

**Legacies of ‘*madiro*’? Worker-peasantry,
livelihood crisis and ‘*siziphile*’land occupations in
semi-arid north-western Zimbabwe**

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines acts of land ‘self-provisioning’ (*siziphile* land occupations) and ‘radical land restitution’ (of land previously annexed from people by the local authority for a pilot grazing project) by villagers in a communal area in Lupane District in north-western Zimbabwe. Situating these occurrences within the wider and historical context of ‘*madiro*’ (freedom farming and unauthorised development of settlements) and Matabeleland land politics and semi-proletarianisation, it stresses the livelihood history of households, the disappointments with local job opportunities and destruction of urban-based livelihoods in a crumbling economy, and the accompanying crisis of communal area agriculture. It concludes that these factors provided a real threat to semi-proletarianisation. By self-provisioning of the land the overriding concern of villagers was to maintain a certain level of livelihood survival, even if it was at odds with their livelihood strategies, while they sought opportunities to maintain semi-proletarianisation.

Key words

Land occupations; ‘madiro’; semi-proletarianisation; ‘siziphile’; Zimbabwe

INTRODUCTION

Every morning, for close to two months – December 2014 to January 2015 – we drove along this desolate road in the semi-arid Lupane District in north-western Zimbabwe, trying to get a glimpse of the flooded Gwayi River, which as we were told, had burst its banks the previous season. I will admit here, I have something for livid nature, and as a boy, I was always fascinated by the boisterous sounds of flooded rivers. Every day we travelled that road, our imaginations consumed by the beautiful side of nature, everything appeared normal – people went about their business of ploughing, cultivating or fencing their fields on either sides of the road.

However, anyone familiar with this area would have realised that all was not as normal as we at first thought it to be. What was now occupied by fields, and in some parts, randomly scattered rudimentary huts, was once a heavily forested forest that was once designated as an arable zone by colonial authorities as part of the centralisation measures, and appeared to enjoy the protection against ‘*madiro*’ by both local traditional and political structures and society as a whole after independence in 1980. This forest has been decimated; trees have been felled; pastures cultivated and rudimentary fences of tree branches built to keep out livestock. As the people put it, ‘*baziphile*’ (they had engaged

in self-provisioning of the land), underscoring the fact that their occupation of the land was not sanctioned by any authority. The deployment of the term '*siziphile*' by the land occupiers depicted, in part, the agency of households in self-identifying themselves and the land they need and the dynamics of land access in Zimbabwean communal areas (CAs) since colonialism (see Nyambara 2001: 782).

I use the term '*madiro*' here, to refer to unauthorised occupation of land and the accompanying freedom to “‘*tema madiro*’” (clear as much land as one has the energy to)’ (Chimhowu & Hulme 2006: 735). The practice of '*madiro*' as some form of demonstrations of frustrations of land hunger, has a long history in Zimbabwe; it started as a response to the deprivation of land rights under the Native Land Husbandry Act (NLHA) of 1951, but gained prominence after independence as land hunger led to a spate of unauthorised land occupations, which the government categorised as acts of 'squatting' (Alexander 1994; Chimhowu & Hulme 2006; Moyo 1995; Thompson 2007).

It would be a grave mistake, however, as it is with these communities, to associate unauthorised land occupation solely with land hunger. Until recently, these villagers appeared content with the land they occupied in the communal area and appeared to have internalised the

principle of planned order since they had shunned away from cultivating or settling on the land in question.

The occupation of the former arable zone was different from occupations that preceded the Fast Track Land Reform and Resettlement Programme (FTLRRP) – it was spontaneous without any political backing; it was not coordinated; the occupiers had no leader; and more importantly, people occupied land on their own individual capacity.

In this article, I want to look back and interrogate the ‘*siziphile*’ land occupations by these villagers in terms of both the historical context, and how such acts intersected with the prevailing situations not only in rural Matabeleland, but also nationally, and in particular to try and situate the behaviour of households within wide land and land reform politics in Matabeleland. The behaviour of these villagers, I argue, has its own history and significance: some aspects of that history shed light on the postcolonial politics of land and development in Zimbabwe and its impact on Matabeleland; others shed light on the significance of ‘*madiro*’ as an approach by groups and communities to select and identify themselves as being in need of land. As others and I also argue, the recourse to ‘*madiro*’ was a ‘mechanism by which the occupiers sought to become “visible”’ (Chaumba *et al.* 2003: 543 – 544), and probably gain official attention. For

these villagers land 'self-provisioning' was a response to what was perceived to be a real threat to semi-proletarianisation after the destruction of formal sector livelihoods and a crisis in communal area agriculture.

The remainder of this paper is arranged as follows. Immediately following this introduction I present the analytical arguments that underpin my analysis and then provide a brief account of the people and their geographical environment before turning my attention to the changing land, social and economic situation that may have influenced the recourse to '*madiro*'. I then turn my attention to land occupations and the land occupiers.

LAND AND LAND REFORM POLITICS

The events in question and similar struggles by households over land in parts of Matabeleland can be understood only in the context of a decades-old history of colonial land expropriations and state policy (Alexander *et al.* 2003; Moyana 2002), together with the development and consolidation of capitalism (Arrighi 1971; Mosley 1983), postcolonial land politics and socio-economic crisis (Carmody & Taylor 2003; Moss 2007), and how these impacted on livelihoods and households decisions.

