Ecological Impacts of Land Struggles in Makonde District, Zimbabwe: 1890 to Present

Vimbai Chaumba Kwashirai

Summary

Land remains the most important resource in Zimbabwe's economy. In the Makonde District, Shona people's lives have been reliant on land from time immemorial. The skewed colonial land policy privileging whites was unstainable as it introduced sharp racial inequalities. Unsustainable too was the haphazard land reform in 2000 that sought to redress colonial inequities but at the same time ushered in widespread environmental degradation, in Makonde specifically and Zimbabwe more generally. The government has dramatically fallen short when it comes to addressing problems arising from land nationalization, land rights, land tenure, scarce energy, resource conservation, and sustainable livelihoods in sparsely distributed agrarian communities like Makonde.

> *Humans are daughters and sons of the soil; they come from, and go back to the soil.*
>
> —Zimbabwean cultural belief

One overarching subject in modern Zimbabwean history concerns land struggles, as reflected in a case study of the Makonde District. This article is informed by extant and interviews conducted in Makonde. Land distribution and ownership in Makonde has generated debates and disputes concerning environmental destruction, land rights, and land tenure. Traditional land management was hugely informed by indigenous knowledge enshrined by spirit guardians as a means through which ritually controlled ecosystems functioned. The ownership, allocation, and control of land, game, forests, and water resources all fell within the spiritual realm. Several woodland phenomena—trees, rocks, mountains, and pools—were made holy, consumed, and conserved by cultural and spiritual design. Indeed, long before Yellowstone, localized natural resource conservancies already existed in Makonde specifically, and Zimbabwe more generally, in the form of sacred groves, *rambotemwa*—the first national parks in the world.

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Harvesting tomatoes for sale at home.

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With the intrusion of British colonialism during the years 1890–1980, land alienation in Makonde and countrywide became widespread, often building up to punitive evictions of indigenous Shona from well-watered prime plateau land, freely appropriated by white settlers. The colonial state built a bureaucratic apparatus to serve its own vested interests and those of the metropole. It adopted universal land use planning categories and through rubrics such as rational and scientific use, and it created commercial farms, national parks, planned forests, and game reserves in Makonde. The 1930 Land Apportionment Act was a cornerstone of a major legal framework for racial land segregation, which guaranteed the economic dominance of whites, confining black people to servitude and poverty. The indigenous population was relegated to the so-called African reserves—"where stones grew better than grass" and with poor rainfall, conditions that compelled the Shona to migrate and work as ultra-cheap labor for capitalist white-owned mines, farms, and industries.

A civil war brought independence in 1980 but for 20 years the land reform in Makonde (and Zimbabwe) was stalled by powerful black and white interest groups. However, from 2000 to 2005, after a long hiatus, Zimbabwe's land reform was undertaken to provide landholdings to an estimated half a million black households. Nonetheless, millions of households remained in congested communal areas. In Makonde, the proper recognition of a basket of multiple land rights, land tenure systems, and environmental considerations was made convoluted by a legal framework characterized by a serious democracy deficit. Methodologically, the land reform process in the district was deeply flawed and embedded in lawlessness. The compulsory acquisition of former large-scale Makonde commercial farms disregarded the rule of law, disrespecting private property rights and environmental justice.

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Home. City councils sell urban land for development with space to build a house and grow crops; maize, pumpkins, groundnuts, sweet cane, etc.

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Urban stands provide for developing an orchard; mangoes, oranges, lemon, bananas, paw paws, peaches, avocado, etc.

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Gardening. Urban residential lands provide space for gardening; carrots, cabbages, tomatoes, onions, beetroot, cucumber, etc.

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In Makonde, the natural environment suffered severely as a result of the haphazard land reform. Land beneficiaries of the Model A (average of 5–6 hectares) plots and Model B (average of 10–50 hectares) holdings, as well as large farm owners, originated from diverse backgrounds: civil servants, war veterans, peasants, army, police. Some of them lacked knowledge and experience of sustainable farming practices. Makonde farmers, who were resettled between 2000 and 2005, rapaciously extracted and exploited wildlife such as game and the wilderness's natural resources such as firewood. Greater human encroachment on wildlife habitats and wilderness resources for agricultural production was exacerbated by galloping inflation of over 250 million percent, in which Zimbabwe lost its currency and dollarized the economy. Unemployment had soared to an unprecedented level of more than 70 percent among the able-bodied working-age groups. Macroeconomic fundamentals had virtually been destroyed.

Environmental degradation in Makonde and across Zimbabwe reflected people's desperation, especially the 70 percent of the 13 million-strong population earning their livelihoods from the land. Also, 70 percent of the total

population were living below the poverty threshold. Rural dwellers generally lacked access to hydropower electricity. Under these circumstances, exploiting forests for wood fuel was the only energy option. Deforestation for energy supply in rural kitchens has vexed the government environmental management agency. The agency also struggles to control hunting and poaching. Wildlife and wilderness natural resources bear the brunt of the consequences of environmental degradation in this Anthropocene age—the current geological period during which human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and environmental transformation.



Communal lands suffer from soil erosion.

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The nationalization of more than 80 percent of Zimbabwe's land, in which the government holds land in trust for the people, has merits and demerits. Redressing the historical land imbalances aside, the poor have access to free land. Both Model A and B farmers possess *offer letters* signaling their rights to land but lack critical tenure security on their holdings. Despite the lack of incentives to conserve communal resources, farmers are developing novel consumption/conservation strategies on the land. Farmers' clubs conserve fields, pastures, and water sources through shared ideas and practices like crop/pasture rotation.

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