

Livelihood and Conservation in Guinea-Bissau's National Parks: A Photographic Essay

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Abstract

Guinea-Bissau is one of the poorest countries in the world, but has a wealth of biodiversity. In this context, a particularly interesting case study is the Urok Maritime Community Protected Area, whose creation in 2005 involved the setting up of multi-scalar governance structures and mechanisms that have fostered participatory democracy. Many eyes are set on this experiment in the political ecology of conservation.

Author's Note

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1. Introduction

A small West African country lying in the transition zone between arid grassland and tropical forestland, Guinea-Bissau comprises several characteristic biotopes, from mangroves and palm tree forests to the Guinean savannah-forest mosaic. In addition to their importance as a source of human livelihood, many of these areas are home to a variety of important and protected species, including salt-water hippos, manatees, elephants, chimpanzees, and rare bird and plant species.

With the stated aim of ensuring the protection of biodiversity and the rational and equitable use of natural resources, five natural parks and protected areas, covering a total area of around 5,000 km², were established in the early 2000s. The establishment of a sixth one, Cantanhez Forest, is currently underway. All of these areas have long been inhabited - with varying but moderate density - by human communities, mostly belonging to the country's various Animist ethnic groups. It is usually the case that rules governing the management of natural resources have endogenously evolved within these communities and gradually acquired a sacred character. The dynamic balance in terms of the relationship between local human

communities and nature has therefore long rested on a complex set of norms, practices and rituals that may include, for example, the rotating use of uninhabited islands for rice cultivation, or the interdiction of selling or trading in molluscs.

That this dynamic balance is being increasingly subject to exogenous strains, not least by virtue of climate change, population increase and the creation and penetration of markets, is part of the reason behind the creation of the protected areas. However, the relationship between the practices and norms of the local communities and the conservation regulations and mechanisms laid down by the State is itself not always harmonious, and the conflicts that sometimes arise can enormously increase the difficulty of reconciling conservation objectives with the interests of the human communities that inhabit these areas.

Moreover, Guinea-Bissau is one of the poorest countries in the world, and its state capacity is significantly constrained by the slim tax base, the lack of an adequately trained and motivated bureaucracy, and the dismantling of government structures in the context of the structural adjustment programmes, in the late 1980s. It is therefore not surprising that the government faces a tremendous capability gap when it comes not only to upholding conservation regulations, but also to engaging local communities in decision-making processes and providing compensation mechanisms that might ensure more favourable outcomes.

In this context, a particularly interesting case is that of the Urok Maritime Community Protected Area, whose creation in 2005 involved the setting up of multi-scalar governance structures and mechanisms that have fostered participatory democracy in this island complex and thereby seemingly enhanced the park's beneficial impact for the resident population. Many eyes are set on this experiment in the political ecology of conservation, in the hope that it might not only advance the twin aims of ecological conservation and livelihood advancement, but also add to the pool of knowledge available to others on how to do it.

2. Essay



Photo 1: Rapids on the Corubal river at Saltinho

The chief features of the physical geography of Guinea-Bissau are its rivers, estuaries and low-lying plains. The Corubal River, seen here in the vicinity of the Lagoas de Cufada Natural Park, provides food, irrigation and transport to the communities that live near its shores.



Photo 2: Full moon over the city of Cacheu

Cacheu was once the capital of the Portuguese colony of Guinea-Bissau. The city's political and economic significance has consistently waned since those days, but from 2000 onwards it has housed the headquarters of the Tarrafes do Rio Cacheu Natural Park.



Photo 3: Felupe celebration in Bolor, Tarrafes do Rio Cacheu Natural Park

The Tarrafes do Rio Cacheu Natural Park constitutes a part of the homeland of the Felupe (also known as Diola) ethnic group, which straddles Northern Guinea-Bissau and Southern Senegal. Like most other Guinea-Bissau's ethnic groups inhabiting the coastal areas, the Felupe are Animists.



Photo 4: Docking area in Bolor, Tarrafes do Rio Cacheu Natural Park

The predominant ecosystem in the Tarrafes do Rio Cacheu Natural Park consists of mangrove, of which the park comprises the largest uninterrupted block in West Africa. Mangrove is seen here on the left and in the background, behind a baobab tree.



Photo 5: Portrait of Felupe young men during a celebration in Bolor, Tarrafes do Rio Cacheu Natural Park

Pursuing objectives and fulfilling expectations on the interface between an evolving 'tradition' and encroaching 'modernity' poses significant challenges to local youths.

The prospects of a better life in Bissau, or in more developed Senegal to the North, constitute a powerful attraction for many.



Photo 6: Felupe elders in Bolor, Tarrafes do Rio Cacheu Natural Park

Among Guinea-Bissau's Animist ethnic groups, including the Felupe, initiation rituals and ceremonies constitute key milestones in the individual's life cycle. On certain occasions, these rituals involve entering the forest for extended periods, during which youth are trained and socialised by elders invested with specific social-ceremonial roles.



Photo 7: Meio Island, João Vieira-Poilão Natural Park

The Bolama-Bijagós Archipelago, which was awarded the status of UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 1995, comprises three of the country's natural parks or reserves: João Vieira-Poilão, Orango and Urok. The João Vieira-Poilão Maritime Natural Park, which includes Meio Island (seen here), is considered the most important nesting site in the Eastern Atlantic for the green sea turtle (*Chelonia Midas*).



Photo 8: Bijagós children in Canhabaque, Bijagós Archipelago

Although the island of Canhabaque is not officially a part of the João Vieira-Poilão Natural Park, the two areas maintain very close social-ecological linkages: traditional ownership and management of the natural resources in the islands that comprise the João Vieira-Poilão Natural Park rest with four autochthonous communities based on the island of Canhabaque.



