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Mara H. Goldman. *Narrating Nature: Wildlife Conservation and Maasai Ways of Knowing*. The University of Arizona Press. 2020. (pp. 304). (ISBN: 978-0-8165-3967-3) \$ 60 USD Hardback

Decolonising Conservation Science and Practice in Tanzania

Based on ethnographic research that began in the 1990s, geographer Mara J. Goldman has written a groundbreaking book about Maasai ways of knowing, being and narrating nature-society relations in Northern Tanzania, in an area known as “Tarangire-Manyara Ecosystem” (TME). The book is situated in a context of a colonial and post-colonial history of conservation initiatives that have marginalised the Maasai in multiple ways. While the context will be familiar to many geographers, anthropologists, political ecologists and conservation biologists, the book offers a new way to look at some of the key themes in critical research about nature conservation.

Goldman contributes to a nascent but growing literature on political ecology of conservation that takes the recent calls for the decolonisation of conservation seriously by highlighting non-Western ontologies and epistemologies. She does that by giving people living with wildlife first row seats in the book instead of relegating them to her objects of research (also see West (2016) for a good example of how political ecologies can be narrated through the eyes of the locals). Yet this is not an essentialist and romantic embracement of indigenous knowledge, nor is it the usual political ecological critique of Western conservation science and practices. Rather, Goldman seeks to “create ontological openings for knowing and being with nature otherwise” (2020: 4). By letting Maasai speak for themselves (through a methodological trick, more on this below) the author shows how they radically question Western assumptions about nature and culture. The author thus goes beyond an epistemological critique of Western conservation science and she cautions against a simple integration of local ecological knowledge into Western scientific practice. Rather, Goldman seeks to contribute to the decolonisation of the *ontological* underpinnings of conservation science and practice.

The book experiments with an unusual writing style to foreground ontological, epistemological and methodological commitments to decolonisation. Three chapters are written in the style of storytelling to decentre the common academic writing where the narrator is the academic expert telling us how it is. Narratives by Maasai are placed front and center “to disrupt existing power dynamics that privilege Western ways of knowing, being, and narrating nature-society relations” (2020: 196). Importantly, Goldman does not simply reproduce actual dialogues held in meetings between Maasai and conservation scientists and practitioners. To promote a decolonial perspective, the author’s “fact and fiction”

storytelling seeks to suspend entrenched power relations from the dialogues and meetings so that the reader can imagine the “possibility that things could be otherwise” (2020: 21). In order to let Maasai and conservationists speak to each other as equals, Goldman has assembled fictional dialogues by drawing on factual information from actual interviews and published articles. This is an unusual approach that takes some time to get used to. At times, it threw me off as a reader and even irritated me, and perhaps this was the purpose. In the end, it paid off. Being familiar with the study area and the topic through my own research, I still learned a lot from the “fact and fiction” dialogues which provide a more intimate description of how Maasai “narrate nature”.

Chapter 1 highlights how knowledge about wildlife’s spatial and temporal patterns is always partial and can be a means of empowerment or disenfranchisement of the Maasai, depending on how they are involved in conservation planning. There is a politics of knowing where wildlife is, and what is done with this knowledge. By highlighting the difficulties in pinning down scientifically the complexity and variability of rain-drought patterns, wildlife movements, and animal and people behavior, the dialogue between Maasai and conservationists serves two purposes. It is an ontological opening “to know and be with wildlife differently” (2020: 64). And it challenges the usual scientific attempts to fix wildlife and people – and thus nature-society relations - in simplified spatial and temporal categories.

Chapter 2 highlights the mismatch between western map making practices and Maasai’s place-based spatial enactments (“place-names”) that are not and cannot be simply mapped cartographically. Goldman shows how decolonising conservation in the study area entails starting to take locally meaningful names for particular places seriously instead of referring to and relying on official conservation maps. Place-names help Maasai navigate land and resource use, commanding a deep, situated knowledge about the environment. However, the problem is that this knowledge remains marginalised in conservation science and does not make people living with wildlife to “experts”. The author shows how expertise in conservation is associated with positivist scientific training which is based on standardised methodologies which simplify complex socio-ecologies. This Western scientific knowledge may be inferior to local knowledge which is more attuned to understanding socio-ecological complexity. Although place-names generate a detailed mental map for Maasai, these place-names poorly match with and often cut across official administrative and conservation boundaries. Maasai constantly navigate administrative and conservation

boundaries and land use plans, *and* their own boundaries to make land use and resource management decisions. However, government and conservation authorities know little about Maasai boundaries, much less do they acknowledge and respect them.

