

DEFENDERS OF THE WOODS? WOMEN AND THE COMPLEX DYNAMICS OF A WORKER-PEASANTRY IN WESTERN ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT

One winter day in 2006, conflict ensued between firewood vendors (selling wood to passing motorists and also supplying bulk quantities to cities), on the one hand, and a group of predominantly women (and others sympathetic to their grievances), on the other. The group confiscated firewood displayed for sale and stockpiles waiting for transportation. Any attempt to explain these acts is often marred by the appeal of ecofeminist discourses on women and the environment and the neo-Malthusian environment, population and conflict thesis. This article seeks to provide an alternative explanation by focusing rather, on the complex dynamics of a worker-peasantry and the circumstances of women in migrant labour societies. An ethnographic research on villages that participated on the demonstration reveals how male labour migrancy created a social arena where women assumed key roles at both the household and society levels on behalf of the absent men. It highlights how the circumstances of the women intersected with the particular socio-cultural and natural environment of a migrant labour reserve, resulting in responsibilities and agency through which certain practices that threatened societal interests were challenged.

Key words: ecofeminism, labour migrancy, women, worker-peasantry, Zimbabwe

INTRODUCTION

During one winter morning in 2006, a group of predominantly women (and others sympathetic to their grievances) from villages on the southern fringes of the former Shangani Reserves – between the Gwayi River and the Gwayi/Shangani rivers watershed forest, under Chief Mabhikwa Khumalo of Lupane District, in western Zimbabwe – organised and participated in what they termed at the time, an ‘environmental cleansing ritual’. They marched along the A8 Highway and into the forest, confiscating firewood displayed for sale on the roadside and the stockpiles still in the forest awaiting transportation to the markets in the city. Environmental cleansing, mostly related to rainmaking, is common practice in this region, and is often performed when dry spells persist for longer periods as an intervention to bring back the rains (see Nyathi 2008). In this case cleansing is concomitant to rainmaking. The ritual is initiated by community elders and led by spirit mediums (*amawosana*) at the local *motolo* or rain shrine, and performed mostly by men through a ritual known as *ukwebul’ ingxoza* or ‘debarking a tree’ (Nyathi 2008). The actual cleansing is focused on specific elements like exposed animal bones, cobwebs, nests of certain species of birds, and trees that were struck down by lightning, which are gathered and destroyed in fire (*ibid*).

But the environmental cleansing of that winter day was different in many respects from the customary rainmaking: no spirit medium (*iwosana*) was involved, no ritual was performed, and more importantly, it mostly involved women.¹ Furthermore, the focus was on people – the firewood vendors. These firewood vendors, mostly men, who harvested firewood from remnants left after the logging companies had extracted commercial timber, had operated from the roadside for nearly half a decade without incidents. What, one hazards to ask then, changed that winter day in 2006? At first glance, there is surely no shortage of answers with two in particular having greater appeal: On the one hand are the dominant discourses on women and environment with their emphasis on women’s natural closeness to nature, and therefore responding to the evident dwindling of the forest and even the felling of live trees, and on the other, the recourse to neo-Malthusian-type explanations relating to overall population growth, but with the number of vendors increasing in response to growth in urban demand for fuel. It would be ridiculous to pretend that elements of these two had no relevance in this case. However, I suggest that it is necessary to search for explanations in the complex dynamics of a worker-peasantry and how women as *de facto* heads of households make every-day household and societal decisions.

In order to clarify and thereby expand our understanding of these events, this paper reflects on the contextual situation of the two sets of key actors – the women demonstrators and the male vendors. In migrant labour societies like those of the former reserves, families are divided – men secure land rights by leaving wives and children on the land and seek

work in the cities. This situation has created a social arena where women assume key roles at both the household and society levels on behalf of the absent men. In my reflections on the context I emphasise in particular how women wives left behind to safeguard men's interests, managed to work around the enormous socio-economic costs associated with divided families and absent men to engage in short, medium and long term decisions relating to the household, farm and society. This element of the worker-peasantry equation is the focus of this paper. My analysis therefore concentrates more on how the circumstances of the women intersected with the particular socio-cultural and natural environment of a migrant labour reserve, creating some form of social identity and responsibility through which certain popular stereotypes about women and their place in society were challenged. I draw particular attention to the migrant labour reserve political economy and the women within this society at a time of economic crisis, and attempt to situate the events of that winter day in 2006 within this broad framework.

