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Beware the animals that dance: Conservation as an unintended outcome of cultural practices

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Abstract

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) World Parks Congress of 2003 and the Conference of Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) of 2004 call for the recognition and support of Community Conserved Areas, with the CBD Programme of Work on Protected Areas committing countries to take action by 2008. Both within protected areas and in the matrix of land beyond reserves, customs and beliefs of indigenous and local communities can yield conservation benefits. Identifying an intention to conserve by the custodians of customary conserved areas can be challenging as customary practices are embedded within a myriad of cosmologies and worldviews. However, the definition of Community Conserved Areas does not require an expressed intention to conserve nor does it specify the mechanisms by which nature or natural resources can be conserved. Thus, conservation as an unintended outcome of cultural practices is included within the scope of community conservation. Fieldwork was conducted in Sabah, Malaysian Borneo, from October 2010 to April 2011. Data for the case study of Gumantong comes from an interview with Porodong Mogilin, Native Chief Representative of Matunggong Native Court in Bavanggazo, Kudat and meetings of community leaders from the 13 villages surrounding Gumantong. This paper 1) employs the case study of Gumantong in Sabah, Malaysian Borneo, to highlight the distinction between communities expressing an intention to conserve and conservation as an unintended outcome of cultural practices and 2) considers the implications of this distinction for the process of recognizing and supporting Community Conserved Areas.

Keywords: Customary conservation, Community Conserved Area, ICCA, intention to conserve, cultural practices, indigenous

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Introduction

Over twelve percent of the Earth's land surface is formally conserved as inter alia, protected areas, forest reserves, and national parks. Both within these protected areas and in the matrix of land use beyond, customary practices of indigenous and local communities[1] can yield conservation benefits. Customary conservation can provide ecosystem services such as hosting pollinators, watershed protection, and serving as refugia for wildlife in the landscape (Bhagwat, Kushalappa, Williams and Brown, 2005). In addition to their conservation value, customary conservation can add low-cost community-based conservation to landscapes saturated with protected areas (Borrini-Feyerabend and Kothari, 2008). However, customary conserved areas often lack formal recognition and face threats due to human-induced global change (Verschuuren, McNeely, Wild and Oviedo, 2010). In Malaysian Borneo, customary conserved areas that lack government-recognised land tenure are threatened by infrastructure projects and agro-development schemes (K.T.S. Group, 2011).

The growing understanding of the conservation value of customary conserved areas and their potential contribution to the contemporary conservation framework has led to the integration of Areas Conserved by Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (ICCAs[2]) with governmental conservation plans and policies (Borrini-Feyerabend and Kothari, 2008). The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) World Parks Congress of 2003 and the Conference of Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) of 2004 call for the recognition and support of Community Conserved Areas, with the CBD Programme of Work on Protected Areas committing countries to take action by 2008 (Kothari, 2006). Responding to the CBD's call for action, a collaboration in Sabah, Malaysian Borneo, of a global non-profit organization (Global Diversity Foundation) and regional government conservation agencies (Sabah Biodiversity Centre and Sabah Parks) explore opportunities to support

[1] "Community" is a simplistic term used in this paper to denote self-regulating groups of natural resource users for wont of a better term. The value of this term has been debated (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999).

[2] "ICCA" is used in the literature to refer to both "Areas Conserved by Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities" and "Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas and Territories", often shortened to "Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas". "CCAs" refer to "Community Conserved Areas", however the definition also includes indigenous peoples (see page 5 for a full definition). Although these terms can be used interchangeably, in this paper the term is chosen to reflect the literature being discussed.

ICCAs within Sabah's legal environment and policy framework (Majid Cooke and Vaz, 2011).

Protected areas are created with the expressed purpose of conserving nature and/or natural resources. Although customary conserved areas exhibit conservation value, in some cases their conservation may be an unintended outcome of beliefs and practices potentially unrelated to nature conservation or the management of natural resources. Borrini-Feyerabend, Kothari and Oviedo (2004, p.51) note that "the voluntary management decisions and efforts of such communities lead towards the conservation of habitats, species, ecological services and associated cultural values, although the protection status may have been set up to meet a variety of objectives, not necessarily related to the conservation of biodiversity". A review of resource and habitat taboos by Colding and Folke (2001, p.584) finds that taboos "do not necessarily proceed from environmental concerns or origins", however their form mirrors those of contemporary conservation analogs.

