essential role in motivating change in the MMGR, seeking justice, providing education and resources as well as empowering the Maasai in a way that speaks to their cultural realities.

Therefore, this case study, through conglomeration of these essential understandings of culture, the complexities of subdivision, conservancy politics and environmental challenges, demands that readers take a critical eye toward simplistic and unilineal narratives and depictions of complex realities. Doing so not only considers but validates the fact that the Maasai have

endured external encroachment for decades and yet in the face of institutions and assumptions that seek to illegitimate, and nullify their livelihoods, they have remained the true keepers of the land.

Methodology

A team of two interns, a research professor, and local translators partook in participant observation and conducted interviews to answer the following themes. In doing so we could analyse what patterns arose, and the significance that they held. This study was conducted within the same village in homesteads, in pastures and during a wedding ceremony to which we were invited. The interviews were structured as follows:

Day 1: History

Goal: Gain an understanding of the origins of the people inhabiting this area. Who was here first? How did the end up here? What has changed with regards to settlement structures? What role, if any, did colonizers play in the establishment of this area? What did the previous settlement look like? How has the land changed and how has this impacted livestock management? Are previous governance structures still employed?

Day 2: Livelihoods

Goal: Gain an understanding of common livelihood practices. What are they and how have they changed? How is labor divided amongst men and women, youth, age set leaders, elders and morans? How have your livelihood patterns changed and why? What challenges impact your livelihood practices?

Day 3: Livestock Management

Goal: Gain an understanding of ‘the history of the herd’. When and how do individuals come to acquire livestock? What happens during droughts? What are your migration patterns and adaptation methods? What have challenged your pastoral practices and how do you mitigate these challenges?

Day 4: Governance Structures

Goal: Gain an understanding of traditional governance structures, the way in which they've changed and why there were formed. What are the various roles? How do they relate to Narok county government structure?

Establishing that the common themes of environment, subdivision and conservancy politics arose most pertinently, they will be fleshed out in this paper to expand on my thesis and validate my conclusions.

Indigenous Livelihood Enhancement Partners (ILEPA)

Indigenous Livelihoods Enhancement Partners (ILEPA) is a grassroots organization that was founded by local Narok Maasai, and McGill alumni, Kimaren Stanley Raimit. His organization was created in 2008 with the goal to enhance local livelihoods and promote sustainable environmental management. Through community based activism, volunteering, and education programs, the Maasai community of Maji Moto has become more informed and vocal about issues such as women's empowerment, HIV prevention, and most recently, the land struggle that threatens their livelihoods. ILEPA is played an instrumental role in organizing and distributing information about an land grabbing and what consists of individual land rights. As educated members of the MMGR, who have been impacted by the land grab, ILEPA members have extended their knowledge, uniting it with their common understanding of Maasai pastoral culture and language and are using it as a platform to promote awareness about the issue. This issue is highly nuanced and difficult to pin down, especially for those without education on the matter. As Kimaren phrased it "people have become very creative in the way they steal land". For example, it has been cited in numerous cases where, as per custom, locals assume their ownership to land that was inherited after their fathers passing, when other members had registered and signed a title deed to that parcel, forcing the previous owner's relocation. Another instance would occur where individuals would register on area lists and land title records under artificial names to then allocate themselves that assigned parcel.

The issue has been long drawn out since the GR decided to subdivide in 1990. ILEPA founder, Kimaren, has attributed the increasing pressure on Maasai pastoral landholdings to subdivide to 'the complex interplay between market forces, state bureaucracy [...] customary value systems and institutions [...] against competing land-use options and mounting population pressure' (Riamit 2014). Through the efforts of ILEPA, GR committee heads were exposed of their corruption, their use of phantom registrations, influences on title deeds and conglomerated efforts to capture as much as land possible. This highlight that the nature of "[...] threats to tenure security in the GR landholdings is shifting from being 'appropriation by the state and non-Maasai to individuals' needs' to [...] appropriation by influential individuals from within the community (Mwangi and Dehorn 2008). As GR members proceed to allot themselves numerous

parcels in their own interests and that of investors, they relocated homesteads, stripped individuals of their customary land rights and captured essential access points to schools, water, and vital grazing regions.