I base my analysis on ethnographic research and interviews carried out between 2011 and 2014 in villages on the southern fringes of the former Shangani Reserves along the Gwayi River in Lupane District as a follow-up to the 2006 events. I carried out 20 interviews with traditional leaders, community elders, men, women – and other people outside the participating households. Ethnographic research involved extended visits to four villages and 30 households that were purposely identified because they were headed by women either on a *de facto* or *de jure* basis. While information from these households provided the core data for the research, a small number of male heads of households were contacted (six during the entire research), and efforts were also made to meet with the migrant men (husbands of *de facto* women heads) when they were at home. These extended visits including discussions with men provided further insight into social and especially gender relations both within households and at society level, in this particular former migrant labour society. Overall, the discussions focused on revealing in addition to these, the specific situation and position of women. I also undertook tours of the Ward on each visit – in total 12 tours were conducted to enlarge upon the historical, social, cultural, and livelihood dynamics in this society of 'worker-peasants' and 'farmer-housewives'.²

The remainder of the paper is arranged as follow. Immediately following this introduction I present the theoretical arguments that underpin my analysis and then detail settlement patterns in the area and its politicisation. I then turn my attention to issues of land access by both individuals and households, the terms of use of different land categories, and how women managed and defended land rights, before finally, tracing the events of that winter day in 2006 to the forest watershed north of the village settlements. Finally, I conclude by referring briefly to the article's title, by suggesting that neither eco-feminist nor neo-Malthusian discourses have any relevance to the conflict that ensued that winter day.

DISCOURSES OF THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Finding an appropriate explanation to the events of that winter in 2006 is difficult due to the tempting appeal of the human/women and nature-type discourses, given the context and the subject – wood – for the demonstration and the composition of the demonstrators. Two of these will be discussed in this section. The first, are the ecofeminist discourses on women and the environment (what Agarwal 1991: 119 terms "feminist environmentalism") that would view our demonstrators from the moral economy of women being victims (hapless victims of environmental decline and resource scarcity) (Agarwal 2013; Shiva 1989), and mainly 'doing what comes natural' (Jackson 1993) (the so-called natural affinity to nature and naturalised role as saviours of nature) (Dankelman 1985; Dankelman and Davidson 1989; Davidson 1989), and a justification for their inclusion in agro-forestry interventions (Landazuri 1985; Shiva 1989; Warren 1997). The second is a neo-Malthusian-type crisis framing discourse that might associate the events of that winter to population growth and contestation over scarce natural resources (see Ehrlich 1968; Kaplan 1994; Homer-Dixon 1999; Myers 1993, Renner 1996), after all, the growing population of wood vendors could be seen to have contributed to the depletion of wood in the forest. This section looks at these two discourses, beginning with the ecofeminist position before moving to the neo-Malthusian's environment, population and conflict thesis.

The discourse of the affinity between women and nature, and therefore women as efficient managers and conservers of the environmental resources has emerged on the background of growing environmental concerns (concerns about environmental protection, sustainable development, land and soil degradation and deforestation) in the 1980s and 1990s, but it owes much to the contribution of Sherry Ortner's 1974 work ' *Is male to female as nature is to culture*'. Perhaps as a consequence, the emphasis on biology dominated some ecofeminist literature (King 1981; Merchant 1980; Mies 1986; Salley 1984), and at the same time, there is this emphasis on the link between the situation of women and that of nature in society, and as a result, an attempt to position women as appropriate agents for nature conservation (Dankelman 1985; Rodda 1991; Shiva 1989). The imperative to conserve nature's resources on their part, it is argued, rests not only on their overdependence on the environmental resources for livelihoods and wellbeing, but also on their special knowledge of the natural environment (Dankelman and Davidson 1989), and patience and caring nature (Aloo 1985; Dankelman and Davidson 1989; Shiva 1989).

In the 1980s and 1990s, the discourse gained more prominence following activism and interests from NGOs, donors and scholarship (notable King 1981, 1989, 1990) from an ecofeminist tradition (e.g. Cheney 1987; Dankelman and Davidson 1989; Davidson 1989; Griffin 1978; Salley 1984; Rodda 1991), and the emergence of different categories of

women's movements and a series of international assemblies, that all sought to promote women's inclusion in policies related to environmental conservation. Whereas until the 1980s the discourse had a Western orientation, it has since been appropriated and applied to the developing world, and most notable Vandana Shiva through her work in India has reiterated the special dependence and special knowledge thesis for women in the Third World (Shiva 1988, 1989). While the discourse was poorly conceptualised, inherently fragile, and has been subjected to merciless critiques (Agarwal 1991; Jackson 1993; Leach 2007), it has more recently re-emerged.