Conservation as an unintended outcome of cultural practices

The effects of cultural practices on the environment are variable; some practices degrade the environment or unsustainably utilise natural resources, some have a negligible effect, and others act to conserve the environment. This paper acknowledges that cultural practices conserving the environment comprise customary conservation and seeks to avoid the description of those practising customary conservation as "ecologically noble savages" (Redford, 1991). Both customary conservation and Western conservation comprise value-laden belief systems and neither are rooted in an absolute understanding of the natural world and the role of humans within it (Angermeier, 2000).

Smith and Wishnie (2000, p.493) propose: "to qualify as conservation, any action or practice must not only prevent or mitigate resource overharvesting or environmental damage, it must also be designed to do so". However, identifying the intentionality or design behind purported conservation actions can be especially challenging within the myriad of cosmologies and worldviews that comprise customary conservation (Mulder and Coppolillo, 2005). Hunn (1982) as cited in Smith and Wishnie (2000) describes examples that lack intentionality or design as epiphenomenal conservation, or conservation as an unintended by-product of factors such as low population densities, limited technologies and limited demand of resources.

The IUCN (2003, p.202) defines Community Conserved Areas as "natural and modified ecosystems including significant biodiversity, ecological services and

cultural values voluntarily conserved by indigenous and local communities through customary laws or other effective means". This definition describes Community Conserved Areas by the observable outcome of a resource being "voluntarily conserved" and describes the conservation mechanism as "customary laws or *other effective means*" (emphasis added). Thus, in addition to an expressed intention to conserve nature and/or natural resources, this definition includes conservation as an unintended outcome of cultural practices. Outcome-based definitions of conservation do not require an expressed intention to conserve nor do they specify the mechanisms by which nature/ natural resources can be conserved.

This paper 1) employs the case study of Gumantong in Sabah, Malaysian Borneo, to highlight the distinction between communities expressing an intention to conserve and conservation as an unintended outcome of cultural practices and 2) considers the implications of this distinction for the process of recognizing and supporting Areas Conserved by Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (ICCAs).

Methods

Fieldwork was conducted in Sabah, Malaysian Borneo, from October 2010 to April 2011, following a 6-week pilot trip in Sabah and Sarawak from June to August 2010. The research employed key informant interviews, oral and written questionnaires, scientific and grey literature reviews, as well as ethnographic tools including participant observation on-site and at conservation planning and capacity building workshops. The primary data for the case study of Gumantong comes from an interview with Porodong Mogilin, Native Chief Representative of Matunggong Native Court in Bavanggazo, Kudat and meetings of community leaders from the 13 villages surrounding Gumantong. Dr. Paul Porodong facilitated access and served as a Rungus translator in Kudat. A well-respected native of Bavanggazo, one of the villages surrounding Gumantong, his close ties with the village and interviewee enabled frank discussion and minimised reporting error due to inter alia, access and control issues and power inequalities between researcher and interviewee.

Gumantong: Beware the animals that dance

The landscape of the Rungus people in Kudat, northern Malaysian Borneo, includes puru, patches of forest approximately one hectare in size and inhabited by rogon (spirits).

Appell (1995) observes that in addition to protecting small patches of forest from conversion to agriculture, puru may include springs or water sources. Rungus community members from five local villages jointly observe the most celebrated puru of the region, which caps the highest hill, Gumantong. Porodong Mogilin, Native Chief Representative of Matunggong Native Court, relates that in the first half of the 20th century, locals believed that if someone entered the Gumantong puru, the animals there would dance. If the person laughed, they would die instantly on the spot, and if they kept quiet, they would die once they returned home (Mogilin, 2011). Within the Rungus Spirit World, the dancing animals are considered kopizo, or omens, who explain to the trespasser he is dying because he has caused religious offence in breaking the strict prohibitions against entering the area (Porodong, 2010) (Figure 1). The Rungus avoided the dancing animals on the hilltop at all costs, which in turn conserved the water catchment area of the local villages. It is unclear whether the belief in the dancing animals was originally adopted with conservation of the watershed in mind, as the intentionality behind the belief was not expressed as part of the oral history.