Colonial conquest resulted in massive land expropriations and the eviction of natives to reserves of

marginal agricultural quality. The first two native reserves (the Gwayi and Shangani Reserves) were established for the Ndebele in 1894 under provisions of the Matabeleland Order-in-Council (Moyana 2002; Youe 1986). These reserves were big, remote, and as Sir Richard Martin later recognised in his 1897 study, agriculturally marginal and unsuitably for human habitation (Youe 1986).

The Ndebele began to move into these reserves in the early twentieth century (Alexander *et al.* 2000). While smaller reserves were later designated well until 1914, the occupation of white and Crown land continued well into the 1940s when the state finally enforced the Land Apportionment Act of 1930. Alexander *et al.* (2000) showed how the enforcement of the Act led to more forced evictions to eastern Lupane District.¹ The brutality of these evictions was captured by Rupert Meredith Davies, the new Assistant Director of Agriculture in 1948:

I must say, I felt very sorry for a lot of these people, because they were sent to most difficult country, what I'd call baboon country. Wild animals, elephants, lions, the lot. There was no suitable land available. And it wasn't good land ... I tried to induce the Administration to put some of these squatters on to irrigation schemes [in the Sabi] ... but they wouldn't have it (cf. Alexander *et al.* 2000: 47).

More people were moved into the Shangani Reserves following the forced removal of groups from Filabusi, Fox Rixon and Matopo in the 1950s. As would be expected, these people had been greatly assimilated into the capitalist world – some had received western education, some were workers, others were entrepreneurs, while others had engaged in ‘*kaffir* farming’ (Alexander *et al.* 2000; Worby 2001: 480).

Reserves were also created as a labour reservoir for emerging capitalism (Arrighi 1970; Bush & Cliffe 1984; Duggan 1980). The goal was to extract African labour through tax levies and the destruction of African agriculture, and to dislodge ‘*kaffir*’ farmers by relocating them to ‘much-diminished reserves – distant from markets, but near enough to migrate to farms to sell their labour’ (Worby 2001: 481). Alongside these measures, extra economic means of coercion became a central mechanism to extract cheap labour although labour needs were also achieved through market mechanisms (Arrighi 1970; Mosley 1983).

In the light of subdued rural agriculture, it was not uncommon for both married and unmarried men to hope to migrate to the city in search of work, and to spend most of their time there. These migrant men would still retain rural land rights and hope to return to the rural home when their days in the capitalist sector were over (Potts 2000; Potts & Mutambirwa 1990). After all, the migrant labour system was

premised on such migrants retaining rights to rural land that would subsidise the urban wage (Potts 2000). The system put pressure on rural land since migrants land rights competed with those of people in rural areas who depended solely on the land for livelihood survival.

Late arrivals to the reserves brought with them herds of cattle and ploughs, and while land was initially available, settlements were concentrated on valley and riverine areas. An immediate result of these activities was that the reserves became overpopulated with human and animal population and became heavily degraded (Prescott 1961). One of the consequences was the demand for additional land, and the other was a looming environmental and agriculture crisis in the reserves – both which required solution. The solution came in the form of the enactment of the Native Land Husbandry Act in 1951. But such a solution did not involve ceding additional land to the reserves. Instead its solution was to impose limits to people and livestock that could utilise land, introduce soil conservation methods and agriculture improvement schemes (Phimister 1991; Thompson 2007).

The Native Land Husbandry Act also incorporated the policy of centralisation – reorganisation village settlements and land into different land-use types – and oversaw its coercive implementation (Wolmer & Scoones 2000;

Thompson 2007). While the NLHA was strenuously resisted until it was abandoned in 1962, centralisation and conservation efforts were not completely abandoned as the Rhodesian Front administration merely shifted the authority over rural areas from the bureaucracy to traditional structures through the Land Tenure Act of 1969. Although the Land Tenure Act formalised the racial division of land, it also increased land allocated to Africans by about 2% and designated African reserves into 165 Tribal Trust Lands (TTLs) of about 16,268 000 hectares (Mlambo 2014; Williams & Hackland 2015).

The Land Tenure Act remained in force in rural Zimbabwe until the 1970s when the liberation war intensified and guerrillas made it difficult for the state to function effectively (Alexander *et al.* 2000; Nyambara 2001). The guerrillas completely discredited the authority of traditional leaders; they also introduced ‘*madiro*’ and encouraged people to plough on contours and to settle on formerly forbidden land (Nyambara 2001).

A host of literature has expounded on the land distribution problem at independence and the centrality of land in the agenda of negotiations that brought about the country’s independence. While this body of literature attest to the highly skewed racial division of land where only 6,000 whites owned over 42% of land, it also identifies the

constraints imposed by a negotiated settlement (Moyo 1995; Palmer 1990).

This literature has demonstrated the new government's commitment to redistributing land – a target to resettle 162,000 households in five years – and the disappointments that followed (only 52,000 households were resettled on 2,7 hectares by 1989) (Moyo 1995; Palmer 1990). Performance on the land distribution front in the 1990s is also well covered in literature. Despite the enactment of the 1992 Land Acquisition Act, which empowered the state to acquire land compulsory, very little land accrued to small farmers. During the whole period government policy shifted towards the development of an indigenous capitalist class (Moyo 1995; Sachikonye 2003).

The period also coincided with Zimbabwe's liberalisation experiment under the donor-initiated Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP), which resulted in the destruction of urban-based livelihoods and erosion of workers' incomes. The consequential impact was felt in rural areas where there was added pressure on land as the unemployed returned home (Bird & Shepherd 2003). ESAP contributed to chronic underemployment and open unemployment and increased the vulnerability of households (ibid). These factors made the issue of land even greater, and as the lack of progress became apparent as the 1990s drew to

a close, land occupations gained momentum (Moyo 2001; Moyo&Yeros 2004).Associated with these, there was further economic decline and unemployment as the economic crisis spurred by ESAP spiralled out of control.