Others have remarked on the homogenisation of the category women, arguing that the woman being portrayed in the ecofeminist discourse is rather unknown. Women and the situations they face are not the same, and in the majority of cases the extent of their dependence on the natural environment mostly depends on a range of social factors (class, ethnicity and age) and natural factors including the ecological zone. Cecil Jackson has argued:

Women as a group do not experience environmental degradation in a uniform manner – these effects are mediated by the livelihood system. Some women may have remittances from migrant males, or more diverse livelihoods, or assets that may be liquidated, or kin-based entitlements which ameliorate the effects of environmental degradation (Jackson 1993: 1949).

Taking this argument further she has shown how men have also proven to be committed environment conservers and concerned stakeholders. Using an example of logging in Malaysia, she showed how logging activities affected hunter-gathering Penan men and women equally and how they both embarked on protests and blockades against logging.

The second, a neo-Malthusian type discourse, is rather pessimistic about the natural environment holding up to population explosion, and warns of imminent catastrophic consequences including biophysical limits to human activities, and at worst, civil strife and communal and external conflicts (e.g. Ehrlich 1968; Kaplan 1994; Homer-Dixon 1999; Meyers 1987; Renner 1996). In our case conflict manifested itself through the demonstration of that winter. While there are various strands of the neo-Malthusian discourse, all dealing with the complex relationship between population growth and the environment, this analysis only provides a broad brush treatment of the neo-Malthusian position, with specific focus on the environment, population and conflict thesis.

Neo-Malthusians predicted that rapid population growth would put severe pressure on the natural resource base, contribute to environmental scarcity and deepening poverty, which when combined may escalate communal conflicts and breed internal and external violence (see Kaplan 1994). The neo-Malthusian school can be traced back to, among

others Ehrlich (1968) and Hardin (1968) in the 1960s and 1970s, but in the 1990s it assumed a new importance in scholarly and policy debates as ecological and demographic pressures increasingly became seen as a 'new age' of insecurity in the post-Cold War era (de Soysa 2002b). Two neo-Malthusian positions can be identified since the 1960s – the alarmist or overly pessimistic (e.g. Ehrlich 1968; Hardin 1968; Myers 1993; Renner 1996) and the moderate (e.g. Homer-Dixon 1999; Kahl 2002; Matthew 2002). Using developing countries as an example, and beginning from a premise that the population depends on certain natural resources for sustenance and wellbeing, neo-Malthusians have shown that uncontrolled population growth and environmental scarcity tend to generate different forms of conflict (Ehrlich 1968; Hardin 1968; Myers 1987). Arguing the case for the population/environment, conflict connection Norman Myers wrote:

.....if a nation's environmental foundations become degraded and depleted, its economy may well decline, its social fabric deteriorate, and its political structure become destabili[s]ed.... This is all the more likely if environmental decline is associated with excessive population growth; and this is so whether the population factor serves as some sort of cause (direct or indirect), or as an aggravative factor, or as a contingent variable of another kind. This additional scope for conflict may well increase as growing numbers of people seek to sustain themselves from declining environments and natural-resource stocks of soil, water, forests, grasslands, fisheries, and the like (Myers 1987: 15).

Accordingly, developing countries are seen as prone to the resource scarcity and conflict scenario because of their lower capacity to adapt and cope with certain environmental phenomena and scarcity of resources (Homer-Dixon 1999; Myers 1987). Others have associated persistent scarcities in developing countries with a 'creativity gap', which in the medium to long run affects endogenous growth and compromises any constructive development initiatives (Homer-Dixon 1995, 1999). In such countries everything moves rather slowly – growth per capita is slow, per capital food production is slow, development proceeds at a much slower rate - social services are overextended, and the natural resource base is overexploited (Myers 1987). Using countries with rapid population as an example, Myers identified two conflict scenarios: first, internal conflict including civil disorder, riots and even revolutions; second, inter-state conflicts with neighbours, which may include political tensions and outright hostilities. A number of publications have moderated on the conflict theory and its application to large-scale and inter-state situations. Homer-Dixon (1999) pointed at the unlikelihood of inter-state wars and concluded that scarcity was more likely to produce low level domestic violence.

