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## Introduction

In the early 1980s, environmental history in Southern Africa had a number of weaknesses: it had been disproportionately reliant on official records, had a tendency to treat official assertions of environmental degradation as uncontested factual statements and had paid insufficient attention to particular processes of political and ecological change in specific localities.<sup>1</sup> Moreover it had virtually ignored the fact that local interpretations conflicted. Subsequent research provided a much clearer understanding of the influences on official thought and state practice. In 1989, however, Megan Vaughan argued that writers still tended to portray African environmental ideas and practices as static and homogenous, paying scant attention either to the politics of producing environmental ideologies or their meanings.<sup>2</sup>

The essays in this special issue of *Environment and History* start to redress these weaknesses. Drawing on the particularly rich body of research in Zimbabwe, they provide new perspectives on local as well as state and international environmental politics and their interactions. They treat ecological knowledge, interpretations of ecological change and readings of the landscape as themselves subjects of conflict, actively shaping as well as reflecting political change.

Some of the papers in this volume date from research conducted in the period 1985-1988. As such, they reflect contemporary intellectual interests in 'indigenous technical knowledge'. The authors were concerned to situate local environmental knowledge and explanations of ecological change in their political and cultural context, as well as to look at the relationship between ideas and practice. The cultural notions of land spirit guardianship which inform local discourse in rural Zimbabwe are not the product of consensus in bounded local communities isolated from the modern world, but have been a central focus of local disputes and have a long history of interaction with state-promoted ideas and practice.

The academic community's enthusiasm for 'indigenous technical knowledge' in the mid 1980s coincided with the Government of Zimbabwe's increasing emphasis on centralised technical planning. Officials argued that land redistribution could never solve the problems of overcrowding, poverty and degradation in the communal areas.<sup>3</sup> The land redistribution programme was scaled down in favour of reorganising the communal areas internally in a programme which essentially reproduced the Land Husbandry Act of 1951 – not only the apogee of technical betterment but also the rallying point for peasant resistance and nationalism.<sup>4</sup> Environmental degradation was treated as a truism requiring state intervention, education and control; traditional tenure and poor farming methods were repeatedly criticised. Political discourse echoed that of the colonial period when conservation interests had been invoked to counter African

demands for land. The reproduction of unpopular policies was justified by casting earlier resistance as purely political and confidently upholding the authority and value of state-promoted ideas and techniques.

The historical literature on Zimbabwe has been rich in its analysis of conservation and technical development in relation to popular resistance and the growth of nationalist parties.<sup>5</sup> Less attention has been paid either to the basis for its appeal to officials, politicians and certain local leaders, or to interpretations of environmental change occurring in its wake.<sup>6</sup>

McGregor explores the elision of conservation ideologies with administrative and aesthetic concerns for order in the landscape and political interests in control. Taking the case of Shurugwi District, where centralisation was launched in 1929, she argues that some local leaders welcomed land use planning for political and economic rather than conservationist reasons, and were able to use the process of reorganisation to enhance control over newly autonomous juniors, former dependants, immigrants and rivals. The opportunities of the early colonial period had undermined local leaders' command over both people and resource use. As land spirit guardianship was highly contested, some headmen chose to manipulate early state intervention to bolster their dwindling authority. In retrospective accounts, clearing woodlands and moving into linear villages symbolised entry into a modern world: for some this meant profanation of sacred sites and offence to land spirits; for others it meant progress and development.

If land use planning and conservationist restrictions heralded new ecological and economic problems in the relatively well-watered and sandy environments where they were first introduced, they proved disastrous in semi-arid parts of the country with heavy clay soils. Wilson's paper focuses on one such area in southern Zimbabwe which was used only for transhumant grazing and hunting at the turn of the century. Pioneers later settled close to the river, cultivating the rich alluvial wetlands. Colonial land use planning brought about intensive use of the clay-rich watershed soils, despite a sizeable body of critical expert opinion. Wilson's article provides at once an insight into local conservationist strategies and a critique of specific interventions such as the planning and layout of paths, contours and paddocks. Local ideas and practice draw on detailed observation, on-going experimentation and notions of an interrelated political and ecological order. They are also deeply embedded in local politics and struggles with the state.

