

# Transforming Traditional Institutions for Sustainable Natural Resource Management: History, Narratives and Evidence from Zimbabwe's Communal Areas

DALE DORE

**Abstract:** A major question that has emerged from the research and discourse on community-based natural resource management in southern Africa is whether traditional rules comply with generally accepted principles of common property management. In other words: do traditional institutions offer a solution for the sustainable management of natural resources held in common? This paper traces the emergence of traditional institutions from the pre-colonial times to the present, and draws a comparison with one fundamental principle of common property management: exclusivity of resource use. Evidence from Zimbabwe shows that traditional rules governing natural resources contradict this principle. The study suggests that the gap between traditional institutions and design principles for sustainable common property resource management can be bridged by making small continuous institutional changes over an extended period of time. It also recommends that longitudinal studies – based on historical precedent rather than contemporary narratives – and cross-sectional studies are required for informed policy decision-making in order to transform traditional institutions.

## Introduction

Bromley (1991) has argued that, with the advent of colonialism and markets, “the spread of private land—and the attendant individualisation of village life—has undermined traditional collective management regimes over natural resources.”<sup>1</sup> In this interpretation of history, the individualization of property led to the breakdown of traditional authority and community regulation over common resources. As a result, common property resource regimes degenerated into open access. Some scholars therefore believe that a return to the pre-colonial situation, when traditional institutions once prevailed, will empower communities to manage their resources more sustainably. The implicit assumption being that traditional systems of land tenure were characterized by collective action and common property management regimes.<sup>2</sup>

The first difficulty with this view is that it differs materially from the literature on the reinvention of tradition.<sup>3</sup> Ranger (1983), for example, maintains that:

**Dale Dore** is a researcher and director of Shanduko, the Centre for Agrarian and Environmental Research. For the past few years he has been the advisor to the Research Committee for the Natural Resource Management Programme’s research into community-based natural resource management in the southern African region. His main interests centre on resource economics, institutional change and governance issues.

<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v5/v5i3a1.pdf>

"The most far-reaching inventions of tradition in colonial Africa took place when the Europeans believed themselves to be respecting age-old African custom. What were called customary law, customary land-rights, customary political structure and so on, were in fact all invented by colonial codification."<sup>4</sup>

Ranger does not imply that pre-colonial African societies did not have valued customs, identity and continuity, but that such customs were loosely defined and flexible. His fundamental point is, therefore, that "once the 'traditions' relating to community identity and land rights were written down in court records and exposed to the criteria of the invented customary model, a new unchanging body of tradition had been created."<sup>5</sup> In other words, traditional institutions were not so much destroyed as reinvented.

The second difficulty arises from the presumption that natural resources in pre-colonial societies in Africa were actually "managed." The economics of property rights tells us that communities would have had little incentive to create rules governing the use of resources, first, if there was a relative abundance of that resource – where supply is perfectly elastic – and, second, if the costs of enforcing exclusive use exceeded the benefits. Given the low population levels and a relative abundance of natural resources on the southern Africa plateau during the nineteenth century, there does not appear to be a justification for resource conservation and the establishment of a common property management regime. The third difficulty is that the tenets of customary land tenure and the use of natural resources in the communal areas do not seem to accord, even closely, with contemporary principles of common property resource management articulated by scholars such as Bromley (1991), Ostrom (1993) and Murphree (1991).

This paper sets out initially to verify whether or not colonialism destroyed traditional common property management institutions by examining the traditional customs and practices of indigenous communities. It then compares traditional practice with one fundamental contemporary principle of resource management that characterises a common property regime: exclusivity. In doing so, the paper tries to establish whether traditional institutions – under conditions of unprecedented increases in human and livestock populations – offer a solution for the sustainable management of natural resources held in common and, if not, how they could be modified so that they can.

My inquiry begins, in Section 2, with an historical exposition of customary natural resource use from pre-colonial times (1840-1890), through the colonial period when native reserves were created, to the emergence of post-Independence notions of traditional natural resource management. This process of institutional change is considered in the context of a burgeoning human and livestock population in the communal areas. Section 3 examines the decline in the conservative conservation narrative and the emergence of a community conservation narrative, focusing primarily on the development of property rights theory and the principles for designing common property regimes. I then compare the common property rights principle of exclusivity with traditional natural resource use practices. This difference is illustrated in Section 4 with evidence of traditional access and harvesting practices of natural resources in the communal areas. The differences between principle and practice also presupposes that improvements can be made in the way natural resources have been managed in communal areas under customary law, and equally, that there are a set of institutional arrangements towards which change should be directed. Section 5 takes up this discussion and suggests new

directions for research. Concluding remarks are made in the final section about the need for historical precedence and social context in our search for lasting solutions to the issues of poverty and resource depletion that beset the communal areas of Zimbabwe and other countries in southern Africa.

## 2. TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Concepts such as “tradition” and “community” have been widely criticized because they are loosely used to carry complex associations – of wisdom, continuity, propinquity – that give them resonance, resilience and power.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, they remain useful concepts if their context and meaning remain clear. Hughes (1972), for example, explains:

“Just as the present colourful ‘traditional’ Swazi dress is known to have come in at the turn of the 20th century, so many features of the social and political organizations may well have acquired their present form at a relatively recent date. Nonetheless, they are specifically Swazi and traditional now.”

