

**THE LAND TENURE SYSTEM AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS ON ZIMBABWEAN SOCIETY:  
EXAMINING THE PRE-COLONIAL TO POST-INDEPENDENT ZIMBABWEAN THINKING AND POLICIES  
THROUGH HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY**

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**ABSTRACT**

Environmental wellbeing is an indispensable part of sustainability and sustainable development. While the socio-economic, political and the physical effects of the land tenure system in Zimbabwe have been historically overlooked as important aspects of sustainable development through the various environmental policies in both pre-colonial and post-colonial Zimbabwe, the paper critically challenges a reconsideration of the potential of these policies. Adopting both the historical approach and the philosophical approach, it will attempt to establish the extent to which indigenous environmental thinking has been compatible with the successive land apportionment programs in Zimbabwe. This will be achieved through a critical comparative analysis and juxtaposition of the pro-colonial, colonial and post-colonial condition of the Zimbabwean natural environment.

**Keywords:** Land Reform, Zimbabwe, History, Ethical Considerations, Land Degradation, Environmental Wellbeing.

**INTRODUCTION**

This paper seeks to explore the dynamics of land ownership and usage during the colonial and post-independent Zimbabwe and how this has affected the environment. The centrality of the research lies on the critical analysis of the socio-economic, political and the physical environmental impact on the natural landscape. This was predominantly caused by the failure of successive governments in Zimbabwe to initiate sound environmental policies on the land tenure system. The colonial government promulgated The Land Tenure Apportionment Act of 1930 and its subsequent amendments, The Native Husbandry Act of 1951 which was meant to be a panacea to the ecological disasters caused by the preceding acts had all disregarded the significance of environmental impact assessment programmes.

The dawning of independence to Zimbabwe in 1980 carried over the colonial legacy of environmental degradation. In the era of Zimbabwean independence, the degradation has been a result of the activities of the newly resettled farmers, who got their lands through the year 2000 fast track land reform programme. Thus the environmental degradation phenomenon is not new to Zimbabwe but has been a common feature in the area between the Limpopo and Zambezi rivers rightly since inception of colonialism to independence.

Overall, the paper attempts, from an ethical perspective, to critically assess these successive land reforms. This will be done through analyzing the history of the environmental thinking in Zimbabwe from the pre-colonial to the post-colonial period.

#### ENVIRONMENTAL THINKING AND POLICY IN PRE-COLONIAL ZIMBABWE

In pre-colonial Zimbabwe, land was communally owned and placed under the custody of traditional chiefs whose mandate was to delineate pastures from arable lands. Certain taboos were enforced with the prime objective of conserving the environment. This was quite contrary to some scholars who suggest that Africans had no form of land ownership, primitive and no sense of conserving their environment compared to white farmers whose methods were considered to be modern and friendly to the environment (Mutami *et al.*: 2010, 138). However, the above philosophy seems to sideline the pre-colonial farming methods which had an appreciation of the environment and all this was perturbed by the arrival of the whites before colonialism. In fact Africans used very scientific methods in preserving the environment. Some good examples were in the form of shifting cultivation which involves the slashing and burning of trees for land clearance and at the same time provided potassium. Equally important were intercropping, terracing among others, such practices conserved the environment.

Another aspect that was overlooked by the settler colonial government is the importance of taboos traditionally used by the indigenous civilizations of Zimbabwe as a means to preserving the environment. Taboos in African societies were and are important as they generally help in forming and shaping a desirable character (Chemhuru and Masaka: 2010, 122; Tatira: 2000, 7). Basically, taboos are made up of prohibitions and restrictions that forbid interaction, association with a particular thing, place or places for the moral goodness of the society at large. In most cases, the association with the prohibited results in, presumably, supernatural punishment (Tatira: 2000, 7). For the sake of this paper, the concern is on human beings' association with the environment. Chemhuru and Masaka note that, for the "Shona, environmental taboos transcend simple prohibitions on certain sacred sites, plants, nonhuman animal species, pools, and rivers, among others and enforce a desirable and sustainable use of the environment" (Chemhuru and Masaka: 2010, 122). As such it is plausible to argue that the natives had and were conscious of the importance of having a good relations with their environment through preserving and maintaining it in a good state.