Other neo-Malthusians while recognising that conflict situations can result from population growth and resource scarcity, they also realised that such conflict can be successfully mediated through a range of intervening variables including among others drawing on social capital (de Soysa 2002a). The problem however, as Kahl (1998: 6) argued, it would seem that it has not been easy to 'identify which of these myriad intervening variables are most important'.

While these views on populations, women and the natural environment have a long history and have been pervasive: they tend to overgeneralise human situations and have failed to accommodate constant negotiations and renegotiations that often take place in society as different actors attempt to make sense of their environments. This form of human agency, which Michel de Certeau refers to as consumption that is 'devious', 'dispersed', insinuating 'itself everywhere silently and almost invisible' and 'does not manifest itself through its own product, but rather through its ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order' (de Certeau 1984: xiii), characterise contemporary rural society. As will be shown later, rural societies are different and the extent to which people depend and utilise the natural resources also differ in line with dominant livelihoods in society; the role played by women in contemporary rural society continues to change and adapt to changes in the socio-economic environment (see Thebe 2014). In worker-peasant societies, like this former reserve, certain societal processes have been 'shaped by local interests to enable the coexistence of subsistence farming and migrant labour' (O'Flaherty 1998: 528) and more recently, by the economic crisis and increased cross-border migration of men which has further entrenched women's decision making roles at both household and community levels (Thebe 2014).

THE 'DARK FOREST' AS 'MIGRANT LABOUR RESERVE'

The land on the southern fringes of the former Shangani Reserves, bounded by the Gwayi River to the south and the Victoria Falls/Bulawayo Highway (A8) to the north, is part of the forest famous for its poor 'waterless ridges of Kalahari sands', and its former image as *amagus' amnyama* (dark forest), hostility to human habitation, and a death trap of wild animals, malaria, tsetse flies and poisonous plants (see Alexander *et al.* 2000: 34 and 19; Worby 2001). This area now constitutes parts of the Menyezwa and Fatima Wards, under the Kusile District Council in Lupane District. Located in Agro-ecological region IV, it has the least favourite agricultural conditions in Matabeleland North and is characterised by semi-arid climatic conditions and occasional droughts. In general, Region IV is considered most suitable for semi-extensive ranching and not ideal for crop production without irrigation, although drought resistant grain and fodder crops may still be produced with some degree of success. Notwithstanding these climatic conditions, it is well endowed with fauna and flora –

the basis for the image of the '*gusu* forests as dark' and as 'places of tall, crowded trees' (Alexander *et al.* 2000). As a consequence, the 1931 demarcation of land under the Land Apportionment Act reserved parts of the forest as protected areas (Sekumbi Forest Reserve) under the Forestry Commission, and commercial ranching (Sotane Ranch).

Prior to the 1950s, the natural conditions had precluded large-scale settlements except for pockets of forest tribes under the leadership of a certain Ngabetsha – a Khoisan leader who was renowned for his hunting skills (Alexander *et al.* 2000).³ The occupation of the area began in 1948 when Chief Menyezwa Gumede and his followers arrived from Figtree near Bulawayo after their eviction from European land. Their arrival coincided with that of other Ndebele groups (also evicted from European territory elsewhere) who paid allegiance to the Menyezwa Chieftaincy. Thus, authority structures were already well established. The area, like other parts of the forest, was a communal area where villages had jurisdiction over demarcated land areas under the leadership of the various village headmen or heads of kraal (as they were earlier known). Through the 1967 Tribal Trust Land Act of the Rhodesian Front government established in 1962, these same village headmen became part of a Tribal Land Authority with power to approve new land applications, allocate land for settlement and crop production, and control common areas as mandated by the Act.

Initially, there were only a few households, and early settlers could pick and choose the land they wanted and – even in rural terms – land sizes tended to be big. Over half the settlements were situated on the poor sandy *gusu* area, while settlements on the richer clay loams were only a minority. Throughout the sandy *gusu* area, trees that were used for local building works were common and available for use by households which further impoverished the land of trees. The settlers built rudimentary mud, pole and thatch huts, fenced their homes and cattle pens with wooden poles, and cleared large areas for their fields, which they also fenced with brushwood. Thus, in every aspect of life settlers utilised natural resources, and the institution of the village headman provided the necessary institutional checks and balances. In most cases settlements were located far apart, and often separated by wide stretches of virgin woodlands. For those settlements where residential plots were close to each other, arable land often spread in opposite directions to allow for future settlers.

