

Politics over leadership: A case study of Loodokirani Maasai around the boundary between Kenya and Tanzania

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Most local communities in Africa have experienced rapid changes in social dynamics—such as the spread of eco-tourism, or democratization after the installation of an electoral system—which sometimes creates conflicts.

One such community is the Shompole Group Ranch (SGR). In 2000, a huge eco-lodge was built and a 10,000 ha wildlife conservancy was created, and they became important financial resources that have brought swift social changes to SGR. At the same time, the Kenyan government executed decentralization and also encouraged residents of SGR to enthusiastically support elections to select one local councilor from the community.



Photo 2. The eco-lodge made by naturally growing materials. The pale thatched roof blends well with the natural environment.



Photo 1. The pillar showing the border between Kenya and Tanzania. SGR is located in the southern part of Kenya, next to Tanzania.

With that background, a group of young people formed a committee that took leadership of SGR in 2009, and then tried to keep all the benefits from the abovementioned eco-lodge to themselves, claiming full legal authority over SGR and embezzling some of its public funds. They eventually led the lodge to bankruptcy and closure in September 2011, which led to a wedge between the young leaders and some elders in SGR, a wedge that grew deeper with

the campaign for the election that was held on March 4, 2013.

In my field research, first, I gathered information on the eco-lodge and the election, collecting documents and files to verify what happened in SGR. Second, I stayed with one of the elders at his home to observe how he negotiated with other people, how he tried to control them, and how he built good relationships with them to win back leadership from the young people.

I noticed that when he negotiated with other people and persuaded them, he often tried to take advantage of their ties based on the local age grade system and their clans.

Also, contrary to my first impression, he seemed to have a keen interest in pursuing good leadership and building peace in SGR rather than personal benefits or the benefit of his people. This elder's behavior seems to give this community a unique identity and raises further questions that I will try to address in my research so that I can better understand the features of politics of Maasai people.



Photo 3. A general meeting in SGR under a tree. The elders organized it for community issues.