It is in this sense, therefore, that the word “tradition” is used here to distinguish between what people today consider to be their own established practices and rules governing access to land and natural resources, as opposed to outside interventions which propose new rules and regulations to which people are unaccustomed.<sup>7</sup>

### 2.1 PRE-COLONIAL SETTLEMENT PATTERNS

Despite the difficulties presented when reconstructing pre-colonial systems of landholding and resource use, anthropologists and historians have combed through early documents and writings to build a reasonable understanding of life during the pre-colonial years in central and southern Africa.<sup>8</sup> For the purposes of this article, I examine briefly the pre-colonial period between 1840 and 1890, just after the settlement of the Ndebele in southwest Zimbabwe at Gabulawayo in 1840, and just before the colonization of the central plateau by the British South Africa Company’s pioneer column in 1890.

Early accounts of pre-colonial life in Zimbabwe indicate that the Ndebele and Gaza – offshoots of the warrior Zulu nation – raided and extracted tribute from surrounding Shona villages for grain, cattle and slaves. As the Shona lived in dread of these raiders, they built their towns on hill-tops in places that were easy to defend.<sup>9</sup> Scoones and Wilson (1989) maintain that the dominant farming system of the southern Shona was based on intensive, continuous farming of vleis (wetlands), the major portions of which were held by petty warlord chiefs, and largely worked by commoners as tribute in exchange for food and wives. In areas beyond the reach of Ndebele influence, however, the most common form of Shona settlement was based on shifting rather than continuous cultivation:

According to traditional agricultural methods the inhabitants start to cultivate a certain selected piece of virgin land, using the same fields for two or three years, when they extend their reclamation for another few years until most suitable land in the vicinity is exhausted. Then the whole village is shifted to another area. The result has been that villages have been moved every six to eight years or so, mainly depending upon the amount of arable land

available within easy reach. This process met with little difficulty in the past as land was ample and dwellings easily built.<sup>10</sup>

By all accounts, the Shona had by 1850 built up large herds of cattle. However, Beach (1984) describes the documentary evidence on cattle ownership and herding only as “tantalisingly vague.” Descriptions by Holleman (1952) of Shona rules governing the pasturing of cattle are also vague and flexible:

“A distinction was made between grazing area (ufuro) and ploughing area (urime), in that cattle had to be grazed at a safe distance from the cultivation area. But as there was little or no control over the movements of villages in search of suitable arable land, cattle were in practice allowed to graze wherever there happened to be food for them, as long as they did not trespass upon fields under cultivation.”<sup>11</sup>

The main differences between the Shona and Ndebele settlements, lay in the *amabutho*, the so-called regiments that were composed of young Ndebele men called together into a residential unit when the king thought fit.<sup>12</sup> Mathers (1891) offered the following description of their settlements:

“These kraals are posted near water, and when they have destroyed the wood for miles around, and when there is not sufficient water or pasture for cattle as it increases by pillage or breeding, then the kraal is burnt and the regiment builds another in a fresh bit of country. A large kraal or town can occupy a place for about ten years. This will account for Inyati having removed from the place marked as such on the older maps. Enhlangeni is the name of the place, and the Inyati regimental kraal is now 50 miles south-east of that; while Gabulawayo is 18 miles north of the position it occupied ten years ago.”<sup>13</sup>

While the evidence is fragmentary, it seems probable that – although much time was spent herding cattle, especially amongst the Ndebele – that cattle were pastured around settlements: the basic rule being that cattle should not stray into cultivated fields that had not yet been harvested.

## 2.2 COMPETING COLONIAL AND NATIONALIST NARRATIVES

Following the occupation of the Pioneer Column and the subjugation of the Matabele and Mashona chiefs in the 1890s, the British South Africa Company had by 1902 set aside native reserves solely for occupation by Africans under traditional tribal ways. Southern Rhodesia was subsequently divided racially into a patchwork of white commercial areas in the more productive areas and native reserves on poorer soils: a pattern of settlement that remains largely intact today.<sup>14</sup>

With colonialism came dramatic changes for the indigenous people. First, there was a boom in agriculture in the native reserves. Following the outbreak of rinderpest in 1896 – a disease that decimated cattle throughout the country – cattle numbers grew from 55,000 in 1900 to nearly a million by 1923. With the introduction of the plough, more extensive areas could be cultivated. The indigenous population had grown from an estimated 400,000 in 1900 to about 940,000 by 1926.<sup>15</sup> As pressure began to be felt within the reserves and the first signs of environmental degradation became evident, two narratives were being created: the colonial administration’s conservative conservation narrative and the African nationalist narrative.

The colonial conservation narrative usually pointed to the inefficient and wasteful methods of traditional cultivation: breaking up and “scratching” of the soil, broadcasting seed over an extensive area without the use of fertilisers, and lack of crop rotation or conservation contours. The cultivation of small and scattered patches of land required excessive labor to keep cattle out of crops. It also meant that while pasture around cultivated fields went to waste, areas set aside for grazing were denuded.<sup>16</sup> The colonial administration’s response was to introduce the concept of “centralized villages” in an attempt to improve African agricultural productivity by the use of organic fertiliser (manure) and by confining crop cultivation to large carefully selected and consolidated blocks of arable land, ringed by homesteads.<sup>17</sup> Beyond these residential “lines” lay undefined woodland and grassland, the so-called “grazing areas.”