All headmen, in line with the 'bureaucratisation' of traditional leaders, took new people into their books (tax register) after arrival.⁴ Nevertheless, while some villages grew rapidly and all available land was quickly settled, farmed and grazed, others grew rather slowly. The villages that grew slowly, I came to realise, were highly 'semi-proletarianised' in the sense that more men were migrants workers and the rural home was left to the wives who also played major roles in society as a whole through the institution of the village court. In these villages controlling the rate of occupation was highly emphasised, and was seen not only as

crucial to sustainable resource utilisation and management, but also, in maintaining land for labour migrant men who had not yet established their own homes.

In the villages that experienced rapid growth, the increases in population coupled with the exhaustion of the *gusu* soils, certainly put pressure on land resulting in some people being given special permission from the chieftaincy to farm on the forest watershed. This land was also part of the common grazing zone, but also, the land provided the bulk of tree and grass resources for all villages. By the 1990s, fields had reached the Gwayi/Shangani border and further cultivation was banned in 1995 by the Kusile District Council. The rapid expansion of fields on the watershed forest had occurred without any consideration of the interests of other users (especially villages in the Shangani Valley) who found their access to certain resources severely constrained. The position and interests of these users are the focus of the section that follows. It aims to highlight aspects that made certain societal groups more likely to respond the way our demonstrators of that winter day in 2006 responded.

Worker-peasants, absent men and *de facto* women heads

Migrant groups that settled in the area, especially from the 1950s onwards, came from different parts of what is now Matabeleland, particularly from 'white land' or 'contested areas' that had been earmarked for capitalist accumulation, and had been exposed to European influence since the late 1880s.⁵ Among them was a proletarian class of people who held jobs in the emerging industries in Bulawayo. Some had retired from their jobs, but had accumulated assets and saw the relocation to the reserves as an opportunity to begin a new life as farmers. Others were between jobs, and took the opportunity in the reserves to build themselves homes before re-establishing themselves as urban workers again. David Johnson writing on how settlers coerced African labour in Southern Rhodesia highlighted the general need for labour by settler capital and how there was no shortage of alternative employment since it was easy for any 'Jim Fish' to 'find work tomorrow if discharged today' (Johnson 1992: 117). There is no better description of the people under Chief Gumede than that of Alexander *et al.* (2000:50):

The men and women who were forcibly resettled in the Shangani had a clear self-image. They defined themselves as Ndebele but not as traditionalists. They were people of the school and of the store and of the market. They were 'dressed' people. They were plough using farmers....Some of them were not Christians; some were illiterate; some were unsuccessful farmers.

The state saw these newly established areas as reserves for – especially male – labour, to be tapped by emerging capital and at the same time, to reduce migration into urban areas (Potts 2000; Potts and Mutambirwa 1990). The realisation of these objectives was made easy through road connections and the development of a private passenger transport sector, allowing men to circulate between the city and the rural home, and to live lives of worker-peasants, while women remained in the rural area as custodians of the new land, a number of these with the assistance of hired helpers.

This was a society of worker-peasants, and from the early days women became *de facto* heads of households. The rate of semi-proletarianisation actually increased mainly because of the referral system adopted by certain headmen in accepting new comers. Although no exact figures exist, I was informed that the majority of households were headed by men working in the city, who got land through colleagues at their work places.⁶ In their case, the women were the key decision makers at both the community and household levels as men spent the majority of the time at work. More importantly, in the absence of men women organised on-farm tasks by mobilising themselves and engaging in a range of community pooling arrangements.

Six decades after the first arrivals in this location, in 2012 when I completed the last of my extended visits, there was still a dearth of men: the original settlers had died; heads of households were either *de jure* females or second generation males. Male migration was still common, although by this time the destination had changed, and most men were working in Botswana or South Africa. This was evident in the composition of a village court in one of the villages where women dominated, not only in numbers, but also, society decisions were determined by women who included the former village headman's widow who was the acting village heads. I was informed by one of the participants: '*Akunamadoda lana* (there are no men here), we have to stand up for ourselves....the men you see here are on transit (*bayedlula*)...they know nothing about this place' (interview 23 December 2012).

