Local Environmental Conservation Strategies: Karanga Religion, Politics and Environmental Control

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SUMMARY

In southern and central Zimbabwe, religious and political authority is drawn from land guardianship cults. Intellectuals have emphasised the role of these cults in providing communal economic and ecological benefits. Schoffeleers, for example, stated:

> Territorial cults are rituals to counteract droughts, floods, blights, pests and epidemic disease afflicting cattle and man ... territorial cults function in respect of the well-being of the community, its fields and livestock ... and the general economic interests ... they also issue and enforce directives with regard to a community's use of the environment ... The impact of territorial cults on the ecological system is such that, borrowing Rappaport's phrase, we may justifiably speak of a 'ritually directed ecosystem'.[1]

This article questions Schoffeleers' interpretation. It argues that local religious institutions are used by ruling lineages for political control, to grant preferential access to particular resources and to enhance political hegemony. The symbolism expressed in the rituals and environmental taboos is more powerful than the idiom of 'conservation'. Researchers should be more sceptical when they talk about a 'ritually controlled ecosystem'.

INTRODUCTION

This article concerns environmental religion and the local institutions of environmental control. It is based on research in semi-arid Zvishavane, Chivi and neighbouring districts, which are located in the heartland of the people who now refer to themselves as 'Karanga'. Information was collected through interviews, by attending rituals, visiting places of religious significance and observing and participating in rural development and conservation.[2]

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The notion of 'conservation' and an economically managed environment are not the main emphases of Karanga rituals. This does not mean that environmental religion does not have major ecological effects; just that the practices do not generate a 'conservation strategy' in the scientific sense. 'Conserved' resources are often used by the ruling lineage at the expense of the wider community of outsider lineages (*vatogwa*). More frequently, resource control by ruling lineages is a tool to legitimise their leadership. People's practices clearly modified their ecosystem and even enhanced the value of their land to some extent. However, the politicisation of resource management institutions meant that resources were not always being conserved optimally for the benefit of society as a whole. However, a participatory approach to research and development can transform local institutions for the better.

Rural communities do not have a single belief system and common set of perceptions and behaviour. Though individuals share an environment, they compete for natural resources: they have well defined personal interests as well as group concerns. People are in different situations, with different opportunities for enhancing their own status and access to resources. Chiefs, lineage elders, the young and old, rich and poor, men and women all try to manipulate the supposedly shared belief system to their own advantage. Individuals' arguments about what should be done based on 'traditional' values, were not the same as what they appeared to believe and practice themselves. Chiefs, for example, have shaped the whole concept of 'conservation' to their own advantage: rather than acting as the humble guardians of society's common interests, they have sought personal gain through preferential access to rural resources. This is not to suggest that rural society is completely dominated by selfish political and economic motives, but rather that indigenous conservation institutions should be regarded as centres of inherent conflict.

CONTROL OF RAINFALL AND WETLAND ACCESS

The study area is within natural regions officially categorised 'four' and 'five'. It is a semi-arid zone, with rainfall of about 400 to 600mm per annum, and frequent droughts are experienced. During bad droughts many farmers run short of food, which in the past was purchased from good farmers (*hurudza*). For such farmers droughts were a blessing in disguise: in areas such as Bungowa and central Chivi, where there are extensive areas of productive wetlands (*makuvi*), the good farmers have benefitted much in past droughts from this trading. Within the region there are two woodland types. On sandveld, often associated with patches of granitic hills, there is the diverse miombo type. Heavy soil plains support mopane woodlands, with areas of *Combretum* spp. and *Acacia* spp.