Land reform, thus re-emerged in the policy agenda through the launch of the 2nd Phase of Land Reform and Resettlement in 1998, but this was overtaken by events before and after 2000 leading to the Fast Track Land Reform and Resettlement Programme (see Chaumba et al. 2003; Marongwe 2003; Moyo & Yeros 2003). A substantial amount of scholarly work emerged after the FTLRRP. This work has been noteworthy for passing the process as a success and using quantitative statistics as evidence of success (Moyo 2011; Scooneset al. 2011). Such interpretations of the land reform process, however, can be misleading since they fail to capture unique regional experiences (Alexander 1991, 2006; Cliffeet al. 2011).

LAND REFORM IN MATABELELAND

A recurring theme in Matabeleland is the general lack of progress on the land reform and resettlement front, ‘despite the relatively extreme extent of colonial land alienation in the region’ (Alexander & McGregor 2001). During the 1980s, the interlinked features of lack of abandoned farms and need for grazing land, meant that very few people moved

from communal areas to resettlement areas (Alexander 1991). But, there were also instances where land became available and was acquired by the state, but either remained undistributed or was taken over and leased to government officials and political elites (Alexander 1991; Cliffe *et al.* 2011).

The lack of movement from communal areas, coupled with the return of people formerly displaced by war, meant that some communal areas experienced population pressure and growing discontent over the slow pace in land distribution, which manifested through the land invasions in Nyamandlovu in 1999 (see Sithole *et al.* 2003). While large-scale land occupations spearheaded by war veterans later followed, these came late in Matabeleland, and ‘attracted a smaller communal area constituency’ (Alexander & McGregor 2001: 514).

Political party support, unemployment and the associated perceptions of the benefits from land, in numerous ways informed participation in these land occupations, but generally people outside the ruling party condemned and shunned the land occupations and left them to war veterans and members of the Zimbabwe National Liberation War Collaborators’ Association (see Alexander & McGregor 2001). The turbulent relationship between the Matabeleland region and Zanu (PF) together with other grievances again

the ruling party and government, had seen the shift in political support towards the new Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in the late 1990s (Alexander & McGregor 2001; McGregor 2002). Alexander and McGregor (2001: 515) noted:

In Matabeleland, the war veterans' alliance with ZANU-PF faced further obstacles. These obstacles were in large part a legacy of the 1980s' conflict, which itself built on older tensions between the two nationalist parties and their respective guerrilla armies during the liberation struggle. Ex-ZIPRA war veterans in Matabeleland (including some former 'dissidents') had been hunted down by state forces between 1982 and 1987: many were tortured and killed or lost family members and friends at the hands of the Fifth Brigade and CIO.... Although the ZNLWVA incorporated both ex-ZANLA and ex-ZIPRA guerrillas, and although many felt they owed a personal debt to war veteran leader Chenjerai Hunzvi for securing benefits for them, some ex-ZIPRA guerrillas continued to feel discriminated against for their past affiliation. Longstanding grievances remained, not least over land. The *Dispatch* reported the angry comments of a former ZIPRA battalion commander on the government's failure to return farms and other property owned by ZIPRA's Nitram Company, which ZANU-PF had seized during the early 1980s conflict: he threatened to invade the old ZIPRA farms first.

An important reason, however, was that land was marginal for small farm agriculture and in the context of the region's past land politics, there are possibilities of people preferring land for grazing than resettlement (Alexander 1991; Cliffe *et al.* 2011). Alexander and McGregor (2001) also observed that most communities in Matabeleland North did not have historical claims to neighbouring farms since they were evicted from land elsewhere, which may explain the reason behind the occupation of farms in Bubi and Umguza districts (see Sithole *et al.* 2003; Thebe 2011).

THE GEOGRAPHICAL LANDSCAPE AND ITS HUMAN INHABITANTS

The Menyezwa Ward in Lupane District lies on the southern fringes of the former Shangani Reserves, bound by the Gwayi River to the south, the tract of forest spreading across the A8 (main Bulawayo/Victoria Falls Rd) towards the Shangani River further north, the Shabula River to the east and the intersection of the old and new roads to the west, is a communal area about 180km west of Bulawayo.

Between the village settlements and the Gwayi River lies another forest of mostly mopane trees, separated from the settlements by the old road, which runs parallel to the Gwayi River until it meets the A8 at the Fatima Mission further north. The physical terrain described above,

presented a perfect setting for the implementation of centralisation measures, with the forest between the old road and the Gwayi River being designated as an arable zone, the land between the old road and the new road as settlements area and the forest north of the new road as the grazing zone, shared between communities in the Gwayi and those in the Shangani. Typical of former reserves, the area is by all characteristics (economic and geography) rural.

The land divides into the four major types of soils found in these former reserves – the Kalahari-type sandy soils, which are by far the most dominant; a mixed combination of clay and sandy soils; red clay loams; and black clay loams, mostly along the river plains and riverine areas. Over most of the area, the ‘*gusu*’ of Kalahari sands is well represented – very prominent over large sections of the settlements and fields, and on the ascend (spreading into the northern forest) – but being significantly dissected by red clay loams, and black loams along rivulets and the land from the old road and spreading into the commercial Ranching areas. Only the land within the settlements and an insignificant part of the northern forest were utilised for crop production.² This means that a significant proportion of fertile land (between the river and the old road) was undeveloped for crop production.³

Located in Agro-ecological region IV, it has the least favourite agricultural conditions 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 crops may still be produced with some degree of success. Through the provisions of the 1931 Land Apportionment Act, land south of the river was designated for commercial ranching and as a Forest Reserve further south (Sikumbi Forest Reserve).