In the mid-20th century, the Rungus people converted to Christianity and began to clear puru for agriculture, claiming that Christianity is stronger than the forest spirits (Mogilin, 2011). As the puru disappeared, the groundwater level dropped and local villages became dependent on government-supplied water. A British team surveying Gumantong included Iban people, an ethnic group from the interior with a reputation of headhunting. The Iban were not afraid of the dancing animals on Gumantong and hunted and ate them (Mogilin, 2011). Thus, the belief in the dancing animals that protected Gumantong was corroded as locals observed the actions of visiting outsiders.

Despite the loss of the belief in the dancing animals in the mid-20th century, at the end of the century local communities prevented the Forest Department from clearing Gumantong's forest to plant a fast-growing exotic, Acacia mangium (Kothari, 2006). Although Kudat was formerly a mosaic of mature and fallow secondary rainforest, today the landscape of Kudat is primarily a monoculture of Acacia mangium due to its widespread planting in the 1980s by the Sabah Forestry Development Authority (SAFODA) for pulp production (Turnbull, Midgley and Cossalter, 1998, cited in Porodong, 2010, p.24-25). The spread of Acacia was enabled by the pervasive use of fire in swidden agriculture, as fire catalyzes the germination of buried Acacia mangium seeds. Acacia mangium has also been shown to out-compete native species such as Melastoma (Osunkoya, Farah and Rafhiah, 2005, cited in Porodong, 2010, p.24-25). When