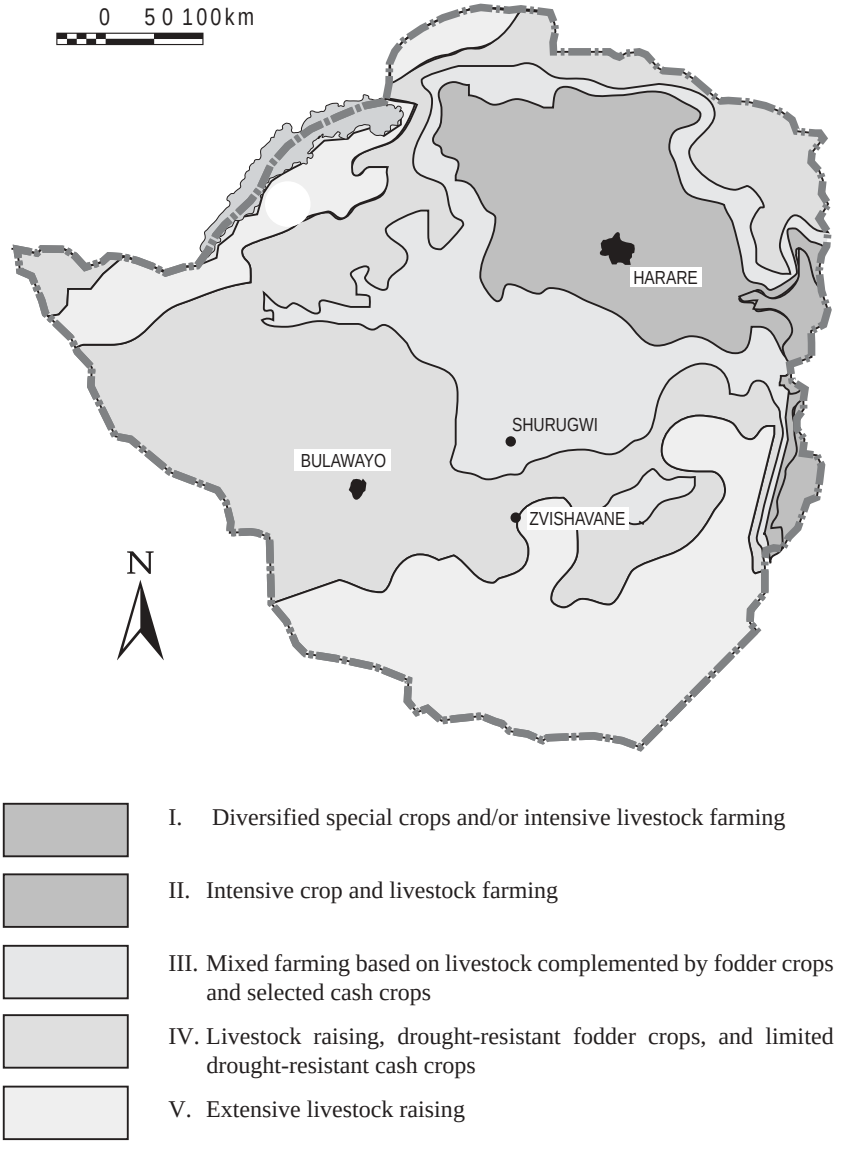

FIGURE 1. 'Natural farming regions' of Zimbabwe (after Nelson 1983)

The provision of rainfall is a central issue for environmental religion – a fact that is hardly surprising in such a dry area with very variable rainfall. Controlling rainfall greatly enhances the status of ruling lineages, who achieve control through access to land spirits who are their own ancestors, or by attempting to communicate with autochthonous spirits. As dynasties have recently expanded in southern Zimbabwe,[3] immigrant lineages have virtually suppressed autochthons over only a few centuries. This process seems to have been particularly rapid during the colonial period. What seem to have been autochthonous Rozvi-related institutions, such as *mhondoro* (lion spirits), have declined almost to insignificance.[4] Maybe this is because the lions were killed by white settlers.

The nineteenth century saw people confined to patches of defensible hills, and factionalism was limited by the need for military alliances. The colonial period subsequently encouraged and enabled a spreading out of people. Spatial expansion was coupled with an increasing tendency for chiefly lineage to divide into separate 'houses', and with the growth of 'wards' as more important political institutions. Division was caused by the combination of collateral succession, population increase, and demilitarisation. These emerging 'traditional' rulers have been very concerned to enhance their religious standing. This could be because they were losing legitimacy under colonial rule where the administration installed them and gave them new legal powers so as to use them as a tool of white authority.[5]

It is important at this stage to introduce the concept of Zame. Zame is the Karanga rain-god, or the so-called *mwari we kumabwa* (god of the rocks/hills). However, field studies showed that Zame is not the only god who provides the Karanga with rain. Rainfall comes from four directions, and each points to the providing god. The others are Fupajena of the Duma, Musikavanhu, and Muchembere of the eastern region (who provides the drizzle [*guti*] in February-March). Furthermore these gods can fight, resulting in droughts.