This land became home to mostly Ndebele households, victims of colonial land expropriations for commercial agriculture and mining, although there were also indigenous forest lineages like the *sili*. The groups that settled in these parts of the reserves originated from different parts of what was referred to as 'white land'. Chief Menyezwa Gumede arrived in the area from Figtree in 1948, his arrival coinciding with that of groups from Bubi/Insuza, Inyati and Nyamandlovu, which initially submitted to his authority, while groups from other contested areas joined later.⁴

Alexander *et al.* (2000) pointed out that the land occupied by immigrant groups was not uninhabited, but was home to some forest tribes. In the study area one of these indigenous lineages under the leadership of Ngabetsha – Alexander *et al* (2000)'s big tall *sili* men who was a good

hunter – remained and integrated with the newcomers. It would seem, then, that Ngabetsha maintained control of a particular section of the valley and submitted to the Menyezwa chieftaincy.

Migrant groups, coming mostly as kin lineages with authority lines developed at places of origin, first settled under a kraal system on the valley plain, with only distant relatives occupying the periphery around the main kraals. As O’Flaherty (1998: 548) noted elsewhere, the kraals were not associated with ‘well demarcated and permanent tracts of land but ...represent[ed] the collective right of the households that were allied with the [senior lineage leader]’. These kraals later transmuted into villages with the disintegration of kraals as members established own homes, arrival of more households seeking land in the reserves, and the bureaucratisation of kraal leaders into *osabhuku* (headmen) for purposes of maintaining the tax register for the colonial administration (see O’Flaherty 1998).

These people had been exposed to the capitalist world at their places of origins. We can count among them a proletarian class that worked in the emerging industries in Bulawayo, entrepreneurial individuals, people who 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, and others who were between jobs and

took the opportunity in the reserves to build themselves homes before re-establishing themselves as urban workers again. Alexander *et al.* (2000:50) captured these immigrants vividly:

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.

At the new place, the basic patterns of life established at places of origin were maintained, which also informed their agricultural practices and land needs. 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 because of two factors: first, were labour needs by the commercial ranches south of the Gwayi River and the Forestry Commission policing the Forest Reserve, and the second had to do with the referral system adopted by certain headmen in accepting new comers.

Even without statistics, evidence points to a complex system of relationships between early households and late arrivals where men who had already acquired land

recommended colleagues from their work places to their heads for land.⁵

The people, despite their high levels of semi-proletarianisation, also made all possible attempts to exploit the natural resource base (see Alexander *et al.* 2000; Prescott 1961). Each household had a field, or more in the case of extended households, allocated by their leaders (*osabhuku*). The land allocations were often liberal, which allowed households the latitude for extension, to release exhausted land and to allocate land to members and outsiders (see Thebe 2012). The village heads retained the responsibility for land allocation at village level. As noted elsewhere (Thebe forthcoming), the allocation formula was simple, people identified their preferred land and the head confirmed such claims through rudimentary branch pegs in a process called *ukutshay' ihlahla*.

However, the topography of land between Lupane District's two major rivers (the Gwayi and the Shangani) was always going to pose major ecological and production challenges even in the most prudent of land husbandry regimes. First, the Kalahari-type sandy soils that are prominent on the '*gusu*' forest that also acts as a watershed between the Gwayi and Shangani rivers are denuded of grass cover, which leaves them exposed to run-off water. Second, the clayey, red soils and black loams are vulnerable to gully

erosion as the gentle gradients release strong water flows both on the south and north-easterly gradients. Through continuous cultivation, the soils lose fertility, forcing people to clear new land to allow initial fields to revert to a bush.

The Ndebele were also livestock herders, and each household owned at least a livestock herd – be it cattle, donkeys or goats – and these were grazed not far from settlements, on common land that was awaiting allocation. It was these realities, combined with the livelihood practices of the population, and perceptions about the disruptive nature of these practices on the natural environment that made a case for centralisation and rational planning and sound land husbandry.

SOCIAL DIFFERENTIATION, WORKER-PEASANTS AND FARMING

Within the occupied territory, patterns of differentiation were very much determined by access to opportunities in the formal job sector than access to land and other natural resources, which were accessible to all households in a village. It would appear that the wage from the formal sector allowed households to accrue assets, and most households had invested in agriculture-based assets including livestock and ploughs. Households headed by non-working men were

often poorly resourced and depended mainly on agriculture for sustenance and survival.

Semi-proletarians/worker-peasants

Worker-peasants were mostly nuclear households headed *de facto* by women in the absence of worker-migrant men. Like all rural households, they had land for fields and lay claims to any land in the vicinity of the fields for future expansion (see Thebe 2012). They had exclusive rights to this land and often protected it from exploitation by other households by fencing it off. Fencing off land was a common practice to prevent encroachment, but its prominence among worker-peasants was mainly due to their financial resources. Simon Ndebele still remembered these households:⁶

Here, it started with a certain Mr Mhlanga who lived across the stream. He worked in the city for a factory that manufactured fences,he fenced-off his home, fields and fallow land.....but his land was small compared to others here. Ngewu also fenced-off this land. The land belonged to his parents and had been fallow for years after the death of his father. He did not live here, we only lived with his late mother and elder brother....he had left as a teenager to work for the National Railways in town. After years of absence, he returned with a wife and sealed off this place with barbed wire. He has since died, and his family has disintegrated although his young brother' small family remains on the land... the

land remains fenced-off and unavailable for reallocation. Despite the underlying principle of tenure in communal areas being usufructuary rather than private possession, the land is secured as long as part of the family remains, pays tax and there are sons whose land needs should be protected. Such land arrangements dominate in these rural parts of Zimbabwe even though most of the land is not put under cultivation.