In spite of these efforts, the 1938 Natural Resources Commission reported that the “result of overstocking in the Reserves and other areas has not only been a loss of stock but also a great deterioration of the grazing ground, much of which has already been brought to a state where rehabilitation appears impossible.”<sup>18</sup> Its recommendations, embodied in the Natural Resources Act of 1941, paved the way for more coercive conservation methods, permitting the authorities to carry out soil protection control and compulsory destocking to protect the environment. Still, by 1944, the Godlonton Commission estimated that 24 reserves were more than 5% overpopulated; 19 were 50 to 100% overpopulated; and 19 were overpopulated by 100% or more. The administration became convinced that only a major sustained effort to improve African husbandry practices could avert rural poverty and further ecological decline. The prevailing mood within the ranks of the government called for a more disciplinarian approach to conservation. This new determination found its expression in the Native Land Husbandry Act of 1951, which was designed, firstly, to ensure that good farming methods were practiced in the reserves and secondly, to modify the land tenure system by giving individual title to peasant farmers.

African nationalists saw the situation quite differently. Inefficient land use and communal tenure were not the sources of declining living standards or environmental degradation, but rather symptoms of “land hunger.” The nationalists argued that growing rural populations and livestock were hemmed in by the failure of the colonial government to allocate them more land, land from which they had been dispossessed and to which they had a right. According to one African nationalist’s submission to a Royal Commission: “The problem of the African, the cause being this story of the people’s agony, is landlessness.”<sup>19</sup> As the “winds of change” gathered momentum during the 1950s, the nationalists’ bid for independence increasingly focused on the administration’s harsh and deeply unpopular measures implemented under the Land Husbandry Act. The Southern Rhodesian government relented first, by abandoning the Land Husbandry Act in 1961 and second, by allocating additional land for peasant agriculture – from 29 million acres in 1930 to 54 million acres by 1969. Although the amount of land available for subsistence agriculture nearly doubled during this period, the African population had more than tripled, from 1.4 million in 1930 to almost five million in 1969.

The recommendations of the Phillips’s Report of 1962, which favored a more flexible approach permitting tribal authorities to find their own local balance between arable and grazing land, were incorporated in the Tribal Trust Land Act of 1967.<sup>20</sup> In particular, this Act restored chiefs’ authority to allocate land previously denied them under the Land Husbandry

Act. Achieving a “balance” would prove well nigh impossible under the prevailing pressures on land. By allowing cultivation in areas previously designated for grazing only, it created a situation in which the burgeoning population and their livestock had to compete for marginal and limited land resources. As the population grew, so did the need for arable land, which meant carving further into the already dwindling feed resources for livestock. As more land was brought under the plough, and as the demand for additional draught power rose, an ever increasing number of livestock had to survive on less and less grazing land. Eventually, overstocking was considered characteristic of most communal areas and the single most important factor contributing to their environmental degradation.<sup>21</sup>

With the restoration of chiefly powers, the colonial era drew to a close. The tenets of customary land law remained intact although reinterpreted as the “right of avail,” that is:

“The right held by the community as a whole, but in which every member of that community automatically participates. From this participation flow the rights to make what the group considers reasonable use of the natural resources available to that community, including land.”<sup>22</sup>

The rights flowing from this “right of avail” included the right of accommodation (a place to live and an area to plough), the right to pasture, and the right to claim a “fair share” to natural resources: water, clay, minerals, wildlife and fish, forest products, timber and firewood, etc. From the right to natural resources flow other rights: the right of way (to move stock to and from pastures and water) and the right to stover (to graze after fields have been harvested). These rights, however, were only extended to a “reasonable” or “fair” share of natural resources for subsistence purposes only.

### 2.3 POST-COLONIAL TRADITION

It is one of the ironies of Zimbabwean history that the Native Reserves and other institutions created by the colonial administration - and virulently attacked by its most ardent critics - were largely preserved by the nationalist forces that came to power in 1980.<sup>23</sup> The Tribal Trust Land Act survived largely intact after Independence, resurfacing as the Communal Areas Act of 1982. In keeping with its nationalist and socialist ideological roots, the new government saw the communal areas as the arena for collective action and the embodiment of a uniquely African socialism. Except for the provision that newly elected district councils would become the land allocating authority in place of the chiefs, who were considered collaborators with the former white minority government, the Communal Areas Act of 1982 was a virtual replica of the Tribal Trust Land Act passed by the Smith government in 1967.<sup>24</sup> Even so, the notion of customary law held firm. In terms of section 8(1), the new Act specifies that the district council, when granting consent to occupy communal land, shall “have regard to customary law relating to the allocation, occupation and use of land.” The passing of this regurgitated piece of legislation therefore saw the seamless passage of customary tenure from the old colonial order into a new nationalist interpretation of tradition.

## 2.4 AGRICULTURAL INTENSIFICATION AND INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

To what extent, therefore, have traditional institutions remained intact or been reinvented? To start with, it would seem that Ranger's depiction of customary tenure as a colonial construct is overdrawn. Rather, as he himself put it later, customary law does change within the dynamics of a rural civil society by adapting "to the new realities of the colonial and post-colonial economy, but all within the rhetoric of changelessness."<sup>25</sup> One of these "new realities" was the resolve of the Rhodesians to improve African agricultural methods by modifying settlement patterns and tenure. Another was the sheer pressure of population on the land. As the population grew, it became increasingly difficult to maintain a culture of shifting cultivation. This land scarcity, and the colonial government's centralization programme, brought about a more settled lifestyle, based on continuous cultivation and, hence, increased investment in land improvements, such as manuring and the use of inorganic fertiliser and hybrid seed. This intensification led, not only to what the Rukuni Report referred to as "traditional freehold," but also limitations on the right to stover, which farmers gathered to feed their own livestock in winter.<sup>26</sup> With the relentless pressure of population, people fell back on the "rhetoric of changelessness." Thousands of landless families, and those whose soils had been exhausted, migrated from overcrowded communal areas and settled in the less congested northern communal areas in a large swathe that ran from Gokwe, through the mid-Zambezi Valley, to Rushinga.<sup>27</sup>

While these two processes – agricultural intensification and rural migration – incorporated new rules into the "tradition" of governing access to arable land, the right of avail to common resources remained part of the unchanging tradition within the customary tenure system.