My interest in Zame was to find out whether he offered any form of control over natural resources. But in fact it seems he rarely even mentions them at his oracle in the Matopos Hills. He is more involved in settling political disputes,[6] and particularly in solving 'domestic' problems. He does not actively protect trees in particular, except fruit trees in a general way. It can be difficult to know whether a statement is from Zame or the government. For example, during the 1982-4 drought Zame was reported to have urged people to plant drought-resistant crops, whilst government extension agents were campaigning for the planting of the same crops and government advice was also being broadcast over the radio. Probably one could say Zame is also moving with the times. But grain varieties may not reflect Zame's concerns at all. The attribution of this advice to Zame may reflect peasant consciousness and peasants' long history of resistance to foreign interventions. Their acceptance of this new crop variety required some legitimacy from Zame.

To most Karanga, Zame is just like any of the great land spirits. He is the senior *jukwa* spirit, the *jukwa guru*. He works within a specified territory with boundaries, which cannot be an attribute of a high god. At these boundaries of his area he competes with other land spirits. Some people hold the extreme notion that Zame is just an ancestral spirit which is used by a clan for economic benefits, of which tribute money for rainfall (*rusengwe*) is the most important. In this context an ex-chief maintained:

> Zame and company are now broke, what you can see are just old scrap cars ... and I only went there when I was chief because I feared people would kill me if I refused to go and ask for rain ...

Legitimacy for many ritual, political and resource management decisions is attributed to Zame. For example, apical lineage ancestors have their own rainmaking festivals known as *mitoro* or *mikwerere*. These rituals are held so that people can ask for rainfall from Zame through their lineage ancestors. People mostly claim that *mitoro* rituals are done under instruction from Zame. *Mitoro* tend to be held at the beginning of the rainy season, though if rains come early they can be forgotten altogether, and during droughts they may be done more than once. The ritual is held under big trees such as *muchakata* (*Parinari curatellifolia*). During the festival the spirits that possess people are said to be descending from these *muchakata* trees. To cut such a tree would be regarded as a crime, or even as sabotage, by the owning clan. Even normal ecological 'die-back' of some of these trees was attributed to witchcraft by malicious clan-rivals. In one case in which a tree used in rain-making ceremonies died, Zame had to decree that there was nothing wrong with the site.

The *mutoro* beer is brewed by women of post-menopausal age, and in theory, the grain to be used is soaked in natural water-filled depressions in granite outcrops (*makawa*). Zame is supposed to send rain to fill these depressions and soak the grain within a few days of it having been put there. Thereafter, the brewed beer is supposed to be carried to the ritual by old women and young girls. A goat or sheep is killed, usually at the top of a hill near the ancestor's grave, and what is not consumed is thrown into the fire. The grave is then swept, and a pot of beer left at the grave-side so that the *mbada* (lion/leopard) can come and consume it. The truth is that the beer is drunk by a member of an outsider-lineage (*mutogwa*), who carries the pot secretly to the ruling elder. The latter then claims to have visited the grave early in the morning and generally reports seeing the footprints of the lion or leopard.

The role of the members of subject-lineages is only to contribute the *rusengwe* tribute to Zame, and beer and grain for the festival. During the ritual they have to shout the praise-names (*zvidawo*) of the ruling lineage and of Zame. Where *mitoro* are organised by vassal lineages themselves, however, paramount lineages are not so subordinate. One *mutoro* holder in Chivi grumbled that 'they

only come so as to drink the large amount of beer at the ritual'. Where the ceremony is actually being held at the grave of someone important who is not in fact an ancestor of the ruling lineage this information is not freely disclosed.

Only after detailed research did it become clear that most of the *mitoro* being held in this region were actually established during the colonial period, as created rather than maintained traditions. They are mostly dedicated to people who died in the last century. The spirits chosen may be recent ancestors of the elders who are trying to promote the *mutoro*, or they may be the spirits of *myusa* (*mwari*-cult messengers), which appeal to a different Iegitimacy. Immigrant peoples, both within areas of ancient settlement and also in newly opened areas (claimed by more distant chiefs), have started their own *mitoro* to enhance their autonomy. Chiefly lineages accuse them of insubordination. The immigrant elders who establish them aim to strengthen their standing and prestige. The *mitoro* in any given area can often be seen as competing: one *mutoro* has often captured the ancestral spirit of its more ancient neighbour.