Extended households involved in productive agriculture

Households with farming acumen were mostly extended, had more than one field, owned large herds of livestock and commanded large networks of social relations locally, which they drew upon for farming and other activities. But these households also had people working in the cities whose land rights were uncontested. Some had left wives and children in the rural home to secure their land interests. As noted elsewhere (Nyambara 2001: 776), the practice by migrant men to secure land by leaving wives and children on the land while they remained working in the city was a ‘well-established method of exploiting the flexibility of “communal” tenure, which allowed rural households to combine rural and urban incomes’. Where worker-migrants were not yet married, their land rights were safeguarded by kin, and they would be allocated land upon marriage although such land remained under the custody of the original landholder.

In this community extended households were few but still dominated in landholdings. One such household was that of the headman of a lineage that originated from Sivuwe in Nyamandlovu, which controlled numerous active fields (used by different members of the household), tracts of abandoned fields and arable land. Some of the land was left behind by relatives that relocated with Chief Menyezwa Gumede, while some was fallowed and released for grazing due to soil exhaustion.

Primarily as a result of continuous cultivation, the sandy '*gusu*' soils became degraded 'as organic matter, which enhances the nutrient and water retention capacity of the soil, is poorly retained and protected by these soils' (see Andersson 2007: 683), leading to increased incidents of fallowing by households. Part of the land including fallow land was fenced-off (although the fence had collapsed at the time of the study) while some of the fallow land had been resettled by relatives and other household members. Resettled households were granted land for fields on both the fallowed and arable land.

Similarly, the Dube household controlled large tracts of land on red clay loams where maize, sorghum, beans and groundnuts and pumpkins were produced. This land was initially divided between three families, but with time and as the household grew, other members began to settle on part of

this land. However, this spread of new homes into the fields did not take much of the land, for some land remained unutilised and reserved for occasional grazing, although it still had agricultural value. In 2005, much of the land remained uncultivated. As the widowed head of household informed me, ‘it is now difficult to cultivate large areas. I no longer have the strength.....all other people have their own homes and fields’ (MaNyathi 2005 int).⁷

Poor households

The last group of households was headed *de jure* by men with no formal jobs, and mostly with no assets of their own. These included families from migrant groups, especially those that had failed the transition from proletarians to farmers, or indigenous groups that failed the transition from hunter-gathering to farming. While some had livestock and were constrained by poor agricultural conditions (both land quality and erratic rainfall), others depended on resource-pooling arrangements with the richer households, which ploughed their fields in return for labour and allegiance.

Despite lack of assets, these did not lack adequate land since their rights to land were secured by virtue of belonging to a village and household. Men in these households performed menial jobs for other households, but also engaged in some agricultural production. In order to

understand the land situation and vulnerability of this group and how livelihood strategies panned out, I present one further example. The family of Morgan Mpfu was part of the Chief Gumede group that arrived in 1947.

Morgan was one of Chief Gumede' helpers and had no experience in the capitalist sector even at the place of origin. At the new place he was given a small herd of cattle and allowed to establish his own home. Being associated with the chieftaincy, he had no land problems although agricultural production remained below subsistence. The household survived by ploughing for others and through the provision of tasks like building traditional huts, construction of contours and storm drains and bush brush fencing for other households. While the children never received adequate education, three of the sons acquired artisan skills, one died while two others went to South Africa. Upon marriage, they all were able to establish own homes and develop fields on both fallow and arable land although two sons later relocated leaving the land to the three remaining brothers.

So far, I have suggested that land rights and security for households – including migrant households – was never an issue of concern in this former reserve. Land was available for settlement, crop production and grazing, and households had uncontested rights that allowed them leeway to expand landholding, allocate land to others and allow

some land to fallow. I also presented the inhabitants of this former reserve as worker-peasants that were not entirely dependent on agriculture for sustenance and survival.

I have not yet mentioned, however, the changing politico-social context during the three decades of independence and their implications on the societal land question, and possible influence on the ‘*siziphile*’ occupation of the former grazing zone. In the following sections, I look at this changing context. I begin by looking at the changing land and livelihood situation before focusing my attention on the ‘*siziphile*’ land occupations of 2013.

Author

THE CHANGING LAND AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT

The rural areas are places where traditional leaders – from the headman at the lower level to the chief at a broader level – were vested with uncontested power after the recall of the NLHA in 1962. After about a decade in the wilderness during the tenure of the NLHA where the state through the District Commissioners interfered extensively in rural affairs, traditional leaders finally retained their authority over land through the Tribal Trust Land Act (TTLA) of 1967. In the study area village heads (*osabhuku*) exercised authority over land and natural resources including their conservation. One of my informants remembered:

Their authority was real and extended beyond mere land allocation as they played the role of gate keepers in the real sense of the word. Villages were grouped into grazing areas through entrance gates, and as custodian of land, headmen enforced strict adherence to these grazing areas. They also literally held the keys to the zone, opening and closing a particular zone for grazing.