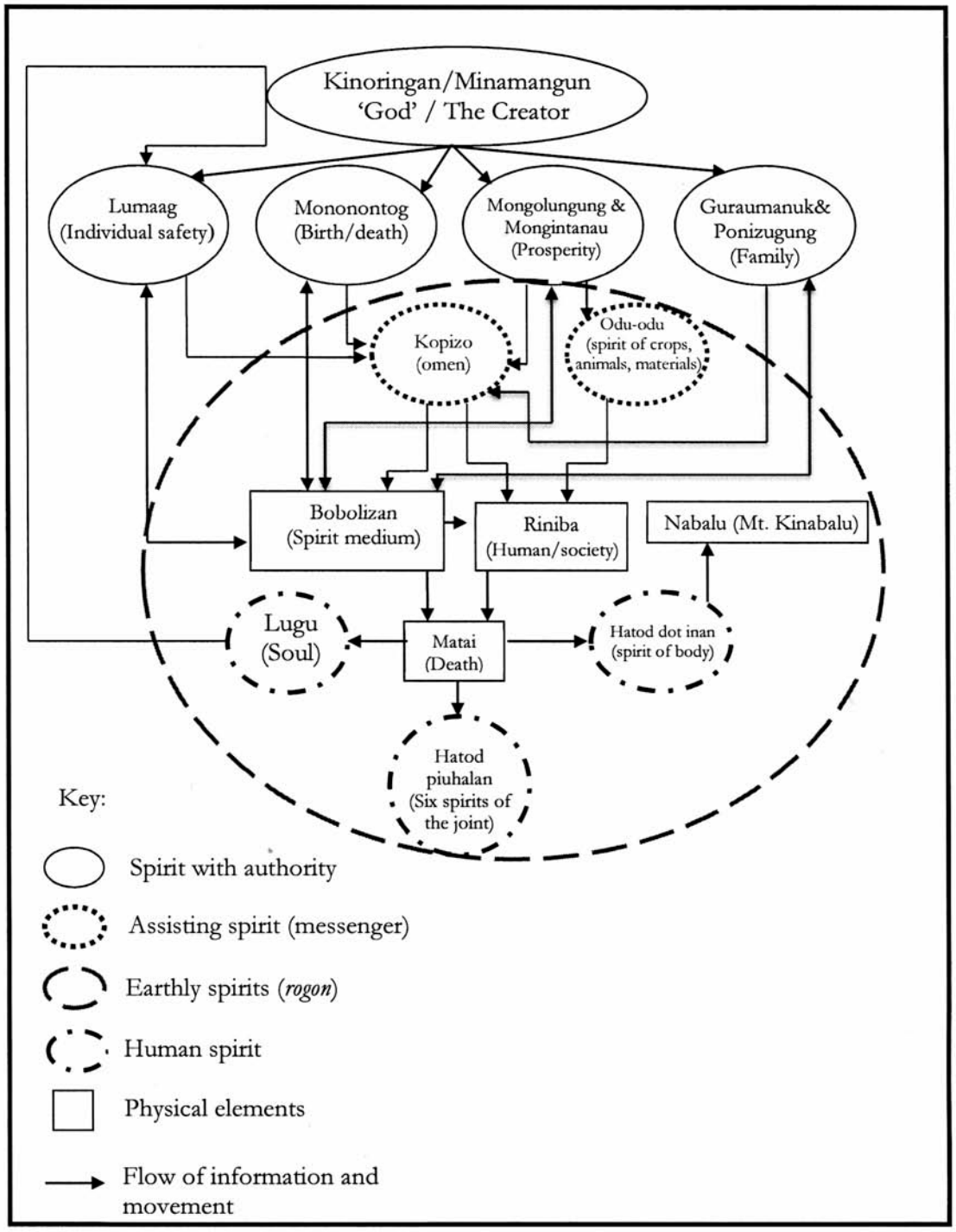

Figure 1. Rungus Spirit World (Reproduced from Porodong, 2010)

protesting the proposed clearing of Gumantong for the planting of Acacia mangium, the communities surrounding Gumantong expressed concern that the exotic species would dry up their water source. To conserve the hilltop, these communities partnered with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) on Climate Change. The villages recently learned that the Forest Department gazetted a 590-hectare area including Gumantong as a Forest

Reserve Class 1 (Watershed) in 2007 without informing the village chiefs or native court chiefs representing the 13 communities and 3,000 villagers. The villages have subsequently registered a complaint with the Chief Minister of Sabah and have proposed Gumantong be recognized as an Indigenous Peoples' and Community Conserved Area (ICCA) (Sabah Publishing House, 2011).

Recognizing Conservation as an Unintended Outcome of Cultural Practices

Since the late 20th century, village leaders around Gumantong have expressed an intention to conserve the hilltop by the aforementioned partnership with the UNDP Climate Change Programme, protesting the Forest Department's proposal to plant Acacia mangium, and proposing the recognition of Gumantong as an ICCA. Conversely, at the start of the 20th century, the hilltop and corresponding watershed were conserved as an unintended outcome of the belief in the dancing animals. This distinction between areas intentionally conserved and areas conserved as an unintended outcome of cultural practices holds implications for the process of recognising and supporting Community Conserved Areas within the framework of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

As demonstrated in the case of Gumantong, beliefs and practices comprising customary conservation are not static, but rather evolve as a natural part of cultural change and adaptation. The introduction of Iban outsiders eroded the local belief in the dancing animals of Gumantong and the conversion to Christianity enabled the clearing of puru in the landscape for agriculture. Mulder and Coppolillo (2005, p.111) note that "where the positive conservation outcome is unintentional, it becomes critical to determine what institutions or practices are responsible for this outcome, and how these might be affected (or bolstered) by social and ecological changes". In cases of conservation as an unintended outcome outcome of cultural practices, communities may not strive to retain conservation value in the face of social and ecological changes, as conservation may not have been an intention in the first place.

Recognizing and supporting ICCAs can help retain conservation value in the face of social and ecological changes, however there is a risk of imposing conservation agendas on local custodians who conserve as an unintended outcome of cultural practices. Negative social impacts of imposing conservation on local communities have included the restriction of land use and the loss of management rights (West and Brockington, 2006). Even in cases where land use and management rights are unchanged, formally describing an area as "conserved" may alter local perceptions of rights and ownership (Pathak, 2006).

