CHAPTER 9

Hustling for Rights: Political Engagements with Sand in Northern Kenya

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Hustling means, like... it’s not only about money; you hustle even to get rights here in our area.
Young man from Laikipia North, May 2014

In the arid and semi-arid lands of Northern Kenya, young people are struggling to establish sustainable livelihood strategies in a context of prolonged and more frequent drought periods reducing pasture productivity, and a growing pressure on land due to new political and economic interests in the region (see, e.g., Fratkin 2013). Such altered livelihood strategies often constitute novel ways of relating to the environment, and sometimes catalyse altered forms of environmental agency. To people belonging to sedentary pastoralist communities in Laikipia North, one of the few possible livelihood options, apart from livestock rearing, is the harvesting and selling of sand from communally owned sand deposits in dry riverbeds. In this chapter I discuss how a group of young people trained as paralegals engage in negotiations regarding the management and use of sand. They call their way of operating ’hustling’, signifying a political practice characterized by improvisation, drawing on eclectic forms of knowledge, doing things in a ’young’ and ’urban’ way, the bending of rules and the use of a multiplicity of tactics, the intertwinement of personal and communal interests and the constant negotiation of ambiguous positions of autonomy and dependency. Through an exploration of the empirical term ’hustling’ and its use in relation to negotiations over sand management, I aim to shed light on young people’s experiences and conceptualizations of their political agency with regard to the environment.

In Kenyan national discourse, young people’s environmental agency and political participation is often phrased in negative terms. Young people in general are considered active participants in environmental degradation (e.g.,
Republic of Kenya 2007, 25), and young men from pastoralist communities in Northern Kenya are seen as initiators of environmental conflicts such as cattle raids and fights over pasture and water, and as actors who are easily manipulated into ethnic political violence. Based on anthropological contributions to the study of the environment, politics and youth, I suggest a more nuanced way of exploring and understanding how young people engage politically with the environment and natural resources.

As a natural resource whose status and exploitation occupy the minds and time of a large group of young people in Laikipia North, sand provides an interesting window into young people's environmental agency. I approach sand with inspiration from newer anthropological contributions to the study of natural resources and materials which regard the properties of materials as processual and relational rather than “objectively determined” or “subjectively imagined” (Ingold 2011, 30; see also Richardson and Weszkalnys 2014). In Laikipia North, sand occupies an ambiguous position, sometimes dealt with as a natural resource or “commodified nature” (Richardson and Weszkalnys 2014, 10), sometimes as part of a wider natural and cultural landscape. This ambiguity releases a range of political negotiations of social relations touching upon gender, generation, community and state. My approach to politics is based on an anthropological tradition which focuses on politics “beyond the boundaries of the state” (Curtis and Spencer 2012, 173) and as situated in the practices of everyday life (see, e.g., de Certeau 1984; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Scott 2008). I approach everyday life politics from the viewpoint of phenomenologically inspired anthropology (e.g., Jackson 1996), thus attempting to capture how young people in a particular place and time period experience their political engagements. However, as suggested in Tsing’s writings, local environmental struggles link up to trans-local and global ideas and practices (e.g., Tsing 2005, ix). With inspiration from Tsing’s ideas on travelling knowledge, I suggest that the everyday life political practices of young people in Laikipia North involve drawing eclectically on global ideas and practices. Understanding how such ideas and practices are brought into use in relation to specific environmental issues requires attention to young people’s contextual positioning. Contemporary African youth research points out that local understandings of a young person in Africa seldom refer to actual age, but to a person in a life stage where he or she possesses little or no power and authority, and is socially dependent on adults (see, e.g., Christiansen, Utas and Vigh 2006; de Boeck and Honwana 2005; Durham 2000; Vigh 2006). As opposed to, for instance, much policy discourse, which depicts young people as individuals with

1 Personal communication with various government officers and NGO representatives, see also Greiner 2013.