INDAWO YAMI – DE FACTO HOUSEHOLD LAND

By the 1894 when the reserves were created, land was held in common, and while legislation governing rural areas kept changing in line with the ruling regime's policies, the communal tenure framework was maintained. As noted already, the institution of the village headman (*sobhuku*) regulated access to land (could allocate, deny and revoke), but this later changed after the enactment of the Communal Land Act of 1982 when the authority over land was transferred to the District Council – the Kusile District Council in this case – before changing again after the passing of the Traditional Leaders Act of 1998.⁷ Under both regimes, three land categories – the commons, residential plots and fields – were recognised, with either the headmen or the District Council regulating access. In the case of

the commons, all eligible individuals who were citizens of a particular village held use rights. In principle, people who were allocated land had exclusive rights over residential plots, but not cropping fields (which reverted to the commons after every harvest), and rights were recognised as long as the landholder continued to use such land. In practice however, the tenure system was quite fluid – land rights were complex – and as noted elsewhere (Thebe 2012: 108), the authority of land governance institutions appeared very constrained. What is of interest here was the development over time of a complex system of landholding and land rights, which left households in complete control of tracts of land outside their official land allocations, and the right, therefore to exclude neighbours. Even when rights to land were understood to be only usufructury, households referred to the land they were using as ‘my land (*indawo yami*)’ and held onto land under fallow following cropping even when it was widely understood that this land was part of the commons. These *de facto* land rights were largely recognised by all in the village, and extended beyond the residential plot and the area occupied by fields.

Broadly speaking, the land belonged to the household, and it exercised all rights enjoyed by private landholders. While only a small number of incidents of contestation were reported, prosperous men with more livestock might take advantage of men being absent and encroach on their land and graze their cattle. Perhaps more remarkable at the time was the apparent strong societal approval and support for such land rights especially since landholders could turn to the village court for recourse, or they could exercise their rights of exclusion. Respondents remembered confrontations between three *de facto* women heads of households and a certain Mr Nkonjeni, an ambitious Master Farmer with a large herd of cattle over access to such land. Mr Nkonjeni would graze his cattle on his fallow land, on the banks of the *dongas*, but occasionally, he would also instruct herd boys to graze the cattle on land belonging to others including the three women. However, I was informed by Mr Moffat Mpala, himself a herd boy at the time:

In these villages, every herd has a distinguishable bell sound that herd boys use to track the whereabouts of the herd. It was the sound of the bell that informed land owners of unauthorised grazing.... and they often responded by driving herd boys and their herd out of their land (interview 20 August 2006).

Sometimes, the headmen would send his messengers to drive the herd boys out of people’s land. I was also informed of a certain elderly woman, who also drove neighbours’ cattle away from her fallow land even though she did not own any livestock. Her daughter in-law, Roseta Nkiwane explained her reasons:

The cattle were destroying the green thatch grass. For a widow, the grass was a major source of income. It was harvested and sold to other people in the village. I still harvest the grass and sell it for a living now (interview 21 December 2012).

To protect land from encroachment, and probably as a way to prevent conflict, richer households fenced off their land. This practice increased after independence and the end of enforced centralisation regimes when people resorted to grazing their herds locally. I was also informed by Moses Moyo, one of the first settlers in the area:

Fencing land was as old as the community itself. It was common practice for people to fence their fields as a way of keeping livestock out....but the fencing of arable land is a new thing, and is probably done to prevent any exploitation of resources from the land by outsiders (interview 27 July 2006).

This land could be taken as a household's woodlot, where the rights holders harvested poles, bush branches, thatch grass, and dry wood for energy, but the woodlot was not commercialised – trees and grass were never sold to others and trees were not felled for fuel wood – rather, access by neighbours was negotiated. Since local harvesting of poles was mainly for small projects while major harvesting was done in the commons, only small amount of trees were fallen. Dried remnants from the harvested poles would then be collected for everyday wood fuel, but like poles for major building works, any substantial amount of wood was collected from the commons.

Another key observation in the use of this land was that it was not used for everyday grazing of cattle which took place in the commons, on fallow land, or 'poach-grazing' was done at the Sotane Ranch. The land was used mostly for grazing of small animals that could not be taken far from settlements, for grazing an ox-span before evening ploughing, and for grazing cattle before being taken for milking. However, in later years this land became significant for women headed households that did not have the assistance of hired herd boys since it allowed them to attend to their fields and mind their livestock at the same time while children were at school.