The whole idea of sustaining and retaining or even forming taboos was meant to ensure that immoral behavior towards the environment was kept at check. In a sense the idea aimed at ensuring that there was no abuse of the environment that is to preserve and protect the environment. Why protect the environment from abuse? The environment was considered an important aspect of African people's lives then and is still today. In the ontological understanding of relations, the African view life in a tripartite form. First there is the relationship between the living, second the living and the dead, third the relationship between the living and the yet to come, the unborn. For the African, there is continuity of life whether one is alive or dead, thus people realize that their sustenance emanates from the environment, and therefore all appreciate the pertinence of preserving the environment. In effect the environment carries the social, economic and religious aspects of the African people's way of life.

## THE LAND APPROPRIATION AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The colonial period marked a departure from all the African consideration, for example, the 1898 Southern Rhodesia Order-In-Council (a constitution) was the second legislative instrument used to establish the colonial land segregation through the creation of Tribal Trust Lands for Africans (Moyana: 1984, 3). Reserves were created in areas with erratic rainfall, hot climate and infertile soil. The areas with favorable conditions were thus taken away from the blacks, marking the inequitable and racial distribution of land in Rhodesia. The effects of creating the reserves were that there followed environmental damages.

The colonial land policy in Southern Rhodesia now Zimbabwe dates back to 1894 with the creation of the Gwayi and Shangani reserves for Africans (Moyana: 1984, 3). This came about as the result of the failure by the settlers to obtain the anticipated gold hence turning their eyes on the fertile lands of Matabeleland. The whole issue was in accordance with the infamous document of Star Jameson signed on 14 August 1893 in Fort Victoria. The document contained information to the effect that each soldier who participated in the Anglo-Ndebele war of 1893 was entitled to 2 428 hectares which translates to a total of 1,6 million hectares of fertile land in the region being lost to the settlers (Moyana: 1984, 2). Ncube (2004, 2) concurs with others that the Ndebele were banished to the wilderness where sandy soils, erratic rainfall and soil erosion were a common phenomenon. Thus, their physical environment was not only tempered with but also the disruptions of their socio-economic and religious environments as well were affected. This shows that the word tenure does not only refer to a relationship between people or the ownership of land but also encompasses a bundle of rights and responsibilities to a range of renewable and non-renewable resources (Palmer: 1997, 297). However it must be observed that through the land segregation policy Africans had their rights to access to resources curtailed since they were not allowed to hunt or perform rituals in their areas now designated as game parks, hence an infringement of the natives' socio-economic and religious environments. To a certain extent as well the natives' efforts at preserving and maintaining the environment was unsettled as they no longer controlled activities themselves.

Though through colonialism, Africans lost considerable freedoms, there were some resistance offered by a handful of traditional chiefs among them, the likes of Rekal Tangwena. The resistances, sounded early warning bells to the settlers that effective land policies were supposed to be instituted. Moyana (1984, 27) suggests that the whites were gripped with fear that one day the locals would rise against the impartial land policies hence they clamored for stringent measures to be put in place. What was only needed in the eyes of the international community was a justifiable cause for the removal of Africans from their fertile ancestral lands.

For the natives, the environment is and was important because of the intrinsic link between the humans and the non-humans. Humans are to be understood in a tripartite way that is the dead, the living and the yet to live that is the unborn. All these need the environment for their survival and for their thriving, it is for this reason that respect and caring for the environment is greatly encouraged. This idea emanates from the African concept of communalism as well. Communalism is an existential expression of the Africans way of thinking. A thinking of togetherness, a thinking of working and helping each other, a thinking that encourages co-existence. Communalism is a thinking which includes the idea of –with and for others. At the same time communalism is an epistemic manifestation of people's way of life, way of life that express one-ness and

wholeness at the same time (Ramose: 1999, 50). But for this to take shape the other that is the non-human is important though its importance is for the benefit of the humans, all these are linked through the environment.

Driven by the need to ensure the preservation of the environment, Gann (1970, 137) postulates that the Land Apportionment Act of 1930 was an attempt to grapple with the problems of soil erosion and advances in African agriculture. This was however a view from the agnostics since the act itself sacrificed the environment in all its dimensions as would be observed later. Moreover Africans had an appreciation of the environment as was demonstrated by their methods of farming which includes terracing commonly practiced in the mountain areas of Inyanga, shifting cultivation among others. Above all the environmental taboos reveal the symbiotic relation that the Africans and the environment had. Therefore to suggest that Africans lacked soil conservation methods would be to stand history on its head.