(Mahlafuna Ndlovu 2006 int)

He particularly remembered one particular headman, who was known for his strictness in allocating land and his conviction in technical land-use planning. He would travel the whole village checking and monitoring adherence to conservation measures – whether the contour ridges and storm drains were in position, and they were of the correct specifications and numbers. He would ensure that cattle were grazed in the correct zone and that there were no unauthorised extension of fields and that people did not use sledges for transport.

Much has been made about people's reaction to land-use and conservation measures, and traditional leadership (see Phimister 1993; Thompson 2007). In the study area, reactions differed across different aspects of the land-use planning package. Generally, everyone dug contours, dipped their cattle, and adhered to the grazing schedule. While transgressions were common, these were punished through

finer administered through the headmen's court. I was informed:

Cattle were often driven to the Gwayi River for water late in the evening and taken to the pens at sunset to ensure that there was minimum transgression. It was during these times that people would poach-graze their cattle on the richer grasses....the grazing zone was a grassless tract of 'gusu'. Besides grazing, other transgressions included unauthorised cultivation and failure to dip your cattle.

(Modus Nkomo 2006 int)

For valid reasons, people loathed dipping sessions and the grazing zone. As highlighted in Nkomo (2001), it was at the dip where cattle numbers were monitored following a carrying capacity formula. As for the grazing zone, it was a great inconvenience since smaller animals could not be grazed in the zone. It is important to highlight here that households did not openly object to these measures and neither were there recorded incidents of hostility against headmen for their part in system.

More commonly however, people appeared to accept the *status quo* until the peak of the liberation war when the political propaganda turned against the system and traditional institutions. This is least surprising since most households were part of same lineage with the headmen,

while others owed their allegiance to the headship for accepting them in his place.

It was in 1976 that changes started to occur in this area following the arrival of Zipra guerrillas and the killing of the farm owner of the Sotane Ranch. The death of the farmer and the closing of the ranch affected livelihoods of many households who saw their livelihoods destroyed with the loss of jobs, but also, it opened the ranch for access by the villagers who used it to poach-graze their cattle. Following this incident, the guerrilla operations affected centralisation and conservation measures as they encouraged the practice of '*madiro*'.

Osabhuku lost their authority over land and the communities as the power shifted from the traditional leaders – dynasties that held administrative power, often through structures of lineage headship, first at places of origin, then in the reserves – to informal political community structures. While one would expect a spate of violations and a chaotic process as people engaged in '*madiro*', there was a resemblance of order and there was minimum encroachment of settlements on pastures. This was also least surprising since in these communities, there was no idle land: land belonged to households.⁸

Further changes took place after independence as the gap in the governance of the area allowed households to

expand their land holdings and to develop garden plots. An important factor affecting land in the area was the land needs of the new adults. Some newly married household members, relatives from other areas and people previously displaced by war acquired land in the communal area. This group was not only able to occupy land for farming purposes, but also for residence, which increased the demand for land.

Unlike household members, whose land rights rested with the household concerned, outsiders were often allocated land from the communal stock by the *sabhuku*. After 1983, the land challenges were further compounded by the lack of movement to the resettlement areas as resettlement stalled in Matabeleland (see Alexander 1991), and the Sotane Ranch resumed operations as a Safari Ranch, leaving livestock and people contesting for space in the communal area. Moreover, there is some evidence from my ethnography that in one of the villages some people were able to exercise '*madiro*', for completely new settlements mushroomed on common land.⁹

It was the annexation of the fields on the northern forest for a cattle grazing programme in the 1990s, however, rather than new settlements, that squeezed the land as people scrambled for fields within the settlement zone. Where fields were not lost to the project, as in other parts of the ward, rampant erosion developed and reduced cultivatable areas.

In the mean time, the resumption of operations at the Sotane Ranch provided the first disappointment for an expectant community. According to one of my informants:

Safari operations could not provide employment opportunities that were previously provided by cattle ranching activities, only a few people were employedbut not for long as the ranch soon ceased operations due to lack of business.

(Moffat Sibanda 2006 int)¹⁰

Two other companies (Sawmills Companies) had started operations in the community, logging timber from the northern forest and the ranch in the late 1980s, and these provided the bulk of local employment and business opportunities for people in the area and neighbouring communities. These operations, although they had succeeded in cushioning livelihood vulnerability and lasting as they did well into the mid-1990s, later folded leaving the majority of households in a livelihood crisis.

At the broader national level, the adoption of ESAP and the resultant retrenchments had led to the destruction of urban-based livelihoods, and the effect were felt particularly by worker-peasants. The job losses did, therefore, affect households livelihood options. Many worker-peasant households had to face the prospect of joining the ranks of the poor households whose livelihoods were made more

vulnerable through their overdependence on unreliable agriculture. Not only was there more pressure for land at the time of the FTLRRP, but also, there was perennial rain failure and below par harvests, at a time where people had seen any 'prospects of formal sector employment diminish' (Ncube 2005 int).¹¹

However, when war veterans attempted to directly occupy the Sotane Ranch, there was no invitation to people outside the local Zanu (PF) branch, in this case in an attempt to confine the occupations within Zanu (PF). Not that the people were willing and ready to support the occupation of the farm, which (when available) had historically served the grazing interests of households. To the villagers the ranch did not, therefore, constitute a crop production or settlement area, and when it was finally reallocated as an A2 model Safari Ranch to a consortium of three black business men, there were hopes for job opportunities. However, the resumption of Safari operations under the new ownership proved inadequate and, despite guarantees by the new owners of preferential employment for community members, the ranch had only employed 8 individuals by 2010, when it was abandoned, allowing villagers the liberty to poach-graze their cattle.