In 1946 one population group was evicted from part of the neighbouring district (Chivi-Central), including two family-heads. Before eviction, they had observed one *mutoro* dedicated to their father Musvuvugwa. When the District Commissioner changed in 1959-60 they were allowed to return: the former mutoro-owner 'A' returned to find that 'B' had already taken over the *mutoro* and moved the site. The previous messenger (actually a female mbonga) and the *svikiro* (medium) for Musvuvugwa had both died. 'B' captured the *mutoro* by taking his own *nyusa* (messenger) and *svikiro* from the same house. Moving the site enabled him to get it under the name of his own faction, but it is only one of the *mitoro* presently being directed to Musvuvugwa.

Commissioned *mitoro* are commonly held in areas where immigrants have become well-established. They are organised by fairly autonomous immigrants, but are held at the grave of, and directed to, a member of the ruling lineage. Sometimes supplication is done by a member of the ruling lineage. There is likely to be serious dispute in cases where immigrants have set up their own *mitoro* to their own ancestral settler (usually quite recently deceased), without the permission of the ruling lineage.

Similarly, some emergent headmen have established an independent link for their own *nyusa* (messenger) with the *mwari* cult centre. Important *nyusa* lineages have been the subject of competition; headmen who cannot get appropriate people have been forced to appoint elders from within the chiefly lineage faction on an ad hoc basis.

Mitoro are idealised as strengthening social homogeneity and communal values, but in fact they tend to be focal points for disputes. Attendance at *mitoro* is effectively a barometer of the strength of headmen in different areas. Other members of the ruling lineage and immigrant (*vatogwa*) people react differently to this call for unity in attendance. Ruling lineage members tend to fall into three categories according to the strategy they adopt. Those in distant 'houses' can

only get the *mutoro* if they can capture the political leadership of the ward as a whole. They tend to therefore distance themselves, weakening the impressiveness of the *mutoro*. But they cannot withdraw completely as they need the *mutoro* to remain a legitimate institution. A second strategy is used to subordinate members of the faction in power. They strengthen the *mutoro*, perceiving long term benefits. Thirdly some leading people are close enough to power that they try actively to capture the *mutoro* during the performance. Outsider lineages can resist attendance and the paying of *rusengwe* (tribute). During mitoro they can break regulations to demonstrate their insubordination.

People in different positions in regard to any particular *mutoro* would make different belief-claims about the functioning of the rituals. Organising elders sometimes admitted privately that they did not believe in the rituals causing rain. Numerous *nyusa* messengers have been convicted of embezzling funds donated to *mwari*. Taboos presented at length to the public, such as on sexual abstinence, may be privately flouted. The nature of the taboos has evolved recently: for example, the soap called *jerimani* is now being treated as an ancient and hence ritually pure substance.

CONSERVATION AS ECONOMIC PRIVILEGE FOR THE RULING LINEAGES

Environmental religion provides ruling lineages with economic privileges, as chiefs struggle to Iegitimise their control of land. *Badza* payments for opening fields were often paid by immigrants. Though this was with the support of the colonial regime, based on some inventing of history, the chiefs remained anxious to make it seem purposeful for the preservation of the ecological order.

Ruling lineages maintained special rights to certain game, such as the pangolin (*hhambakubvu*), and to portions of all big game eaten (e.g. a forelimb, *bandavuko*). Whilst this did secure and bolster their political status, it also had clear economic benefits when hunting was frequent. The fields of the ruling lineages used to be cultivated by tributary labour (*zunde*). The chiefs could justify this as essential for maintaining the productivity of the land, for example, to ensure rainfall.

Since independence the rise of the party and the village development committee (Vidco) structure means that chiefly lineages have suffered. Chiefly lineage leaders have argued that the people belong to the government, but the land belonged to the ancestors, and hence should be managed by themselves. The bad droughts 1982-4 and 1986-7 have certainly bolstered the chiefs' claims, and the government has now decided to reinstate some of their authority. But land allocation remains outside their jurisdiction. During the late 1987-8 rainy season the dispute over whether pangolins should be given to President Mugabe or local chiefs was on the television and in the national press almost daily.

Examples can also be found where Zame and chiefs did not manage environmental rules for their own benefit. An example is the *mavhenekera nyika* fine which was imposed on anyone who caused (unwanted) veld fires. The chief was supposed to be the one who set alight the first hunting season fire. Chiefs also resisted development that increased rural differentiation on religious lines. Burnt bricks and the use of cement were not allowed for building homes in Mazvihwa until quite recently. They were described as dead, and *kuvuraya nyika* (killing the country). Abandoned homes, (it was said) would be devoid of grass: the community as a whole would lose a piece of territory.