In essence, the Land Apportionment Act of 1930 was meant to enhance white supremacy, it had nothing or little to do with protecting the environment per se. Thus the white advanced the theory that blacks and whites would never co-exist peacefully in the same environment. Therefore the civilized (whites) were supposed to be separated from the uncivilized blacks (Moyana: 1984, 27). This policy of segregation extended even to residential areas where again sanitary conditions in high density areas, or areas inhabited by blacks were a cause for concern since burst sewage pipes became the order of the day, coupled by slow response to ameliorate situations, thereby polluting the physical environment and eventually the water bodies (Leach: 1996, 153).

The worst environmental challenges were however experienced in the rural areas as a result of the land segregatory policy. A few blacks who could afford buying land were allocated the Native Purchase Area with an average of 81-111 hectares. By instituting the Native Land Husbandry Act of 1951, the colonial government aimed at encouraging Africans to protect natural resources in their communities through limiting the number of animal stocks in reserves within their ecological areas' carrying capacity. In line with this development, arable lands were reduced to eight acres per household and a maximum of five beast per family (Pendered and Memerty: 1955, 4). Under this act, Africans were further forced to dig contour ridges in the Tribal Trust Lands. This exercise met with a lot of resistance from the Africans who were poorly educated on the imposed conservative measure culminating in soil erosion since families ended up cultivating along river banks. This furthered land degradation. To show that the Africans resented the digging of contour ridges, they produced a revolutionary song (hondo yemakandiwa) which literally implies the torture associated with the enforcement of contour ridge digging.

In essence, animal culling system was only a theoretical arrangement since the indigenous people of Southern Rhodesia had for long time been practicing cattle ranching. In cases of shortage of grazing lands and in cases of huge uncontrollable herds, the indigenous people employed the cattle loaning system (kuronzera). Since the indigenous people practiced cattle ranching, they found it difficult to simply loss of their cattle through the above act and as a way to avert losing their herds they turned to kuronzera, especially to neighbors who had none. Thus, in practice no beast were reduced in numbers and as a result overgrazing became a perennial problem. As such the act only helped in exacerbating land degradation.

The act ignored the fact that the local people in Southern Rhodesia now Zimbabwe wanted more land to cushion the ever increasing rural population and not many contours. Thus, J Hlongwana *et al* (2010, 197) is of the view that the Land Husbandry Act of 1951 was a cosmetic arrangement because it failed to produce practical solutions to the ecological disasters

caused by the Land Apportionment Act. Whitlow (1988, 13) sums it up when he avers that there is a direct correlation between increases in population density and increases in the extent environmental degradation. Therefore, the only solution presented with the black government in 1980 was none other than to decongest the rural areas

#### **THE ACCELERATED LAND REFORMS IN POST-COLONIAL ZIMBABWE: SOME ENVIRONMENTAL-ETHICAL CHALLENGES.**

In the year 2000, the Zimbabwean government embarked on the accelerated land reform as a way of decongesting the overpopulated rural areas. While the speedy reallocation of land was a noble idea, the manner in which the whole process was conducted produced serious environmental challenges that have never been part of the traditional African heritage. Although focusing on traditional African societies, Murove (2004, 195) observed that "traditional African ethics in general recognised the intimate bond between men and their environment." Manzungu (2004, 53) suggests that the accelerated land reform was implemented within the context of a serious democracy deficit. At times the satisfaction of the electorate would ensure an added mileage in any political contest. Thus, in this case, the environment in its totality played a second fiddle to politics, yet as Bujo (2009, 281) observes, "total realization of the self is impossible without peaceful co-existence with minerals, plants and animals."

It was against this background that the landless people of Zimbabwe started casting their eyes on the white large scale commercial farming area. Therefore, the paradox of the fast tract land reform programme was not as fast as is suggested by the name of the programme instead, it was a gradual process which gained momentum in 2000. Raftopoulos (2009, 211) avers that the land occupations of 2000 and beyond were not the first such protests since independence. He further argues that in the 1980s, people were resettled on farms abandoned by their owners. However it should be noted that this early programme was well coordinated hence minimal environmental damage occurred. Even the religious environment was taken care of because the resettled families often joined their extended families back home for ritual ceremonies and they continue to refer to their original homes as 'kumusha' which literally implies back home. Hence, the environmental thinking of the indigenous peoples of Zimbabwe has generally been traditionally informed and moulded by a communitarian system which for Eze (2008, 01) "advances a priority of the community over the individual."