## 3. PRINCIPLES OF COMMON PROPERTY RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Romantic European imaginings of African life had their roots in nineteenth century explorers and missionaries such as Stanley, Livingstone, Burton, Moffat, and Courtney Selous. This notion of Africa was poignantly captured in the title of Mathers' book, *Zambesia: England's el Dorado in Africa*, published in 1891. With colonization, the charms of Africa were recounted by settlers and today still resonate in popular novels/films such as *I Dreamed of Africa and Out of Africa*.

This picture of tranquility was soon shattered by the clamor for African independence from which an alternative image emerged, that of a suppressed people throwing off the shackles of imperialism and colonialism: a people searching for the roots of their own identity, history and culture. It is from these nationalist stirrings that the concept of collective action and the role of the "community" took root within development and environmental circles in the 1960s. The following decades saw a repudiation of the conservative narrative by discrediting Western concepts of property rights, scientific knowledge and development.<sup>28</sup> In its place, a new narrative of community conservation was created.<sup>29</sup> Here, notions of ancient tribal wisdom, harmony with nature, ecological knowledge and a pre-colonial communal existence based on subsistence and equity held sway. Scott (1981), for example, spoke of the "moral economy" and in Zimbabwe, Moyana (1984) proclaimed that the egalitarian principles that governed the pre-

colonial distribution of land ensured peaceful operations of the customary land tenure system. Cross (writing in South Africa) averred that the “single basic principle underlying the indigenous land systems is the commitment to the interests of society, amounting to a deep reverence for the social good.”<sup>30</sup> To use one more example, Folke and Berkes claimed that indigenous knowledge differs from scientific knowledge in being “moral, ethically-based, spiritual, intuitive, and holistic.”<sup>31</sup> For them, traditional ecological knowledge and management systems – developed by trial and error through millennia and handed down through generations by cultural transmission – enabled many societies to use their resources in a way that maintained the integrity of their local ecosystems.

But a stolid piece of work and the quintessential expression of the conservative narrative, Hardin’s classic paper *The Tragedy of the Commons* (1968), stood in the way of the full blossoming of the community narrative. His main argument, based on cattle grazing on common pasture, was that individuals have a strong incentive to continually add more cattle to the commons because they receive a benefit at no additional cost. As a result, he hypothesized, the commons would eventually be destroyed. The attacks on this model were rooted in the belief that it is possible to prevent the “tragedy of the commons” by designing institutions to manage natural resources, rather than changing the tenure system itself.<sup>32</sup> This challenge to Hardin has spawned a vast literature, including the theory and principles of common property regimes. While Bromley articulated the differences between common property regimes and open access, Ostrom collated and elaborated on these principles in her paper, *The Rudiments of a Theory on the Origins, Survival, and Performance of Common-property Institutions*. Consensus grew that the one fundamental principle that differentiates common property regimes from open access was exclusivity, both in terms of boundaries and ownership. Bromley captures this principle most succinctly:

“In one important sense, then, common property has something very much in common with private property—exclusion of non-owners. ... The property-owning groups vary in nature, size, and internal structure across a broad spectrum, but they are social units with definite membership and boundaries.”<sup>33</sup>

Given that Bromley considered traditional land tenure systems to be common property regimes, and that such regimes were characterized by exclusivity of resource use, the expectation was that the principle of exclusivity would be inherent in traditional systems of natural resource management.

#### 4. CURRENT NATURAL RESOURCE USE PATTERNS

It soon became clear that these design principles sat uncomfortably with the customary law of natural resource use. Zimbabwean scholars therefore sought to delve deeper into the mechanisms of traditional rules governing natural resource use in order to resolve this contradiction and vindicate the community conservation narrative.

Guveya and Chikandi (1996) selected two communal areas in Zimbabwe – Svosve in a region of high agricultural potential and Mhondoro-Ngezi in an area of low potential – in order to assess whether well-defined rules guided grazing resource utilization. Using a stratified random sample for their household survey, together with focus groups, their research showed



that local households were allowed to graze any number of cattle wherever they pleased. The only restriction (rule) was to ensure that their animals did not destroy other people's crops. After harvest the chief (in consultation with the headmen) declared when farmers could graze their cattle on arable land. Even when people were able to identify grazing areas that fell under the jurisdiction of different traditional leaders, they felt no obligation to respect these boundaries.