SACRED WET PLACES: PERCEPTIONS AND CONSERVATION

Perceptions of conservation and sacredness of wetland are a fascinating subject.[7] Sacredness (*kuyera/kuzira*) can be translated as abstinence, and the sacred wetland can only be approached carefully and observing avoidance taboos. It is clear that at the base of any rural society the environment is not inert. There are forces embedded within the environment of the living and the dead. This may sound illogical but it is not possible to use an iron tin to fetch water from a sacred pool. A gourd is required, and this creates a special relationship.

Research on this topic has been carried out in the districts already referred to. However, Mwenezi, which was settled by people from many areas after the promulgation of the Land Apportionment Act also adhered to the same beliefs and rituals. Referring to southern Zimbabwe, water is immediately brought to mind. Water keeps Zame alive, and there is a lot of evidence that in a drought Zame gains particular prominence. Places with water are often revered and protected. Sacredness becomes more common and strongly appreciated when the site is natural.

For the Karanga, wetlands are guarded by live 'natural' animals or rather beings whose survival in a place means the continued availability of water. It is these that *kuchengeta* (keep/look after) a place, and make it sacred. These pools represent the world of the *vari pasi* (those below), and this world reflects our world. Homes are established and voices can be heard calling cattle for milking while dogs bark, indicating that there is a whole world active beneath the pool. Sounds are often followed by the filling of the pool. To Karanga these are not just geophysical adjustments but also the work of *njuzu* (water sprites), which are one of the types of pool guardians. *Njuzu* have been described as half-human, and often pull wrong-doers into the pool. Those dragged in are most commonly lighter brown in complexion and those who wash with soap or use metal utensils to draw water.

The people taken by *njuzu* often find themselves below the deep pools being fed on mud and worms. Those who refuse are often killed, and those released become *n'anga* (herbalists) of great repute using the powerful *jukwa* spirits. That

this happens is subject to doubt as there seem to be no recent occurrences. The frequent deaths at these pools (usually of children) are said by some rural sceptics to be due to python-attacks, as indicated by blood coming out of their noses.

In some cases snakes act as guardians: some are pythons, but there may also be a strange variety called *mvuvamacheche*. Catfish (*mhatye*) can also be guardians of sacred wetplaces. As long as the guardians remain present then the continued existence of the pool is guaranteed.

Similar sacred pools can be found on top of granite hills and these may be called *ninga*, a term which also refers to the *njuzu* (water sprite).[8] Again it is the presence of the *njuzu* that controls the amount of water. These places can be called *hozhobwe*. One I visited in 1987 was dry, and the headman explained that the water in it had been called by the water in the sky and would return when it wanted. The use of soap at the site may have explained the lack of water, but the headman observed that *jerimani* soap (the earliest soap brand introduced) is preferred by the *njuzu*. Water from this pool is used for the soaking of grain to brew the beer for rituals such as the *mitoro*. The water is said to be clean in its own domain: it has not been tainted by contact with the human domain.

These wetlands cannot be taken out of context because they are found at the centre of societies in dry regions. Water from these places is used by *n'anga* to initiate possession and the water is said to have healing powers. In some cases avenging spirits (*ngozi*) have been cooled using the water. It is not surprising that enterprising people have created such ponds, like one made by an immigrant healer I interviewed. Catfish were put in to be the guardians, but were fished out by a chiefly lineage member, a teacher, due to his *kudherera* (lack of respect). The pool dried up and the dispute reached the point where the teacher had to be transferred.

Two other examples can be given of the importance of wetland areas. In Chivi central a borehole that had been constructed near a sacred site had to be removed as it was suspected of making the pool dry up. This place slowly developed into something of a cult centre during the recent droughts. Even the independent churches (zionists and apostolics) came to collect 'holy water' and carried out baptism at the pond. This ended up with one of the zionists being 'swallowed' by the pond only to emerge naked through the *mhino* ('nose': two small pools further down). Both the church groups and traditional lineage elders want to take control. Using cement to up-grade wells in this area is another matter that has led to disputes.

The processes by which a pool becomes sacred are interesting. Some are even made by people and belong to them for which they get economic benefits (see above). Most are communally owned and provide water to the rural folk near to them. Sacredness of wetlands and ponds can be proclaimed by individuals for historical spirits, for example a traditional healer with a healing spirit can say that a pond belongs to his spirit. Control of an important sacred site enhances that particular lineage faction's authority. This is clear in Chivi where there is a

VaNgowa enclave in the Mhari chiefdom, which controls a famous *chidziva* (pond). There are also agricultural benefits attached to these wet places, because farming near them makes for good yields, especially in drought years. This increases social standing and brings power. This is why access to wetlands is so unequal and why they are mainly held by leaders of ruling lineages.

