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## **„We protect our park“**

Negotiating spaces, identities and institutions in Pendjari National Park (Benin)

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### Summary

The dissertation focuses on the Pendjari National Park in northern Benin, founded as an animal protection area in 1954 under French colonial rule. Since then it has been object of often conflictual negotiations between different groups of neighboring dwellers, such as peasants, herdsmen and hunters, as well as the park administration itself. Based on ethnographic observations during 19 months of fieldwork and a detailed analysis of their interactions, the dissertation investigates how different groups of actors have constructed the park as a socially relevant entity. The main focus is on the construction of spaces, identities and institutions, which are closely interconnected.

The core of the study is an extended case study of the attempts at cooperation between the park administration and local hunters. They (re-)negotiate the space of the park, which local hunters consider to be a hunting ground and domain of spirits, while park administrators and international development actors see it as a zone of state-protected biodiversity. These differing spatial imaginations are connected to specific norm and values: while the park administration legitimizes the protection of nature with reference to laws and legal norms, the local hunters feel responsible towards local authorities and the spirit world.

The identities of local hunters, closely linked both to their use of the space of the national park as well as to associated norms and values, have been fundamentally altered through their interactions and negotiations with the park administration: characterized as *local hunters* before the establishment of the park, they came to be labeled as *poachers* soon after. It is only since they have become involved in the parks' surveillance service that they are identified, and identify themselves, as *local professional hunters*. This is clearly demonstrated both in narratives on regional history as well as in ethnographic observations about everyday interactions. Before the foundation of the national park, hunters were highly respected for their role in discovering new settlement sites and defending their villages against outside enemies and colonial troops. Furthermore, they were providers of bush-meat, which is very prestigious in the local context. Last but not least, they were respected for their courage in facing the dangers of the hunt, such as encountering the spirits of animals and of the bush which, in the local imaginary, are considered potential sources of magical power. Since the establishment of the park and the radical exclusion of dwellers (fortress conservation), however, they were declared "poachers to be fought" by the administration. This new identity as illegal hunter was adopted over the time by communities adjoining the park and even by the hunters themselves. It was only with the turn to new participatory administrative structures in the 1990s, and especially the incorporation of hunters into the park surveillance system, that the hunters' identity was again transformed: they became "local professional hunters".

The implementation of the participatory approach by the park administration and the subsequent integration of new forms of interaction with the hunters reveals the strong influence of international development actors and discourses on local processes. As a consequence of the “participatory turn” new institutions were established, such as a hunters’ association, and new approaches to surveillance were developed. The dissertation assesses the stability of those new institutions by drawing on Ostrom’s design principles. By showing how the national park and related spaces, identities, norms, values and institutions are socially produced, the analysis contributes to recent debates in the field of human-environment interaction and especially political ecology. Moreover, the dissertation may be of relevance to practitioners working in protected areas such as national parks as it offers complex insights and practical recommendations regarding participatory approaches to the management of natural resources.