This traditional right of access to the commons was also exercised towards a formal grazing scheme that had been established by three village development committees. Farmers in the surrounding areas cut fences and drove their livestock into the paddocks to be grazed and watered. They claimed to be exercising their traditional right to use this area, arguing that "no-one owns grazing as it belongs to everyone." Even during periods of critical forage shortages, this right prevailed. The authors therefore concluded that:

"An analysis of the rules governing grazing resource use show that in both Svosve and Mhondoro-Ngesi communal areas, there are no boundary rules and restriction rules on the use of natural grazing. This means access to grazing resources is open access. Thus in these communities use of grazing resources cannot be restricted to levels that allow for sustainable yield."<sup>34</sup>

In the case study of Mzola state forest, the Gwaai Working Group (1997) investigated the problem of moving cattle from the overstocked Dandara communal area into the underutilized state forest area, which lay in a restricted foot and mouth disease zone. Seeking a solution to this problem, the research team decided to explore the rules and practices of two communities (Bimba I and II) that control the use of state and communal natural resources. They found that:

- Cattle are allowed to roam freely during the dry season;
- Only cattle belonging to members of the village are allowed to graze close to cropland in the wet season;
- Stover left in the field (after it has been collected by the plowholder) may be freely accessed for grazing;
- There are specially demarcated areas within one village where grazing is closed between November and April (when resources elsewhere are plentiful) to build up reserves during the dry season.

In another study of five wards in the Zambezi Valley, Lynam et al. (1997) tried to determine how households and communities use natural resources to satisfy their needs by emphasizing the spatial pattern of resource use. The selection of study areas was representative of high and low agricultural potential as well as high and low population densities. With the help of a global positioning system and aerial photography, a team of enumerators estimated the pattern and intensity of natural resource use from a stratified sample of twenty-four randomly selected households at each site. This was followed by intensive discussions with groups of local "experts." The results of the study showed that households did not observe

village or ward boundaries in their resource use or harvesting activities. On average, twenty percent of households used resources outside their ward boundaries, and eighty-six percent of households used resources outside their village boundaries. They observed that where resource constraints were experienced within a village's own boundaries, this was overcome by a "spillover" use of the resources in neighbouring wards. While the authors acknowledge that access to and use of natural resources are a result of complex processes that are, as yet, poorly understood, they nonetheless conclude that "The boundaries of production units, as well as the controls being applied to the use of resources within these areas, require much clearer definition if resource use is to be sustainable."

In a similar study, Mandondo (2001) assessed the clarity of resource use boundaries and resource use access rights in five contiguous villages in Nyaropa Ward, Nyanga (a district lying along Zimbabwe's eastern border with Mozambique). His objective was to investigate how resource use related to village boundaries and to assess the institutional arrangements governing the use of natural resources between villages. A participatory rural appraisal (PRA) mapping exercise – to establish the location of natural resources in relation to village boundaries – was followed up by a formal questionnaire survey to ascertain resource use patterns. Using a PRA matrix ranking technique, Mandondo compared people's access to a limited number of natural resources (fuelwood, timber, mushrooms and wild fruit) both within and across village boundaries to determine the degree to which these resources are subject to rules of exclusion. His results show that although villagers depended primarily on resources from their own villages, many of them also acquired resources from other villages, especially wild fruits. In general, the lighter products, such as mushrooms and wild fruits, were collected from adjoining villages, whereas the heavier products, such as fuelwood and timber, were more likely to be collected from within the village. The reasons had less to do with the ownership or exclusivity of resources, and more to do with practical considerations, such as the availability of the resource, ease of access, the proximity of the resource, and the possibility of accomplishing other tasks when collecting the resource.

## 5. DISCUSSION

As their introduction makes clear, Guveya and Chikandi share in Bromley's belief that traditional authorities' ability to manage common properties was seriously eroded by the colonial administration, thus removing the conditions for establishing a common property rights regime. However, tracing the rules governing use of grazing and other natural resources from pre-colonial times to the present day reveals that the main threads of traditional institutions have remained largely intact. Livestock owners may graze any number of cattle anywhere (so long as they are kept safely away from the cropping areas) and people may collect natural resources from the most convenient locations – subject to certain rules (such as not cutting down big or fruit-bearing trees or harvesting from sacred sites). So traditional access to resources appears deeply etched into African culture. Both Mandondo and Lynam et al. have commented on the general acceptance of the principle that people may collect resources within and across village or ward boundaries, as well as the apparent lack of acrimony when people exercise this right.

This type of resource use differs significantly from the principle of exclusivity that characterises common property regimes that Mandondo suggests the general incongruities between administrative units and resource use contradicts the logic of having villages exercise exclusive legal control over resources. Instead of distinct boundaries, he argues that it is necessary to accept “soft and diffuse” boundaries, characterized by informal resource sharing, as the starting point for community-based natural resource management. Guveya and Chikandi and Lynam et al., on the other hand, recognize that traditional institutions of natural resource use – under the pressure of growing human and livestock population – will not be sustainable. It was for this reason that the 1994 Land Tenure Commission recommended a programme in accordance with principle of exclusivity to survey the communal areas, starting with the adjudication, mapping and registration of traditional villages in order to formalise boundaries and to “formalise traditional tenure and all subsequent transactions performed under traditional tenure.”<sup>35</sup>