Over months of legal work and campaigning ILEPA has acted against all three heads of the GR committee (the chairman, treasurer, and secretary) managing to overthrow and replace them with two members of ILEPA. They have also pushed for media coverage to bring greater awareness to the issue of subdivision and land struggles in Maji Moto as, in popular media land rights issues and the rights of Maasai pastoralists tend to be shirked in the public eye as this practice is perceived to be antiquated and of no economic value. ILEPA is continuing to work to finalize the legal proceedings, while simultaneously restoring order to the pastoral land holdings, ensuring people are assigned land and that greater awareness is spread about the importance of land to Maasai pastoralists.

Subdivision, what?

Subdivision is the systematic division of parcels of land into smaller plots in hopes of promoting productivity in land use, to encourage investment, and to make complex territorial divisions legible to the state. The dynamic between development interest, the increasingly industrialized economy of Kenya and the pastoral communities has brought about great tension for years. Illegal land grabbing and forced relocation of individuals is not a case unique to Maji Moto. Competition over land has exacerbated and sharpened perceived inequalities of income and wealth, putting tremendous strain on social ties and threatening the stability of individual wellbeing. Considering the dense concentration of people in areas with more frequent rainfall there is an increased pressure on land especially given the country's heavy economic reliance on land use. Individuals whose only means of subsistence depends on access to land are now having to fight in terms of life or death (Riamit 2014).

Tenure regimes began in Kenya in the 1950's and has had a tremendously contentious impact especially on the more vulnerable members of pastoral groups, namely the poor and women. Per custom, women claim no ownership to property in a homestead, not even the children, which limits their options to attain any source of independent income. There are increasing cases where

men allow their wives to work outside of the household to acquire this income through menial labor in other households, beadmaking and charcoal burning. These activities which are also staple parts of women's daily chores have become increasingly difficult to pursue as subdivision has limited access to firewood, water resources, as well as the space to burn charcoal. Poorer individuals tend to withstand the worst of land disputes as local elites and wealthy external bodies take precedence over land allocation in resource abundant areas.

Pastoralists in Illetukunyi, a village in the far reaches of Maji Moto, have not yet come to face the full impact of subdivision but feel its politics and imminent encroachment. While men continue to graze along the vast stretch of valleys and pastures, and women continue to access resources in the forests, informal implementation of subdivision has begun to take place, disturbing normal pastoral practices, and livelihood maintenance.

While it remains on the village fringes for now, subdivision is still an extremely contentious issue in Illetukunyi. The chairman who allocated himself upward of 18 parcels resides there with much of his family, and his father, an elder, is a highly-regarded man known as one of the first to draw the initial boundary lines of Maji Moto. Furthermore, there is a stark discrepancy between the perceived loss and gain to be had from the decision to subdivide. While many individuals cited a sense of abjection inflicted by their local government, others view subdivision as an opportunity to expand projects, entice investment, and as a symbol of autonomy.

Investment

The latter proponents of subdivision base their support in the opportunity it presents to stabilize their autonomy and use the land in more productive means. Their reasoning is oddly reminiscent of common development narratives which anthropologists constantly criticize for its employment of a unidirectional blueprint of development. As Scott argues, “the simple ‘production and profit’ model [...] has failed in important ways to represent the complex, supply, negotiated objectives of real farmers and their communities” (Scott 1998). In contrast to this however, a few locals and the GR chairman himself stated that “the fool is the most disadvantaged” for it is he that does not seek the economic potential of land privatization. He claimed that subdivision, as a collective decision, enabled more efficient maintenance of livestock and has and will continue to reap

rewards from which all can benefit.. Regardless of the intentions of the GR chairman, this narrative has motivated support from youth in the region seeking to advance their ticket in life.