SACRED MOUNTAINS

Sacred mountains and hills are also places revered in Karanga religion. These are mostly connected with burial sites of the Rozvi people and also of clan founders. Most of them also have wet places which are also sacred. In Mazvihwa each hill is associated with one ruling section of the ruling lineage. It is in these hills that clan rituals are held, for example the mitoro. These hills serve as symbols for the clans they are associated with.

Mount Bupwa (Buchwa) is one of the most famous sacred mountains in south central Karangaland. There has been a lot of debate about this mountain.[9] It is rich in iron ore, and mining of the site could have started as early as the thirteenth century. The people who stayed around the mountain are the so-called VaMizha (craftsmen) who made iron hoes, axes and spears for the Mwenemutapa or Changamire. They were subdued by the Mgowa tribe. The mountain is believed to have graves of some important Rozvi. But of late the Ngowa have wanted them to be called Ngowa grave-sites.

Bupwa mountain is presently being mined by ZISCO (Zimbabwe Iron and Steel Company), and this has been a thorn in the flesh of the local ruling lineage. Many stories have been told about how the mountain refused to be mined for a long time. In these accounts a lot of people disappeared and are said to have been taken away by the mountain spirits. These sprits are generally described as *mapa* (given by Zame).

Another feature of Mount Bupwa is that the people a distance away think that the *kuyera* or sacred things on the mountain are Rozvi, because the Rozvi were really the owners of the mountain. The VaNgowa who stay nearby claim that the spirits there belong to Ngowa of the praise-name 'musaigwa'. Generally Bupwa is referred to by them as *Gomo raMataruse* (Ngowa chief Mataruse's mountain).

Truly people believe that Bupwa is *zame's* mountain. The mining of the mountain is seen as killing the country by causing droughts. Spirits withhold rain due to their anger at being disturbed. Miners are said to experience a lot of problems with ore extraction. Low quality ore can be found after massive and expensive blasts, and this is said to cause most problems. In order to get the good ore, it is said they have to call an Ngowa person to come and propitiate and supplicate the Ngowa spirits. This has been denied by the mine management (but this could be for professional reasons), who say these are simply Ngowa claims. The truth is that the freedom fighters killed Mataruse Dzingai, the Ngowa chief

in the 1970s, on the accusation that he had 'sold the mountain to the capitalists', by supplicating his Ngowa ancestors to make the way for the mining. He is also said to have been given a lot of money after the ceremony. According to oral interviews this kind of supplication, called *kufupira* (to make the place quiet), has not stopped. It is said that the mine management often secretly consult ruling lineage elders whenever 'their things are not moving properly'.

Although the mining has been going on for a long time at Bupwa, and some parts of the mountain have been completely destroyed, the people around the mountain believe that the place is still sacred. The parts of the mountain described as the most sacred have changed from time to time as the mine advances. Originally the whole mountain was sacred but these days only the southern end is said to be the sacred part. I was shown a mound near the mine pit, which the informant claimed was left because the dynamite failed to blow it up. But the mine management denies that its sacredness protected it. They claim that the mound is of low quality iron ore. Accidents on the mine are explained by locals and workers as the works of ancestral spirits who are against the mining of the mountain.

Karanga do not think that they are controlling the mining process, but through being consulted by the mine management the chiefs feel that their position is recognised and hence their power enhanced. The money they get for the supplications should be seen as marginal to the value of sacredness in maintaining their political hegemony.

The mountain should burn at the start of a good rainy season. Zame is supposed to set it alight, but rumour has it that some of the chiefs secretly start fires so that they can legitimise their power and hence maintain recognition. If the mountain does not burn, the chief's rule is questioned: Zame is saying that he should not be chief and therefore the rains will be poor. Of late the mountain has burnt but the rains have been poor, and this reinforces the questioning of local cynics as to whether it is being illicitly burnt. Continued droughts maintain mountain burning as an issue.

It can be concluded that the 'conservation' of sacred mountains is in fact similar to that of wetland conservation, and the sacred woodlands described below. The issue is actually one of 'resource control' rather than 'management'. Sacred places act as supporting pillars to the political hegemony of ruling lineages, in the sense that they function as symbols of identification and legitimisation.