These opposing positions on the principle of exclusivity are not irreconcilable. Strong support for evolutionary institutional development and change can be drawn from the existing literature. Central to the Boserup’s (1965) now classic proposition, for example, is the idea that when land scarcities develop as a result of population pressure, indigenous land tenure arrangements evolve towards more individualized land rights in response to factor price changes. This means the underlying demographic and economic processes that induce agricultural intensification and technical change are those which simultaneously generate a demand for socially sanctioned institutional change in the tenure system. Whereas initially households are allowed only to continuously cultivate land, they are later able to bequeath and sell it. This not only creates greater security of tenure, thereby providing incentives to make farm investments, but it supposedly facilitates the commercialization of agriculture as allocative efficiencies begin to emerge with a land market. Eventually, this evolutionary process of institutional development produces a unified system of land documentation and registration, backed up by the enforcement of property rights.<sup>36</sup>

We also learn from North (1990) that because rules are based on culture they change only incrementally and marginally, persisting along a path of institutional change over time. The challenge facing policy makers in Zimbabwe and other southern African countries is how to modify these deeply ingrained traditional rules and guide them along a path of evolutionary institutional change towards a system of more sustainable natural resource management. One promising avenue might be to intervene initially only in those areas where population pressure, resource scarcity and agro-economic conditions have already set in motion a process of agricultural intensification (ie. where the community is primed for institutional change). Using “light touch” facilitation techniques, communities may be encouraged to modify their rules in order to provide incentives for adopting patterns of behavior that lead to more sustainable resource use. In Zimbabwe, there is already evidence that resource scarcity has set in motion a process of institutional change. Arable land in communal areas are being continuously cultivated and the construction of permanent homesteads has imperceptibly changed the traditional tenurial concept of “ownership.”<sup>37</sup> Another example is the finding by the Gwaai Working Group (1997) that, as grazing resources became scarce, elaborate local rules emerged to prevent grazing within a certain area during summer in order to build up reserve pastures

for the dry winter season. These examples suggest that the pace of institutional change may be hastened if it can be ascertained when a community is ready to make the necessary changes.

Two lines of research therefore present themselves. The first is to undertake longitudinal retrace studies to investigate and understand the institutional evolution of natural resource management systems. Only when we are armed with an adequate institutional map will it be possible to advise policy makers on the most effective strategies for assessing when and where interventions would be most appropriate. The second line of research is to identify those marginal changes in rules which modify behavior towards more sustainable resource management outcomes. Currently, however, we have little information on the effects of specific attributes of tenure which would allow researchers to predict how changes in tenures can modify management incentives and influence behavior that promotes sustainable resource use. A promising way forward is to view characteristics of tenures as representing variables within a property rights framework, allowing researchers to compare and contrast important features of various property right structures in systematic ways.<sup>38</sup> This approach also presumes the need for carefully chosen cross-sectional studies to find variation in key property rights characteristics that provide insights into the representativeness of case studies (Luckert forthcoming).

For those practitioners and organizations that facilitate the emergence of new institutions, Putnam (1993) maintains that one of the most important lessons from his own work was the need for patience. Institutional change requires a long term commitment by governments, donors and non-government organizations. Another important lesson from Putnam is that the most successful local organizations represent indigenous, participatory initiatives in relatively cohesive local communities. With these lessons in mind, some measure of success has been achieved in developing institutions for community wildlife enterprises in various southern African countries. In particular, non-government organizations working in Namibia have provided “light touch” facilitation over many years that involves working directly with communities, paying regular field visits, training and capacity building, and monitoring the internal dynamics of power shifts within the community. Equally important, these facilitators have been able to provide a communication bridge between government policy makers and donors, on the one hand, and local level organizations and communities, on the other. As a result, legislation and policy governing community-based wildlife conservancy management have been shaped in accordance with design principles that characterize common property regimes. Conservancies, for example, can only be registered after the communal area residents themselves define the conservancy boundaries and membership. Although this legal requirement delayed the establishment of many conservancies, external mediators facilitated negotiations between the various interest groups who grappled with issues, made compromises and eventually reached a settlement based on a workable institutional framework for common property resource management.<sup>39</sup>

## 6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

By tracing the rules governing the use of natural resources (especially grazing) this paper has shown, first, that traditional institutions were not destroyed by colonialism or the post-

colonial state, but that they have survived largely intact. Rules have only been reinvented in the sense that the pressure of population has resulted in resource scarcity that has modified traditional institutions. Secondly, the paper has shown that traditional rules do not comply with the principle of exclusivity of common property regimes and, hence, do not in themselves offer a lasting solution to sustainable resource use. This is especially true under conditions of growing human and livestock densities. But more than this, the paper has tried to show that history matters. Since, in keeping with North (1990), institutions are “path dependent” – evolving by continual marginal adjustments, building upon the preceding institutional arrangements – I have proposed that traditional institutions, as they are practiced today, are the logical starting point from which rules could be modified step-by-step and steered towards greater conformity with the principles of common property regimes. It is this process by which traditional institutions could be transformed to ensure greater sustainability in natural resource use.

Fortmann (1989), in her analysis of agricultural institutions in Botswana, criticized approaches to resource management as being ahistorical and suggests that explanations and interpretations of existing patterns of resource management can only be understood from a historical context.<sup>40</sup> All too often, one finds African research reflecting the narratives of European misconceptions of pre-colonial African society, colonialism and the post-Independent state. Invariably, these lead to one-size-fits-all policy prescriptions, the most popular at the moment being “co-management” – combining fragile communities with over-extended, ineffectual and aid-dependent government departments. When policy neglects history, culture and social context, huge amounts of effort and funding can be wasted on misconceived initiatives, resulting in lost opportunities, as well as frustration and fatigue. Rather, research should be founded on a new self-confidence among African scholars, fashioned by research competence and intellectual integrity that draws on historical precedence to bring fresh perspectives on natural resource management into the realm of public policy debate.