Many non-Maasai locals from Narok, largely Kikuyu investors and businessmen, have taken advantage of the increasing subdivision in the region. One man was interviewed on the fringes of Maji Moto center, where he demonstrated his efforts to seduce investment in the land. Since purchasing several plots, he divided them into segments and, through the water supply of a borehole, grew vegetables, tree, and plant varieties, built bricks from the soil, cultivated hay, and raised a bee farm; proving toward investors the potential that awaited them.

Abjection

Juxtaposed to the excitement of business prospects, a sense of abjection (Ferguson 1999) stems from the effects subdivision has had on the nature of Maasai pastoralist society. For a livelihood that holds livestock and family structures at its apex, subdivision disassembles and physically divides complex networks of solidarity and security. This poses even greater challenges to vulnerable groups such as women and the poor who are unable to access funds to acquire livestock, nor the means or right to own land and thus are severely dependant on these networks. A translator recounted an instance where a family she knew was force to relocate from her homestead to one across the far-reaching plains among the Loita Hills, far from their social networks, severing ties of support.

Additionally, the arduous work of livestock management is highly dependant on access to adequate grazing fields which subdivision and land titling deprives of pastoralists. Thus, individuals were compelled to reduce the numbers of their herd to accommodate the smaller space and prevent land degradation. This sort of re-organization reifies class distinction which is heavily imbedded in the dynamic of subdivision and relocation. As wealthier and elite GR members, can use their financial endowments to gain closer access to resources, purchase more land and procure greater earnings which enables them to assert a positional and symbolic power over others. Despite this social, and economic abjection, pastoralist have sought to pursue livestock management in a way which is, as they describe, “profitable”, and as will be explained

in later sections, will expand their possibility frontiers in the face of subdivision and other externalities.

Green for Green

In addition to new methods of livestock management, recently pastoralists with smaller herds have begun selling the surplus of grass to those with a shortage in exchange for heads of livestock or cash. Many individuals struggle to access essential water points as well as grazing areas and have established agreements with neighboring plots to permit their access. A local pastoralist explained his lack of access to resources which drove him to find other means for the survival of his herd and livelihood. He explained his process of accessing water resources through connections he had established with two other parcels. To gain access and avoid allegations of trespassing, his man pays the first parcel owner KES30, 000 and an additional KES17, 000 for the second, which covers 10 months worth of access. He must, therefore, sell on average two sheep every other month through out a year (25 sheep per annum) to afford these fees. The initial narrative for subdivision appears to find validation in the fact some pastoralists have managed to establish small business ventures and new means of wealth accumulation because of subdivision, irrespective of the cost to others.

Climate Change, Lifestyle Change

A report on climate change and variability in small-holder sectors like Narok has spelled out the impacts and concerns of climate change such as the droughts which have led to ‘the rampant environmental degradation, resource use conflicts and desertification’ (Gordon, G. O, *et al.*, 2010). Pastoralists in Illetukunyi, however, have established various, tried and trusted, mechanisms for coping with drought. These incorporate a fallow period to encourage regeneration of grasslands and seasonal rotation of livestock grazing to ensure regenerated resources remain preserved in cases of drought. Prior to subdivision, the mountain sides were reserved for drought where grazing could be done communally and safely away from wildlife, while the plains were allocated for grazing during seasons of rainfall. Severe droughts have

pushed herds toward areas where heavy rainfall has been predicted, sending men, and occasionally their families, away for months at a time. Over the years there has been an observably increased frequency and severity of droughts in the region which has meant immense implications for pastoralist livestock populations. The most severe droughts were cited by Illetukunyi locals to have occurred as recently as 2009 and previously in 2000, the latter of which was noted to have been the most severe and characterized as the period where nearly all livestock and hope were lost.