TRADITIONAL PERCEPTIONS AND MANAGEMENT OF INDIGENOUS WOODLAND

Karanga societies have set management strategies for indigenous trees. The bulk of these strategies were never recorded but were carefully passed on from

generation to generation. Detailed research had to be undertaken to identify what people were doing and what they knew. Though local management of woodland management gives an encouraging picture of what can be achieved by indigenous resource management, some aspects of tree conservation are also tools of political authority.

Sacred woodlands (called *rambotemwa*: refuse to cut) contribute with other sacred places to the spiritual and hence political hegemony of the ruling elite. These were left for Zame and linked to autochthonous Rozvi spirits. Each one was controlled by a chief, who is to ensure that it is not cut by outsiders or locals. There was some hunting allowed, and women could collect dead wood for firewood.

The *rambotemwa* also served as a burial ground for some of the important people of the clan. Oral sources pointed to the Rozvi in particular. In Mapanzure, for instance, the *rambotemwa* is found at the base of a hill with graves, acting as a buffer zone to this religious site. Lion spirits are also a characteristic feature of *rambotemwa*, and these are said to chase people flouting the taboos. Those with evil intentions can also encounter leopards (*mbada*), of the variety symbolic of the ancestors. People could get lost after breaking a taboo, and would only be found after propitiation of the angry spirits. Growling could indicate impending rains or dissatisfaction with rulers.

In Mazvihwa there appears to have been only one *rambotemwa*, representing all the lineage sections descending from Mazvihwa. A small rural business centre has been opened within it (called Rambotemwa Township) and the son of the late chief has opened a field in one section. Live trees are also being cut within it. These changes followed a visit by the late chief to Matonjeni to request that Zame hear the plight of Mazvihwa's children and allow them to encroach into the holy grove. This suggests that political and religious factors are more behind these woodlands than economic motivations.

It seems that *rambotemwa* Iegitimise authority. Each branch of the ruling lineage can have one which becomes important when they capture the chieftainship. A leader without one is prone to ridicule if he has to propitiate at a competing section's grove. There may have been cases where *rambotemwa* were started quite recently by such a local leader anxious for authority. There are competing claims about the one in Mototi, Mazvihwa. Like *mitoro* ritual sites described above, *rambotemwa* have risen and fallen with the clans associated with them, and ruling groups have tried to create or enhance the status of the sites they can control.

Many *rambotemwa* were destroyed by the government's imposed land-use plans in the period 1920-1960. Chiefs lost control of the land. Some were also destroyed in areas turned over to settler or mission farms. During the 1970s when the Smith regime lost control of the rural areas, some were destroyed by young people opening new land in the period known as 'madiro' (freedom, or doing what one will). The recent wave of droughts have made people less happy about

the destruction of the *rambotemwa*. Traditional leaders are reviving the punishment for those who cut.

Big trees are associated with rainfall. This link is interpreted both religiously and ecologically. Trees are said to catch clouds and initiate rainfall. But such trees are also said to harbour *hwaya*, cuckoos that migrate into the area, whose calls are said by western informants to bring on rainfall. Deforestation and drought have heightened concern to preserve these trees. The current change in wind direction has been associated with less trees and is said by many to be the cause of droughts. It is also said that there has been a general increase in wind, which carries away the clouds and the rain. As this is not a tradition it can be felt by everyone and not just chiefs.

People are not allowed to cut certain valuable fruit trees, for example *mishuku*, *misumba*, *mitobwe*, *mitamba*, *michakata*, *miwonde*.[10] According to tradition, Zame, as well as local ruling lineages promote these cutting taboos. Cutting such a tree could involve a fine of a goat. The justification is the protection of trees to provide people with fruit, etc. This is especially important to small children and in drought years. Stories are told of travellers surviving on miwonde (fig) fruits. These stories are told to children so that they can know the value of trees. Everybody benefits from such rules, and they can also be seen to improve the area in the long term. Many people in south-central Zimbabwe have left trees in fields despite the call by agricultural demonstrators to fell them. Today this seems non-religious, because the farmers explain the benefits of the trees in economic terms: providing shade, fruit and improving soil fertility. But resistance could also be articulated in the 'traditional' idiom of environmental religion, in which the chiefs and the farmers could feel relatively united.