Chapter 3 returns to a storytelling format to illustrate how a foreign tourism entrepreneur has sought to exploit participatory mechanisms for decision-making to push through a tourism camp on village land. The camp would benefit the businessman and selected village elites while it would undermine people's access to land and livestock's access to pasture. While this should be a familiar story to many who have studied the conservation-tourism nexus in East Africa, Goldman adds an important dimension by showing how Maasai's (female and male) deep knowledge about wildlife-livestock interactions, animal, soil and fire ecology, and resource availability across time and space allows them to critically assess potential consequences that conservation and tourism-related projects will have on rangeland dynamics in semi-arid environments. By letting local residents question and challenge a foreign investor in a "fact and fiction" meeting of equals, Goldman highlights how local ecological knowledge resonates with state-of-the-art rangeland science of East African nonequilibrium ecologies, while it can be at odds with knowledge that people with scientific training in conservation management hold. Showing how wildlife-livestock interactions can be mutually beneficial for both and how the boundary between wildlife and domestic animals shifts in time and space for the Maasai, this chapter ends with a thought-provoking challenge and question: can conservation social scientists and ecologists make an ontological shift and begin their research about animals as "animals", rather than as livestock and wildlife?

Chapter 4 highlights how Maasai do not draw strict ontological boundaries between wild and domestic, nature and society. This fluidity is assigned to animals, people, and places. Rainfall, fire, human resource use and livestock grazing jointly shape the degree of "wildness" of places for both people and livestock. Rather than trying to be modern (Latour 1993) by rearranging and reordering this socionature along fixed Cartesian boundaries of nature and culture, Maasai embrace these ontologically blurred environments through rituals, spirituality, and appropriate land and resource use practices. Inevitably, this ontological difference puts them at odds with state and conservation ideologies of fixed territorial separations for nature and culture.

Chapter 5 takes the reader back to another "fact and fiction" dialogue, this time in a meeting about wildlife corridors. Despite a great deal of (ontological and epistemological) uncertainty as to what constitutes a corridor, wildlife corridors have become popular with conservationists as a concept and an intervention to connect protected areas through village lands. The chapter illustrates how local people living with wildlife can critically engage conservationists and question their assumptions about the ontological and epistemological foundations of wildlife corridors. From a Maasai point of view, it makes little sense

to conceptualise wildlife movements between protected areas as 'corridors', given that wildlife, livestock, homesteads, and people are sharing the space together. This is not merely an ideological argument based in metaphysics of how Maasai would like nature-society relations to be. Rather, it is based on living with domestic and wild animals, and holding situated and embodied knowledge (Haraway 1998) about complex human-animal relations and ecologies.

The final chapters highlight how participatory processes in community-based conservation will only be genuinely inclusive and sincere if conservationists respect difference. This is not only a question of different identities, but also different knowledges, scientific or otherwise. Having done research in the same region, I read this book as a challenge to conservationists working in the Tarangire-Manyara Ecosystem (TME), but also beyond. (I have had some of my own experiences with challenging conservationists in the TME to embrace socio-ecological complexity as this recent exchange between Bond and Lee (2018) and Brehony et al (2018) illustrates). TME is one of the most intensively surveyed and studied places pertaining to wildlife population dynamics in Tanzania. However, scientific knowledge generated from regular animal surveys remains exclusive of Maasai ways of knowing despite the fact that they live with animals (domestic and wild) in the study area and have much to contribute to questions that keep conservationists up at night. *Narrating Nature* was written to turn a bright spotlight on this contradiction. To Goldman, it will take nothing less but the decolonisation of conservation if the gap is to be narrowed and eventually closed between how complex nature-society relations in Northern Tanzania are actually lived and how they are scientifically studied, written about, and intervened in.

I should mention two caveats. The experimental "fact and fiction" writing style may throw off some readers. Moreover, at times, I struggled to keep apart ontological from epistemological dimensions pertaining to lived and researched nature-society relations, partly because it was not always clearly spelled out, partly because both are intertwined. Nonetheless, conservation scientists across different subdisciplines will particularly benefit from this book, should they be willing to leave the ontological and epistemological comfort zone of positivist science to immerse themselves in Maasai socionatures.

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