Subsequently, subdivision and land privatization has posed limits to the extent of migration and access to resources. This has meant that pastoralists have had to diversify their breeds of livestock to ensure security during droughts. Additionally, they have had to find ways to expand their mechanisms for income generation to afford what casualties may be incurred during a drought and if their herds do falter. In 2000, men sold the hides of deceased livestock in exchange for sheep, the more durable head of livestock, with goats following closely. Sheep were noted for their shorter reproduction cycles and hardy diets which were conducive to the short and dry vegetation left over from drought. Breeds of sheep became more selective as well, for the black headed Somali sheep and red Nanyuki and Samburu breeds proved to be the most durable and reproductively efficient. Livestock diversification has been taken up in regions all over Kenya, most notably in Samburu's semi-desert where locals keep Somali dromedaries for their milk and longevity. Dromedaries also happen to run for around KES70, 000 (CAD900) a head which locals there appreciated for its functioning as a savings account, and something to use toward education, or to pull one out of financial hardship.

Another method of 'adaptation', so to speak, is the relationship that has been forged between pastoralists and conservancies, namely the one in Maji Moto with the Maasai Mara. The pastoral-conservancy dynamic will be fleshed out shortly, but it is worth mentioning as a mechanism which pastoralists have used as last resorts to maintain their herds. As conservancy's have been built over the resource abundant areas of the region, and subdivision further limits access to resources, herders have tried their luck with grazing in conservancies after dark. While the conservancy has permitted this for the moment, there are strict rules regarding times of access and grazing of which violation may risk confiscation of livestock or fines from KES5,000 to KES10,000.

Markets

A few men shared the history of their herd and the regeneration of its numbers post-drought, each noting that the increased role of the market facilitates this process more easily. About an hour away from Maji Moto center a weekly market is erected which enables herders and city dwellers alike to access the necessities of life. Food, clothing, and houseware is in high demand but not nearly as much as the deworming medication, tick sprays and the opportunity to buy and sell livestock. Large corrals are divided into sections for cattle, goats and sheep which roam freely, freshly marked with paint to denote the buyers claim. It is here where pastoralists seek to sell bulls in return for productive heifers, sheep, or goats.

During the 2000 and 2009 drought's the market's pickings were scarce and revenues were low as livestock became too thin to sell, and even a successful sale would only put around KES1000 into a herder's pocket (around twelve Canadian dollars). This is extremely problematic considering the relatively high costs of living for some pastoral families. The increasing government pressure, as well as intrinsic desire to send children to school places burdens on family funds which already strain to manage household fees, food, and to purchase medicine for livestock. In the case of a father of three, school fees on average may come to KES1000 per term, around KES250 per month per child. This father's ability to sell his livestock for a good price is essential considering the costs he incurs each year. Selling according to need, he may sell two sheep every second month. Additionally, his medical expenses proceed as follows: KES1000 for tick spray for cattle, KES1000 spray for sheep and goats, KES2000 to deworm all 200 of his sheep and KES2000 to treat 50 of his goats. The sale of two sheep can cover around KES8000 worth of expenses and this becomes more significant in the face of drought.

The Anti-Pastoral Machine

Conservancy politics and the steamroller effect of development ideology has played a significant role in determining the well-being of pastoralists for ages. A report shows that the contribution made by travel and tourism to Kenya's GDP was 10.5% in 2014, and is expected to increase by 5.1% in 2025 (World Travel and Tourism Council 2015). The extent to which conservancies

contribute to national GDP, in addition to the pressure for wildlife preservation and environmental conservation has placed Kenyan conservancies in a position of increasing priority.

For instance, the Kalama National Park, in Isiolo, is managed by the Northern Rangelands Trust and covers a large region of the Gir Gir Group Ranch, Waso Division and Samburu East District. Kalama conservancy sits on a registered title of land ownership which was issued and recognized by the Gir Gir Group Ranch and agreed upon with the hopes of procuring benefits from the conservancy's presence. Conservancies serve as meccas for local income generation as they provide jobs as well as facilitating large influxes of tourists who seek an authentic taste of Africa, opening a prime market for the sale of beads and other handmade goods. With these benefits comes larger withdrawals.