The process of recognizing and supporting ICCAs must acknowledge that communities may have had negative experiences or hold preconceptions of formal conservation and must include safeguards to ensure the autonomy of local custodians (Kothari, 2006). In the case of ICCAs where conservation is an unintended outcome of cultural practices, the conservation value of their practices must be sensitively discussed with communities before raising the option of their opportunity to identify the area as an ICCA.

Borrini-Feyerabend, Kothari and Oviedo (2004, p.71) acknowledge the potential temptation of conservation agencies to identify ICCAs on their own, proposing instead: the "legal recognition of a Community Conserved Area should be pursued only at the request of the concerned community, and with its prior informed consent". However, communities that conserve as an unintended outcome of cultural practices may not recognize the opportunity to include their areas within this framework, as conservation is not their expressed purpose. Thus communicating to local custodians the breadth of the definition of Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas and the diversity of mechanisms contributing to conservation, including conservation as an unintended outcome of cultural practices, should form a key component of the process of recognizing and supporting ICCAs (Figure 2).

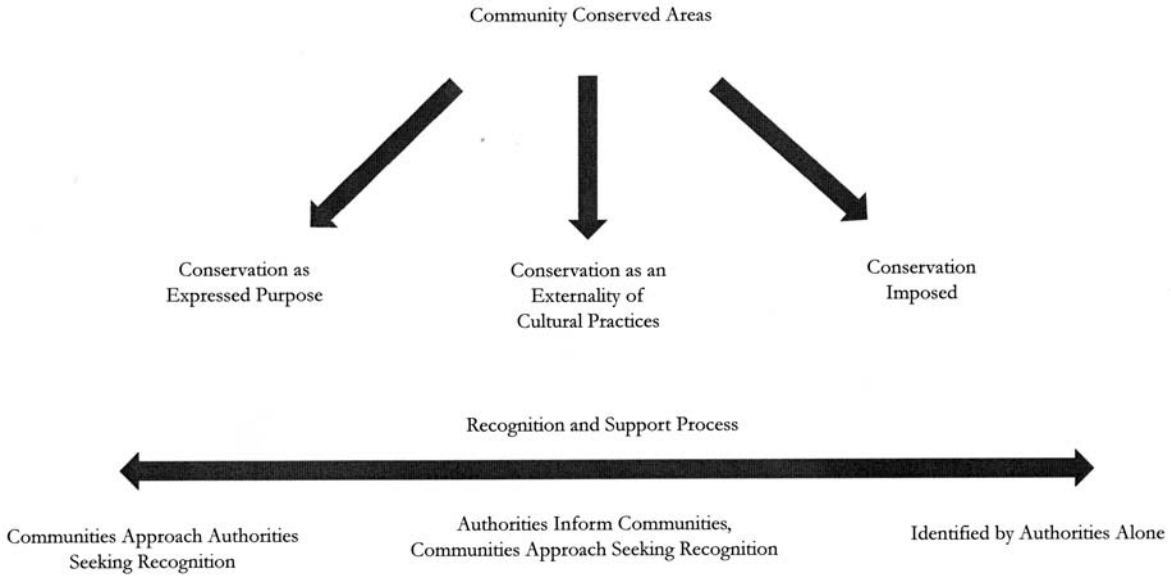

Figure 2. Intentionality of conservation of Community Conserved Areas and the recognition and support process

This paper highlights that both conservation as an expressed intention and conservation as an unintended outcome of communities' cultural practices fall within the scope of ICCAs. This distinction is raised to note the benefits and

challenges inherent in recognizing and supporting ICCAs where conservation is an unintended outcome of cultural practices. As governments begin to formally recognize and support Community Conserved Areas within the framework of the Convention on Biological Diversity, ICCAs where conservation is an unintended outcome of communities' cultural practices require tailored approaches in the recognition process. Research and monitoring designed with this distinction in mind will contribute to a new paradigm of community conservation: one that 1) acknowledges indigenous people and local communities who conserve as an unintended outcome of cultural practices, 2) supports their conservation in the face of social and ecological changes, and 3) recognizes the autonomy of local custodians in the process.

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