Mukamuri's paper focuses on the institution and idiom of land spirit guardianship. Though previous scholars have romanticised the role of such institutions, Mukamuri reveals the political and economic interests in ensuring rainfall, fertility and respect for land spirits. He investigates the factional local struggles over seasonal ritual, rules of resource use and particular sacred landmarks in the form of mountains, forests, wetlands, and particular trees. Mukamuri challenges the view that chieftaincy and the institutions of spirit

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guardianship are predominantly concerned with conservation and promoting communal economic and ecological benefits.

Just as the technical discourse surrounding land use planning and conservation could serve to hide the politics of state intervention, so the history of rural water supply development has been far from a purely technical issue. Cleaver's article focuses on Nkayi District in the infertile Kalahari sands of western Zimbabwe. The forced removals of the colonial era led to dense settlement of this water-scarce environment. Evictees dumped at newly drilled boreholes depended on a technology vulnerable to repeated breakdown and sabotage. Cleaver argues that the improvement of rural water supply has not been merely a tool in the development of marginal regions, but has also been a means of state control, providing a lever in the collection of taxes and the extraction of unremunerated labour. This history has contributed to the development of a culture of minimal water use and the persistence of obstructive attitudes to attempts to improve rural water supply.

If the legacies of a political culture of resistance continue to shape local water management strategies, the same may also be true for wildlife. Hill argues that in the communal areas, anti-conservationist attitudes towards wildlife are a product of the restrictions of the colonial era when people were deprived of any right to manage or benefit from game. Post-independence initiatives have tried to give local communities a stake in wildlife, and economic returns are seen as an important part of conservation as outlined in Zimbabwe's *National Conservation Strategy* of 1987. In contrast, the international community, influenced by western preservationism, has tended to rely on the force of law and sanction to protect game. Hill explores this contradiction through a case study of the effects of the international ivory ban.

Turning away from struggles over state intervention, Schmidt explores the different readings of landscape which accompanied colonial land appropriation in the Eastern Highlands. Speculators, explorers, managers and priests all had their own perspectives, but shared a tendency to exoticise the landscape, presenting it as a remote forested wilderness. Another common element to colonial perceptions, according to Schmidt, is the sexual imagery they invoke. She argues that these portrayals themselves legitimised penetration and domestication of the land and appropriation of its resources. The land was not, of course, uninhabited. To local eyes, the landscape, and particularly the dense rainforest areas, were controlled by ancestral and land spirits. Schmidt argues that local imaginings also sexualised the landscape and revealed a sense of threat from female spirits as well as the need for respect.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> W. Beinart, 1984, 'Soil Erosion, Conservationism and Ideas About Development; A Southern African Exploration 1900-1960'. *Journal of Southern African Studies* **11**(1): 53-88.

<sup>2</sup> Reviewing R. Grove and D. Anderson's important edited collection *Conservation in Africa: People, Policies and Practice* (CUP, 1989), *Journal of African History*, 1989, **30**: 184-5.

<sup>3</sup> 'Communal area' is the term used after independence for the former native reserves.

<sup>4</sup> On continuity and change in pre- and post-Independence agrarian policy, see M. Drinkwater, 1988, 'The State and Agrarian Change in Zimbabwe's Communal Areas: An Application of Critical Theory' (PhD, University of E. Anglia, now published by Macmillan); J. Alexander, 'The State, Agrarian Policy and Rural Politics in Zimbabwe: Case Studies of Insiza and Chimanimani Districts, 1940-1990' (PhD, Univ. of Oxford, 1993); J. Alexander, 1994, 'State, Peasantry and Resettlement' in *Review of African Political Economy* **61**: 325-45. On the politics of land in Zimbabwe, see also, M. Bratton, 1987 'The Comrades and the Countryside: The Politics of Agrarian Reform in Zimbabwe *World Politics* 39, 2; S. Moyo, 1986 'The Land Question' in I. Mandaza (ed) *Zimbabwe: The Political Economy of Transition 1980-1986* (Dakar, Codesira).

<sup>5</sup> For example, T.O. Ranger, 1985 *Peasant Consciousness and Guerrilla War in Zimbabwe* (James Currey); D. Lan, 1985, *Guns and Rain: Guerrillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe* (Zimbabwe Publishing House); N. Kriger, *Zimbabwe's Guerrilla War. Peasant Voices* (Cambridge University Press, 1992); Alexander, 1993, op.cit.; Drinkwater, 1988, op.cit.

<sup>6</sup> Exceptions are Drinkwater, 1988, op.cit., and Alexander, 1993, op.cit., which explore official and local attitudes.