Foremost, it must be understood what environmental conditions locals in Samburu are dealing with - that of an extremely barren, semi-desert environment, with little access to potable water. The region is more of a transitioning avenue through which groups travel from their origins, escaping conflicts or land degradation, toward pasture, water, and security. If one were to walk through the plains of Samburu where pastoralists live, and then cross the gate into Kalama, it would be like entering another sphere of existence. Within the conservancy, the grass is long and lush and water is abundant. This shocking visual brings to light the human rights abuses inflicted on indigenous populations and calls anthropologists and tourists alike to critically examine what is meant by development and conservation.

The concept of 'fortress conservation' is often employed in discourse surrounding conservancies, and is criticized to be an approach which 'seeks to preserve wildlife and their habitat through forceful exclusion of local people who have traditionally relied on the environment in question for their livelihoods' (Brockington 2002). What exacerbates this deprivation further is that, through the conservancy, wildlife populations have increased which has also meant an increase in wildlife attacks on herds of livestock and on people. As stated by locals, the conservancy scouts and Kenyan Wildlife Services (KWS) appear to do little to resolve the human-animal conflict. Even killing an animal out of self defence results in arrest, and here, as in the case of Maasai Mara, lies the conflict between people and the state.

Literature which critically examines the pastoral-conservancy binary challenges the 'underlying assumption...that wildlife will generate sufficient income to justify its presence on private and

communal lands” (Homewood et al. 2009). Pastoralists in Illetukunyi facing severe drought have relied on the conservancy’s graces for provide access to drinking water and grazing areas, and while negotiations have been struck they do not come without conditions. With the competing interests within GR dynamics themselves and between pastoralists and the conservancies, it is difficult to gauge where a middle ground may be found. With regards to grazing rights conservancies in Maji Moto and in Samburu have allowed individuals to graze after dark to preserve the ‘authentic’ and ‘natural scenery’ of the African wilderness for tourists. During times of drought pastoralists become anxious to access the abundant resources preserved by the conservancy and sneak into conservancies at night which puts them at risk of enduring a fine from KES5000 to KES10, 000 for trespassing.

Conservancies and the narrative of conservation as development symbolize what Ferguson argued to be extensions of state power, and mechanisms to de-politicize resources rights (Ferguson 1994). The way that conservation sites treat pastoralist’s as an invasion on the natural scenery demonstrates the greed and disillusioning motivations of the conservancy’s, as well as the ways that the pure image that is fed to tourists is preserved to justify this sort of action. An imagined purity is placed on the ‘African wilderness’ which neglects the history of peoples who have lived there since time immemorial. It perpetuates the marginalization of pastoralists who are continually regarded as backward, destructive, and unproductive. Moreover, it disregards the way that pastoralists in Samburu or Maji Moto are vital attributes of the natural ecosystem. Nature preservation cannot eliminate the people that have helped to maintain the ecosystems through their traditional knowledge. This presentation of nature, and conservation eludes the public of the real issues, that of land grabbing that has carried on illegally for years, rendering hardworking, and innocent families landless. It ignores the corruption which profits off division, and environmental hardships. Further more, it paints a unidimensional picture of pastoral realities which deserve more critical analysis, understanding and empathy.

Conclusion

This paper has revealed, the way pastoralists have managed to surpass the demands and pressures of external governing bodies, economic interests, and cultural prescriptions. Instead they have managed to mould and absorb what change and influences are directed their way and translate them into something legible, and contextually significant. What this paper has come to demonstrate is not only the versatility of pastoral adaptation mechanisms, but that cultures are multifaceted and proponents of change. While some changes are not expressed in ways that align with blueprint modes of development nor, can they be legibly transcribed and applied to various scenarios, these changes have been directed by values and customs which speak to the economic, social, and political realities, as it should be. Hence the success of organizations like ILEPA, who take local language, and ideologies and transmit new ideas to groups through these means. They create a level playing field which provides greater autonomy and dignity and thus enables them to put their own development onto a trajectory that they've chosen. Albeit while conservancy's and development models may be well intended, they often neglect delving into further investigation as to how their programs may be received, and what the alternatives could look like. Furthermore, tourists and development activists need look critically at the essential questions of projects such as these: who is this truly benefitting?