RECLAIMING THE ANNEXED LAND AND 'SIZIPHILE' LAND OCCUPATIONS

Throughout the second half of the 2000s, there remained unsolved the issue of land annexed by the Kusile District Council for the pilot grazing project in the late 1990s. Then in 2011, following yet another drought and harvest failure, villages moved into the project area and reclaimed their former fields. By 2013 vast areas, even those that had not been cultivated before, had been developed for fields and were put under cultivation. State authorities in Zimbabwe are known for their discomfort with unauthorised land occupations, but in this case the Kusile District Council was conspicuous for lack of action.

Even before the first harvest was obtained from the reclaimed fields, another land occupation of a similar nature was taking place on land south of the settlements – what was the former arable zone. After the winter of 2012 a group of villagers, mostly unemployed adults between the ages of 30 and 45 and acting independently, moved into the land and began developing land for cultivation, and without informing the chief of the area. As one of the field owners explained:

Everything happened so fast, I cannot remember the sequence of events. ...what I think happened was that one person started clearing land and others followed. There was never any meeting

where the occupation was discussed, no individual or political party...people did not need politicians to know that they are starving.....people have been hungry for too long.

(Moses Ngwenya 2014 int)

Initially, there were relatively few people involved (around 10 people started the occupations), others remained apprehensive of the repressive state. However, land occupiers believed they were right and had points of reference:

This land is idle and has been idle for too long. It has not been utilised for grazing since the Sotane became available, and even before..... since the decline of the community herd, pastures had never posed a challenge.... there is plenty of fallow land here. We are not the first people to plough this land. In some villages, there are settlements and fields south of this road....yet these people were not chastised. In others, these settlements are even a recent occurrence.....in some, people started settling across the road immediately after independence....some were spurred by the harvest failures in the late 1980s and early 1990s....but what do we do here? Continue to starve on that degraded land while fertile land lies idle, and is home only to baboons? So, you tell me that baboons are better than people?

(Martin Ndlovu 2014 int)

Other people were wary of moving into land dominated by crop eating beasts like baboons, monkeys and wild pigs, and there was also the issue of the community roaming livestock herd. After all, villagers had raised concerns about the new fields, the potential conflict they would bring, and had expressed their unwillingness to change their grazing patterns.¹² But for those who took the risk, there were opportunities to determine field sizes (*tema madiro*) and the quality of the soils (black clay loams) were a major pull. In reality land sizes were relatively smaller and located on a variety of soil types, ranging from salty clay to the fertile black clay loams.

The following year, however, after the chief appeared to endorse the new developments on condition that field owners fenced their fields, more people moved in to clear fields for themselves until all cultivatable land was occupied. Others even crossed the river and developed fields on the southern river bank, but all land occupiers continued to hold onto land in the village, despite its poor quality. Land occupiers also went to great length to build brushwood fences around their fields although some also maintained a visible presence to guard against baboons and monkeys.

Primarily as a result of the farmers' past farming experiences, crops such as maize, sorghum, pumpkins, melons and sweet cane were cultivated following the

intercropping system. For those occupying land on the river bank, vegetables and tubers like potatoes and sweet potatoes were also produced under supplementary watering.

In the context of past behaviour, the radicalisation of attitudes was unexpected. It is evident that land occupations, taking place as they did in the second decade of the twenty first century, combined aspects of livelihood and other frustrations. Since the redistribution of the ranch in 2000, expected job opportunities never materialised, yet on the agriculture front villagers continued to struggle for a decent harvest. As it has become apparent, the land occupiers were constituted by people whose livelihood were vulnerable – they were mainly unemployed and had seen their agricultural production frustrated in the village.

Unlike the popular '*jambanja*' land occupations of 1999 and 2000 (Chaumba *et al.* 2003), these land occupiers were a mix lot (political orientation, lineage groupings, asset endowment), and superficially, they were all united by the attraction of fertile clay loams (*isidaka*), and possibly, a better harvest (at least for those more able to utilise the land).

Many of the field owners tended to be young and owned no assets of their own, and after clearing the land they left to seek jobs elsewhere. Lukas, for example, was only 21, recently married and employed as a herd boy locally. He had no assets and came from one of the poor families that relied

on resource-pooling arrangements with neighbours to till their land. While he held no land in the village, the family had large fields and had inherited fields left behind by relatives that relocated to the resettlement farms. He joined the land occupations in 2014, but left for South Africa in 2015.

Whilst recognising that land occupiers were diverse, I want here to focus on certain individuals and the role they played in the ‘*siziphile*’ land occupations. Some of these individuals represented institutions of governance in rural areas through the Traditional Leaders Act of 1998, which conferred traditional structures of chiefs and headmen with authority over land. Here I provide a brief account of how certain individual acted.

Tyson, for example was 46 years old, unemployed and the elder of three brothers. A descendant of a *sili* lineage that headed one of the villages in the ward, he was appointed headman after the death of his father, and was the custodian of land and natural resources (including the former arable zone) in his area as outlined in the 1998 Act. Being headman, he presided over disputes and passed judgments. After assuming the headship, he had developed fields adjacent to the former arable forest *matiro*-style. When the land occupation first began in the summer of 2012, and despite his position as headman, he had helped himself to

land on black clay soils in the contested forest. In January 2016, he joined his brother in South Africa leaving the land to his wife.