## Notes

1. Bromley 1991, 136.
2. Sithole 1997.
3. Ranger 1983 and 1993, and Cheater 1990.
4. Ranger 1983, 250.
5. Ibid, 251.
6. Adams and Hulme 2001.
7. Traditional institutions are, in other words, informal constraints that are part of a people’s heritage that we call culture and therefore includes values, norms, taboos and so on (North 1990).
8. For examples, see, Holleman 1952, Beach 1980, Ranger 1983, Cheater, 1990.
9. Mathers 1891.
10. Holleman 1952, 4.
11. Ibid, 3.
12. Beach 1984.

13. Mathers 1891,194.
14. Floyd 1972.
15. Yudelman 1964.
16. Holleman 1952 and Alvord 1958.
17. Holleman 1964, Zinyama and Whitlow 1986.
18. Quoted in Moyana 1984, 90.
19. Yudelman 1964, 83.
20. The full title of the Phillips Report was the Development of the Economic Resources of Southern Rhodesia with Particular Reference to the Role of African Agriculture.
21. Kay 1975.
22. Hughes 1974, 42.
23. See Arrighi 1970, Palmer and Parsons 1977, Cliffe 1986.
24. Doré 1993.
25. Ranger 1993, 102.
26. Zimbabwe 1994
27. Zinyama and Whitlow 1986
28. See Bromley and Cernea 1989, Folke and Berkes 1995.
29. Hulme and Adams 2001.
30. Cross 1988, 367.
31. Folke and Berkes 1995, 125.
32. See Bromley 1991, Ostrom 1993, Hanna 1995, Rihoy 1995.
33. Bromley 1991, 25-26.
34. Guveya and Chikandi 1996,103.
35. Land Tenure Commission 1994, 1-533.
36. See Noronha 1989, McNicoll 1990, Feder and Feeny 1991, Doré 1994.
37. Zimbabwe 1994.
38. Luckert and Kundhlande 1997.
39. Shackleton and Campbell 2000, Jones and Murphree 2001.
40. Sithole 1997.

## References

Adams, W. and D. Hulme. "Conservation and Community: Changing Narratives, Policies and Practices in African Conservation," in D. Hulme and M. Murphree, eds. *African Wildlife and Livelihoods*. Oxford: James Murray, 2001.

Alvord, E.D. *Development of Native Agriculture and Land Tenure in Southern Rhodesia*. Unpublished ms. Oxford: Rhodes House, 1958.

Arrighi, G. "Labour Supplies in Historical Perspective: The Proleterianization of the African Peasantry in Rhodesia." *Journal of Development Studies* 6 (1970).

Beach, D.N. *The Shona: 900–1850*. Gweru: Mambo Press, 1980.

- Beach, D.N. Zimbabwe Before 1900. Gweru: Mambo Press, 1984.
- Boserup, E. The Conditions of Agricultural Growth. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1965.
- Bromley, D.W. Environment and Economy: Property Rights and Public Policy. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.
- Bromley, D.W and M.M. Cernea. The Management of Common Property Natural Resources. Discussion Paper 57. The World Bank: Washington, D.C., 1989.
- Cheater, A.P. "The ideology of 'Communal' Land Tenure in Zimbabwe: Mythogenesis Enacted?" Africa 60, no.2 (1990).
- Cliffe, L. Policy Options for Agrarian Reform in Zimbabwe: A Technical Appraisal. Harare: FAO Report, 1986.
- Cross, C.R. "Informal Freehold and the Free Market," in C.R. Cross and R.J. Haines, eds. Towards Freehold? Options for Land and Development in South Africa's Black Rural Areas. Cape Town: Juta, 1988.
- Doré, D. Land Tenure and the Economics of Rural Transformation: A Study of Strategies to Relieve Land Pressure and Poverty in the Communal Areas of Zimbabwe. Doctoral Dissertation: Oxford University, 1993.
- Feder, G. and D. Feeny. "Land Tenure and Property Rights: Theory and Implications for Development Policy." The World Bank Economic Review 5, no. 1 (1991):135-53.
- Floyd, B. "Land Apportionment in Southern Rhodesia," In R. Prothero, ed. People and Land in Africa. London: Oxford University Press, 1962.
- Folke, C. and F. Berkes. "Mechanisms that Link Property Right to Ecological Systems," in Hanna, S. and M. Manasinghe, eds. Property Rights and the Environment. Beijer Institute/World Bank, 1995.
- Fortmann, L. "Peasant and Official Views of Rangeland Use in Botswana. Fifty Years of Devastation?" Land Use Policy 6 (1989):197-189.
- Guveya, E. and S. Chikandi. An Economic Analysis of Grazing Resource Management in Zimbabwe's Communal Areas. Department of Agricultural Economics and Extension, Harare: University of Zimbabwe, 1996.
- Gwaai Working Group. Local Level Valuation of Village Woodlands and State Forest: Cases from Matabeleland South in Zimbabwe. IES Working Paper 7, Harare: University of Zimbabwe, 1997.

Hanna, S. "Efficiencies of User Participation in Natural Resource Management," in Hanna, S. and M. Manasinghe, eds. *Property Rights and the Environment*. Beijer Institute/World Bank, 1995.

Hardin G. "The Tragedy of the Commons." *Science* 162 (1968):1243-48.