Although environmental degradation and climate change is imminent, and the presence of corruption and imperial ideologies are ever present, for now, there is no question that the Maasai have proven their ability to adapt and continue to do so. Pastoralists have been confronted with challenges since time immemorial and continue to face those challenges and persist despite the odds. The purpose of this paper was to flesh out the challenges faced by Maasai pastoralist and those in the region of Samburu regarding environmental pressures, corruption, and subdivision, as well as the imposition of development narratives. My observations and understandings gained

through living in Kenya for two and a half months, along with my in-depth research in Maji Moto, and Samburu and working with the infallible team at ILEPA as broadened my understandings and challenged my preconceptions, which is the sort of enlightenment I hope to extend to readers Ultimately, with this understanding of cultural realities, and awareness of the knowledge that the Maasai have endured external encroachment, degradation, and threats to their way of life for decades, and yet in the face of this and imperial assumptions that seek to illegitimate, and nullify their livelihoods, they have remained the true keepers of the land.

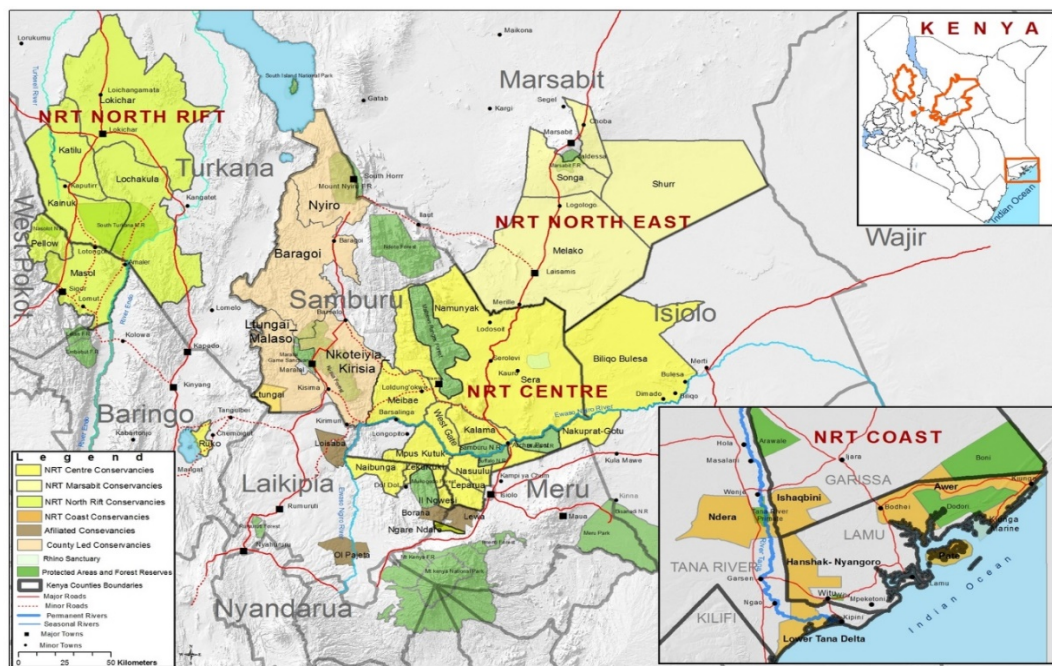
Images for reference



(Google Images: Maji Moto – Not far from Hot Springs, a more informal arrangement with borders separating plots, perhaps the beginnings of subdivision or at least privatization)



(Google Images: Maji Moto - A more formal example of implemented subdivision and land privatization)



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