Similarly Reginald, 38 years, married with three young children was the Acting Headman in a neighbouring village. He was related to a lineage that controlled relatively the largest amount of land in the whole of the Menyezwa area. As part of the village lineage, he had access to land in the village, and in 2000 he had taken over land from relatives who had relocated to the resettlement areas in Umguza District. The late headman, who led the village from late colonialism to the 1990s, was known for prudence in land-use and allocation practices, that the village remained the most under-populated and environmentally protected to date. Reginald had never held a permanent job although he had been to Botswana and had also occupied part-time jobs locally, and owned only a herd of donkeys inherited from his late parents, which he used for draft power. However, even with all the land at his disposal and his position of trust, he was among the first people to occupy the former grazing zone.

The situation of Jericho Mpofu, 28 years, married and with a young family, was rather different from the two in that he did not hold a position of authority in his village although he was next in line to the headship. His brother was the

substantive headman of one of the crowded villages that had faced challenges of land for cultivation since the annexation of field in the northern forest. But land had since become available after the radical reassertion of land rights after 2011, and Jericho had access to land in the forest. He was not employed, and depended mainly on casual jobs. In 2012, he and a few other men from his village started establishing homes on the occupied land. He even went further than others by crossing the river into the Sotane Ranch where he developed his fields.¹³

Leo Gwebu, 50 years old, was a good example of those who joined the occupations late, either because they thought the occupation would be short-lived or they were bound by a sense of responsibility. Leo was an Acting Headman, and was related to the kraal lineage that he currently leads. In 2011 he had led his people to reclaim the land that was annexed for the grazing project in the northern forest, and had redeveloped his parents' old fields, which he was still cultivating in 2016. Although he had never held a formal job, he had inherited the family estate including a herd of cattle.

However, he lacked farming acumen – having confined livelihood activities to subsistence production and off-farm activities that included fishing, gambling and beer brewing. When the occupation of the former arable forest began, he had condemned the acts, which he referred to as ‘acts of

stupidity’ (Gwebu 2014 int). But after realising that the land occupiers had a better harvest, he joined the occupations in 2014 and established fields on the southern bank of the river.

CONCLUSION

As the Zimbabwean state closed the land reform and resettlement chapter, endorsing the process as a resounding success, *madiro*-type ‘land occupations’ of both communal and private land tell a different story. In Zimbabwe, ‘*madiro*’ has a long pedigree, beginning as it did in the 1950s as a response to the NLHA, it was expropriated in the postcolonial period as an expression of land hunger, and while postcolonial state policy has always been opposed to acts of ‘squatting’, the state was often ambiguous in its response – violently evicting squatters at times and paying a blind eye in others.

Taking advantage of this ambiguity and occupying land in the hope of complicity by state officials, but also, exploiting the state’s questioned legitimacy at the local levels due to stagnated progress in land delivery, land ‘self-provisioning’ came to dominate and define grievance over land, and became a central tool for postcolonial land restitution. The crisis of authority in rural areas together with the ambiguities in land governance inherent in the dualistic structure of traditional leaders and local government

authority (District Councils) (see Alexander 1994; Mohamed-Katerere 2003: 124), provided a fertile terrain for dissatisfied groups to present their grievances and assert land rights.

The tendency for the communities, over the years, to identify land for redistribution through '*madiro*' leads to the question whether these correspond with the '*siziphile*' land occupations in this former reserve in southern Lupane District. After all, it would appear that people took advantage of the confusion in rural authority, the flexibility of the communal tenure system and complicity by traditional structures. Thus, they assessed the risks and when the state did not react, it seemed to lower the risk.

Even for all this, it occurs to me that the emphasis on farming livelihoods may be misplaced, given the history of land politics in the region, and the history of this society in particular and the timing of the 'land occupations'. A stance taken here, right or wrong, is that the recourse to '*madiro*' was a response to the destruction of livelihoods following disappointments with local job opportunities and a general job squeeze nationally as the economy went into a free fall, and the crisis of agriculture in the communal area following years of harvest failure. The overriding concern of villagers, it would appear, was to maintain a certain level of production to offset the threat to semi-proletarianisation, but they were

quick to abandon the fields when opportunities for semi-proletarianisation arose.

NOTES

- ¹. The Land Apportionment Act effectively divided the country into two – one for settler whites and another for blacks – but it also provided land for black commercial farming in African Purchase Areas.
- ². Even the Sotane Ranch, which is located on a rich belt of black loam soils, was first and foremost a cattle ranch, with only minimum cultivation taking place on land near the farmhouse, mainly under irrigation.
- ³. This is the land that was subjected to *madiro*-type land occupations in 2012.
- ⁴. Chief Gumede later ceded the area and his subjects to Chief Mabhikwa Khumalo who had arrived in this part of the reserves in 1947 and settled on the Shangani Valley in what is now called Jotsholo, when he (Gumede) relocated to Tongamuzi deep into the northern forest.
- ⁵. 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.
- ⁶. Interview with a community elder, Menyezwa, 16 Dec. 2014.

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- ⁷. Interview with a head of household, Menyezwa, 28 Dec. 2005.
 - ⁸. Even land released for grazing had a claimant, and people referred to it as ‘*amafusi akwa....*(so and so’s land)’.
 - ⁹. These settlements were later endorsed and granted a separate headship following the communal area reform after the enactment of the Traditional Leaders Act in 1989.
 - ¹⁰. Interview with a land occupant, Menyezwa, 20 Aug. 2006.
 - ¹¹. Interview with Collins Ncube, Menyezwa, 5 Nov. 2005
 - ¹². Since the Sotane was abandoned after its FTLRRP allocation to a business consortium, villagers would drive their herds into the ranch without minding them.
 - ¹³. The Sotane is a Safari Ranch, which is very popular with wild pigs, baboons and monkeys, and in seasons with good rains, the Gwayi River floods from November to February.

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