Attempts to conserve trees around homes and in grazing areas were strategies that were not seen as chiefly impositions. They benefitted people as a whole. This is linked to the many perceived benefits from trees: that they increase rains, improve the soils, provide wood and browse for livestock. Because conserving trees was contrary to government policy people were able to mobilise environmental religion to better husband their natural resources.

Generally people perceive that though Zame and specific ancestors do not own individual fruit trees (though they do own forests), they do in some way provide them for people. For example drought years tend to be times of heavy fruiting, which helps survival.

DEVELOPING ENVIRONMENTAL RELIGION FOR CONSERVATION

The above discussion illustrates the different interests and institutions involved in Karanga environmental conservation strategies. There are limitations in the factionalistic ways these currently operate, as with chiefly institutions, which have monopolistic and exploitative conservation strategies. Control over re-

sources is not all inequitable to the same degree, however. For example, trees have not been monopolised by one group of people at the expense of others, at least in the Zimbabwean case. Tree conservation does not have a history of elitist imposition and this means people are more open to engage in it.

The rural people under discussion are not bourgeois, but their idiom of conservation is. The patch of woodland which becomes a *rambotemwa*, the ordinary grave which becomes a *mutoro* site and the small hole in the rock which becomes an *njuzu* pool can all be regarded as commodities – and everybody wants one. The owner/controller can accumulate a little prestige by association, and (perhaps) a little cash or produce, which may enable him to rise slightly above the near subsistence level his cash cropping allows.

Local Karanga environmental religious institutions do not have the economic motive of benefitting the environment for the community as a whole. Yet both individuals and institutions are engaged in resource management and have a great deal of knowledge about their environment. Since groups and individuals have divergent interests, development projects should not aim at homogeneity, but at benefitting as wide a range of people as possible. By facilitating meetings in which conflicting views are brought to the fore and challenged, development organisations can enable local communities to draw up management plans, and local development committees can make decisions that benefit the community as a whole. The most important role for development agencies in this context is to change attitudes and motives to be purely conservationist in a scientific sense. Institutions have to be redirected away from monopolistic and exploitative conservation strategies, but not alienated. The question remains, can these indigenous institutions provide a useful basis for natural resource development projects?

NOTES

[1] Schoffeleers 1979, pp.2-3.

[2] This part of Zimbabwe is my home area. I started research in 1985, assisting Ken Wilson. From 1986-7, I did the research for my by B.A. Thesis (Mukamuri 1987). I later worked for ENDA-Zimbabwe, implementing a community based woodland management project which grew out of research in Mazvihwa undertaken by a team including myself, K. Wilson, M. Chakavanda, O. Chikamba, B. Higgs, Z. Phiri, I. Scoones and others. Although hundreds of people assisted in this research, particularly helpful interviews were given by: Old Dewa, VaTangwena, acting chief Mazvihwa, Old Dzviti, England Dzviti, VaKunjani, Va Chibidi, VaMagaya, OldBwoni, Old Bunga (late), Old Mohobele, ex-chief Msizibi, Old Masinire, the late Maruvure, the late Madyzkuseni, VaMabomba, Mr and Mrs Saul Jim, VaSpikita, VaSangatowa, VaJokonya, VaChibagwe, VaHoto, Councillor Bwoni, chief Madyangove, VaPhiri, VaTsaurayi, VaChikombeka, Mrs. Choshamba, VaShoko, VaMechanika (VaMudhomori), VaShilongoma. I would like to thank: UZ for loaning a tape recorder; K. Wilson and I. Scoones for loaning their motor

bikes; J. Madyakuseni for recording some interviews; my BA supervisors D. Moyo and Dr. Mackay; D. Gumbo and K. Wilson for helping prepare this article;government officials and local authorities for allowing field research.

[3] Beach 1980.

[4] These *mhondoro* should not be interpreted as being identical to *mhondoro* amongst other 'Shona' groups, as reviewed by Bourdillon 1982.

[5] Lan 1985; Ranger 1985.

[6] Daneel (1970) describes a political transaction. The cult is also analysed by Werbner (1977) and Ranger (1986).

[7] More detailed descriptions of wetland sacredness are given by Wilson (1986, 1988).

[8] *Ninga* can also refer to a pothole in a rock, or to the actual point of a spring.

[9] A fuller account of the sacredness of Bupwa Mountains is given in Mukamuri 1987.

[10] Wilson (1989) discusses the ecological and religious issues connected with leaving trees in fields iin detail.

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