Holleman, J. F. *Shona Customary Law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952.

Holleman, J.F. *Chief, Council and Commissioner*. London: Oxford University Press, 1969.

Hughes. *Land Tenure, Land Rights and Land Communities on Swazi Nation Land in Swaziland*. Monograph. Durban: University of Natal, 1972.

Hughes A. J. B. *Development in Rhodesia's Communal Areas: An Overview*. Tribal Areas of Rhodesia Research Foundation, Salisbury, 1974.

Jones, B. and M. Murphree. "The Evolution of Policy on Community Conservation in Namibia and Zimbabwe," in D. Hulme and M. Murphree, eds. *African Wildlife and Livelihoods*. Oxford: James Murray, 2001.

Kay, G. "Population Pressures and Development Prospects in Zimbabwe." *Rhodesia Science News* 9, no. 1 (January 1975).

Luckert, M. And G. Kundhlande. *What Types of Land Tenure Systems Facilitate Forest Management?: Towards Empirically Tested Theory*. Paper presented at Commonwealth Forestry Conference. May 1997.

Luckert M. (forthcoming) "Can We be Social Engineers with Respect to Property Rights to Natural Resources?: Some Evidence from the Rural Areas of Zimbabwe." *African Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 3 (Fall 2001).

Lynam, T.J.P.; Chitsike, J., Howard, M., Hodza, P., Khumalo, M.A. and Standa-Gunda, W. "Assessing the Contributions of Renewable Natural Resources to the Livelihoods of Communal Area Households in the Zambezi Valley of Zimbabwe," in N. Christoffersen, B. Campbell and J. Du Toit, eds. *Communities and Sustainable Use: Pan African Perspectives*. Harare: IUCN, Regional Office for Southern Africa, 1996.

Mandondo, A. "Use of Woodland Resources within and across Villages in a Zimbabwean Communal Area." *Agriculture and Human Values* 18 (2001): 177-194.

Mathers E.P. *Zambesia: England's el Dorado in Africa*. London: King, Sell and Railton, 1891.



McNicoll, G. "Social organization and Ecological Stability under Demographic Stress," in G. McNicoll and M. Cain, eds. *Rural Development and Population*. London: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Moyana, H. V. *Political Economy of Land in Zimbabwe*. Gweru: Mambo Press, 1984.

Murphree, M.W. *Communities as Institutions for Resource Management*. CASS Occasional Paper Series. Centre for Applied Social Sciences, Harare: University of Zimbabwe, 1991.

Noronha, R. "Land Tenure in sub-Saharan Africa," in Maunder, A. and A. Valdés, eds. *Agriculture and Governments in an Interdependent World*. Proceedings of the 20th International Conference of Agricultural Economists. Dartmouth: Aldershot, 1989.

North, D. *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Ostrom, E. "The Rudiments of a Theory on the Origins, Survival, and Performance of Common-Property Institutions," in Bromley, D., ed. *Managing the Commons: Theory, Practice and Policy*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993.

Ostrom, E. and E. Schlager. "The Formation of Property Rights," in S. Hanna, C. Folke and K.G. Maler, eds. *Rights to Nature: Ecological, Economic Cultural and Political Principles of Institutions for the Environment*. Washington D.C.: Island Press, 1996.

Palmer, R. and Parsons, N., eds. *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa*. London: Heinemann, 1977.

Putnam, R. *Making Democracy Work*. Princeton University Press, 1993.

Rihoy E. *The Commons Without the Tragedy: Strategies for Community Based Natural Resources Management in Southern Africa*. Proceedings of the Regional Natural Resources Management Programme Annual Conference. Lilongwe, Malawi: SADC Wildlife Technical Coordination Unit, 1995.

Ranger, T. "The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa," in E. Hobsbawn and T.Ranger, eds. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

Ranger, T. "The Invention of Tradition Revisited: The Case of Colonial Africa," in T. Ranger and O. Vaughan, eds. *Legitimacy and the State in Twentieth-Century Africa*. London: Macmillan, 1993.

Scoones, I. and K. Wilson. "Households, Lineage Groups and Ecological Dynamics: Issues for Livestock Development in Zimbabwe's Communal Lands," in B. Cousins, ed. *People, Land and Livestock*. CASS. Harare: University of Zimbabwe, 1989.

Scott, J.C. *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976.

Sithole, B. *The Institutional Framework for the Management and Use of Natural Resources in the Communal Areas of Zimbabwe*. Mimeograph, 1997.

Shackleton, S. and B.M. Campbell. *Re-Empowering Communities to Manage Natural Resources: Where Does the New Power Lie? Case Studies from Southern and Eastern Africa*. Harare: SADC Natural Resource Management Project (CIFOR/WWF), 2000.

Yudelman, M. *Africans on the Land*. London: Oxford University Press, 1964.

Zimbabwe. Commission of Inquiry into Appropriate Agricultural Land Tenure Systems (Rukuni Report). Harare: Government Printer, 1994.

Zinyama, L.M. and J.R. Whitlow. "Changing Patterns of Population Distribution in Zimbabwe." *Geojournal* 13, no. 4 (1986).

Reference Style: The following is the suggested format for referencing this article:

Dore, Dale. "Transforming Traditional Institutions for Sustainable Natural Resource Management: History, Narratives and Evidence from Zimbabwe's Communal Areas." *African Studies Quarterly* 5, no.3: online URL: <http://web.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v5/v5i3a1.htm>