The landholding patterns described here are important in understanding the agency of women, and how such agency was exercised and to what effects. Here, I refer to the reforms under the Traditional Leaders Act of 1998 and the challenges of its implementation in this area. The reorganisation of villages into entities of 25 households meant that new villages had to be created and new headmen elected to add to existing traditional houses. The new headmen presided over households that had entitlements to various categories of land – land they occupied, land they cultivated, land they had fallowed, and arable land they

held *de facto* rights – over which they held inalienable rights. As noted elsewhere (Thebe 2012), households refused to allow the headmen to allocate any of this land to others beyond their relatives, especially sons. According to Mr Martin Shabangu, one of the remaining village elders:

The land is reserved for sons who work in cities.....these sons as known members who were raised in the village, support the households and pay visits. They have recognised land rights. Land is the only thing that links them to us. They will need land when they finally decide to come back. Where will they get it if we give it away? That is what I asked the officials from the district when they were here. They had no answers (interview 18 December 2011).

In a small minority of cases villagers also refused permission for land allocations to outsiders, even when such people were introduced by other villagers, and the new households were going to be settled on part of those villagers' own land.⁸ In some parts of Menyezwa Ward, these villages were dominated by women, which draw our attention to women as influential societal actors with responsibility for to protect societal interests.

THE FOREST COMMONS AS CONTESTED TERRAIN

The complex interactions and roles of women in society, manifested themselves through everyday forms of use and decisions, and created both expectations and tensions, which ultimately played out on the roadside that winter day. Women, men, herd boys, logging companies and firewood vendors all had a stake in the forest watershed and these different interests in the forest clashed or coalesced into complex conflict. This section presents and examines the forest watershed as both a terrain for conflict and a source of life for various societal actors.

The settlement of the land south of the Shangani Reserves in the 1940s had coincided with the implementation of centralisation measures in the reserves where land was divided into different use categories. Centralisation fitted perfectly into the typology of an area where the location of certain landmarks provided a natural divide for different land categories. The land between the river and the old road was designated as an arable zone, the land to the north and bordered by the new road was the settlement and cropping are, and the forest watershed north of the A8 Highway and sloping onto the Shangani Valley was the grazing zone. In the grazing zone the *gusu* of commercial timber tree species was dominant although there were also other trees used for household purposes. From the onset of rains cattle were grazed in the zone from morning and driven to water in the Gwayi River by evening; they were grazed in the zone until around April.

To the west of the grazing zone lay a pocket of land designated as fields for only one of the villages. Formal control over the grazing zone was vested on the headmen who executed this responsibility through messengers. The importance of such control and compliance was seen during the war years when the abandonment of the zoning system led to overgrazing in the residential and arable zones, and the subsequent land erosion. In general, however, the whole system was ill-suited for a worker-peasantry where women had to shoulder an extra burden. For example, zoning meant that women could not combine household and on-farm tasks with livestock duties unless herd boys were available for hire. In the remainder of this section I focus on the different interests in the grazing zone, and more importantly, on how the importance of having a stake in this zone arose.

a). Conflict over fields – In the west of the grazing zone, although crop fields were open to everyone as commons for grazing once crops had been harvested, a number of individuals or households fenced their fields to exclude access by others for grazing, but also for harvesting the fruits and caterpillars that inhabit certain tree species in their fields, which were common property prior to the establishment of fields. While these were mainly harvested for consumption, they also had a market value and were a major source of income for some households. In the early days of settlement, families had options outside the fields, but as field allocations increased in the 1980s, trespassing became common. There were frequent reports to headmen everywhere as fields spread into the forest, but people from the Shangani Valley went far beyond mere complaining, by demanding a ban on cultivation of the grazing zone. They repeatedly argued that the land should be used solely for grazing until, by the late 1990s, all field owners had been evicted, and the forest annexed for a pilot grazing project.

b). Operations of logging companies – In addition to tree species that bear fruits and those that host caterpillars, the forest was also rich in timber. Since the occupation in the late 1940s, people living closer to the forest harvested poles. However, in the late 1980s two logging companies were licensed by the Kusile District Council to start harvesting timber. The communities of both the Gwayi and Shangani welcomed these operations because they provided jobs and the companies were interested in certain tree species that had little value to them.⁹ What is of interest here therefore is how the logging activities of the commercial companies contributed to the demonstration of that winter day more than a decade later.

c). The forest as a source of wood fuel – Women, young and old, had access to wood fuel and built stockpiles for use during the rainy season. The wood consisted of dead tree

branches, and with the arrival of the logging companies, it was more readily available although gradually supplies were dwindling every year.