Photo 9: Children by the fire in Cantanhez Forest

With an estimated population of about 20,000 people, Cantanhez Forest is the most heavily populated of all the areas subject to conservation intervention in Guinea-Bissau. By virtue of its remoteness and inaccessibility, it also experiences significant problems in terms of the access to health, education, agricultural markets and employment. Pursuing conservation objectives without penalising an already disadvantaged population constitutes a challenge, for which there are more questions than answers.



Photo 10: Dawn in Cantanhez Forest

Cantanhez Forest, whose process of conversion into a natural park is currently underway, constitutes the northernmost end of West Africa's stretch of tropical

forest. Among other species, it is home to a sizeable population of chimpanzees, which are particularly active just after sunrise.



Photo 11: Forest guides in Cantanhez Forest

Although tourism is still an incipient reality in Guinea-Bissau, it is expected that it could eventually become an important source of income- and employment-generating opportunities. It is hoped in a way that does not jeopardise social-ecological equilibria. The forest guides seen here were trained in the context of a local development project in Cantanhez Forest.



Photo 12: Ancadaque village, Formosa Island, Urok Maritime Community Protected Area

The Urok Maritime Community Protected Area was set up in 2005 and is especially remarkable for its participatory governance structures and mechanisms, including regularly-held Island Assemblies, Youths' Fora, Elders' Fora, etc. The overall aim is to involve the local population in the decision-making process so as to cater to its needs and demands, and raise the level of local ownership of the conservation process.



Photo 13: Sunset over the mangrove, Formosa Island, Urok Maritime Community Protected Area

The Urok Island Complex comprises three nearly adjacent islands and a larger number of islets and shoals. The regulations of the Maritime Community Protected Area divide the maritime area of the park into three types of zones, whose outline was determined with the involvement of the local population: (i) zones for the exclusive use of the local population; (ii) zones accessible to all, including fishermen coming in from the outside; and (iii) no-fishing areas, destined for the recovery and reproduction of the species.



Photo 14: Beach landing in Nago Island, Urok Maritime National Park

The lack of options in terms of transportation is one of the main problems affecting the population of the Bijagós Archipelago, as most islands and villages are only served by occasional pirogues. This penalises the cost structure of exports, increases the price of imports and significantly compromises access to healthcare, education and other goods and services.



Photo 15: Extracting palm oil from the fruits of palm trees, Urok Maritime National Park

Operating at near-subsistence output levels in the context of relatively small and isolated communities, most Bijagós households opt for diversification as a resilience strategy: with very few exceptions, most households combine the practice of itinerant agriculture with the exploitation of forest products, fishing and animal breeding, occasionally complemented by small-scale commerce or crafts production. Achieving output gains without the compounded risk and disaggregation that comes with specialisation and the change in social-productive relations is the challenge confronting economic development initiatives undertaken under the umbrella of conservation.

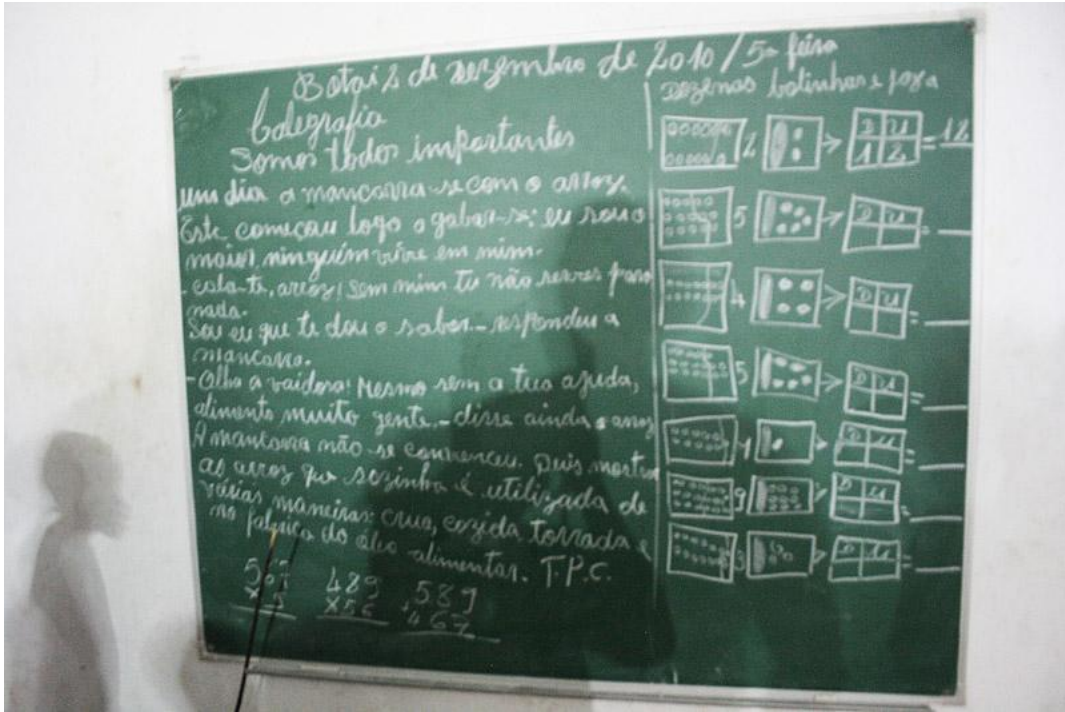


Photo 16: Blackboard at the community school in Botai, Nago Island, Urok Maritime National Park

One of the main domains in which the autochthonous population of the Urok Island Complex has benefited the most from the creation and operation of the Community Maritime Protected Area is education: half a dozen primary and elementary schools have been built or substantially improved in these islands, drawing on funding from foreign assistance in addition to the communities' own resources.