d). Commercial interests of firewood vendors – Apart from any increase in demand for firewood by the ever-increasing population, the dwindling supply was also associated with the commercial interests of male firewood vendors. Initially the vendors focused on large logs, which they split by axe before taking them to the roadside where they were placed into neat piles to attract passing motorists. However, with time and growing demand for wood in cities, vendors increased their numbers and harvesting activities, and began transporting the wood themselves into the cities by haulage trucks. As the availability of large logs decreased, the vendors then turned to fallen branches, and dead trees that had always been a source of fuel for home consumption in the locality. Eventually, all the dry wood was exhausted, prompting them to start felling live trees. One of the respondents, Nolita Ncube explained: ‘Something had to be done, we reported to the village head...but she could do nothing alone. We could not wait for men to come from the cities...we had to do it ourselves’ (interview 19 December 2014).

CONCLUSION

This work began with my interrogation of the conflict between firewood vendors (selling wood to motorists and also supplying bulk quantities to cities) and a group of predominantly village women (and others sympathetic to their grievances) on the A8 Highway in Lupane District. The group had targeted firewood vendors and their stockpiles of firewood on display on the roadside and nearby in the forest waiting to be transported out of the area. At first sight the action of the women on this day could be viewed from the moral economy of women being victims (hapless victims of environmental decline and resource scarcity), and justification for their inclusion in agro-forestry interventions, or a neo-Malthusian environment, population and conflict thesis. While these discourses are none the less very welcome in that they highlight the importance of nature to human life and the dynamics of human interaction with nature. However, in this article I have challenged such generalised framing of societal problems and interactions (assumptions about women, the environment and conflict scenarios) by focusing broadly on the complexity of a worker-peasant society, and the implications for women’s situation at the household and society levels.

In shifting my attention from the events of that winter day in 2006 to phenomena at the society level, I attempted to identify labour migrant societies as a different kind of rural society – one that was highlighted by the feminisation of everyday forms of decisions and use. I also tried to show how this setting and the institutional framework imposed an extra burden on the women and how they in turn framed their responses to these constraints

and realities confronting their everyday lives, and turned them to their own advantage. This I equate to Michel de Certeau's consumption that is 'devious', 'dispersed....does not manifest itself through its own product, but rather through its ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order' (de Certeau 1984: xiii).

I suggest that such forms of agency by women was developed and nurtured through women's extended responsibilities at the household and society levels, and while it would appear to have manifested itself that winter day as some form of affinity ecofeminism, it had a long pedigree in this society. Historically women as *de facto* heads of households had successfully handled threats to their households' interests, and also, threats at the society level. In a former migrant labour society, where certain patriarchal principles had long been weakened by high rates of male migration, it was not so much a question of women assuming responsibilities previously shouldered by men, but rather, how such responsibilities were played out at both the household and society level overtime. This was ostensibly a female space, evoked in practice by the domination of village court sessions by women, but also, the seating of a woman as an acting village head. My concluding remark is that the conflict should be contextualised in terms of its sociological basis by analysing the social context that gave women legitimacy to decision making and power to mobilise against threats. The ecofeminists' women nature bond and thus 'doing what comes natural' has no relevance in the events of that winter, yet also, applying the neo-Malthusians' environment, population and conflict thesis would appear to be stretching it rather too far.

NOTES

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- ¹. Rainmaking ceremonies are initiated by community elders and performed by men under the guidance of the *wosana* spirit medium.
 - ². See Deborah Potts's (2000) work '*Worker-peasants and farmer housewives in Africa*', or her other work with Mutambirwa in Harare – '*Why migrants need land*'.
 - ³. The Ngabetsha and other *Basili* lineages are still found in the area.
 - ⁴. O'Flaherty use the term to highlight how kraal leaders were incorporated into the colonial system for both tax and control purposes.
 - ⁵. Immigrants who entered the Shangani Reserves in the 1940s came mainly from Bubi, Filabusi, Fort Rixon and Matobo, but in the southern end of the reserve there were also groups from Insuza, Inyati and Nyamandlovu.
 - ⁶. At the time in the 1960s and 1970s, people were being squeezed out of 'white land' and needed land to settle in the reserves. Colleagues who already had land would then recommend them to their headmen.

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- ⁷. The Act recognised the role of traditional leaders in rural society. Under the Act, villages were reorganised into 25 households, which ultimately increased the number of village headmen and introduced a system of elected headmen.
 - ⁸. Landholders can allocate part of their land to outsiders by introducing them to the village and upon the headman incorporating such people in his register.
 - ⁹. Logging companies only harvest selected trees of a certain size.

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