However, the 1990s saw further occupation mostly precipitated by pressure for space in the rural areas as the government could not cope with the increased demand generated by the liberalization of the economy. According to Scones *et al* (2010, 38). The Fast Track Land Reform Programme was in essence a spontaneous exercise and little was done by the law enforcing agents to address the chaotic nature of the programme. The same disorder was transferred to the environment without a consideration for environmental well-being as informed by environmental ethics. Generally, Environmental Philosophy has been understood as the thinking that attempts to accord moral standing to other realities outside the human community. Boss (2008, 735) sees it as concerned with "the moral basis of environmental responsibility, including the moral value of non-human nature, pollution, population control, food production and preservation of the wilderness and species biodiversity." This understanding of environmental philosophy concurs with Moscher *et al* (1998, 3) who noted that "the application of moral consideration to the area of environmental issues has come to be called *environmental ethics* or *ecological ethics*." Pojman (2000, vi) also sees environmental ethics as extending the scope of moral thought to involve all human beings, animals and the whole of nature, the

biosphere, both now and beyond the imminent future including future generations. Thus, the fast track resettlement programme in Zimbabwe completely ignored the importance of the environment. In this case the co-existence of people of different races, and it ignored the co-existence of humans and the non-human community. There was generally serious disregard of people of different skin pigmentation from blacks, and the non-humans were abused, for example wild life (provided food) was destroyed through wanton hunting and the destruction of trees and grass not to be forgotten. Trees and grasses were needed for building and thatch houses. Not forgetting defecations that were randomly done putting people in danger of diseases outbreak.

The 2000 land reform was chaotic and unplanned (with no infrastructures), this is why war veterans established small committees, mandated themselves with the duties of allocating land to any interested parties. To show how environmental inconsiderate the reform was, instead of carrying out farming expectations of regions, maize farming and groundnut farming took the centre stage. Thus instead of cattle ranching (in regions 5 and 6 respectively) the areas were turned into groundnut and maize production area thereby exposing the loose soils to erosion. Scones et al (2010, 38) classified many districts of Masvingo into regions 4 and 5 with poor sandy soils. He cites Gutu, Chivi and part of Mangwandi area covering Masvingo peri-urban as some of the examples.

Originally farms in these areas were cattle ranching but all has suddenly changed with new farmers now into crop production which is totally against the geography of the area. The same practice soon became national and little attention was paid to the environment.

In Matetsi area of Matabeleland north a white farmer who had developed his area to a successful game part was given only seven hours to vacate the premises and this resulted in the suffering of the animals before the onset of the rains. This situation was worsened by an influx of poachers who indiscriminately destroyed the game. This homocentric thinking has invariably corrupted the thinking of most individuals who are tempted to inherit the fallacy that African communitarian environmental thinking is also anthropocentric just like other Western notions on environmental philosophy. According to The Financial Gazette of 13-19 March this created an unbalanced ecosystem through the destabilization of the natural environment.

Scones et al (2010, 88) avers that the Fast Track Land Reform Programme in Zimbabwe resulted in the destruction of the natural environment. Veldfires expanded massively following the resettlement. There was extensive hunting of game in the area and trees were cut to clear fields for farming and to sell firewood for urban dwellers. This was a clear defiance of policy on the part of government and knowledge from the villagers. Just like what happened during the enforcement of the (NLHA) of 1951 whereby the colonial government failed to educate people on the digging of contour ridges as preventive measures to soil erosion, the Zimbabwean government made a similar historical blunder by not apprising people on environmental conservation measures. People were once again filled with the 1980 independence euphoria which has now been carried over into the second millennium. Thus, in this regard, one can reasonably argue that the history of the land reform programme in Zimbabwe has been centered on an anthropocentric epistemology, where it is believed that the human community is at the centre of the universe such that he can occupy the land and use all animate and non-animate reality surrounding him for his own needs. Moscher et al (1998, 03) gives this western informed philosophical and anthropocentric perspective to nature when they admit the fact that "for a long time, environmental problems were seen solely from a human perspective. The environment was taken to be *our* environment, and therefore appeared in need of preservation only for *our* sake; people

therefore assumed they had the right to use the environment exclusively for their own ends.” This has been the case with the Zimbabwean predicament.

Cases of newly resettled farmers using poisonous herbs when catching fish became a common sight. This method of fishing was even condemned during the pre-colonial era but this time around it has gained momentum as people assumed a misconception of independence and original ownership of natural resources. Frogs and other aquatic organisms became victims as people were jostling for total control of the environment. Some scholars cite incidents where dam water was drained and the whole stock of fish was harvested. The powers of the local authorities were suspended and again chiefs had no jurisdiction over these areas since they were originally occupied by the white farmers. All this causes destabilizations in the ecological balance.

Further degradation of the land comes from the unregularised gold panning, most of the panners are people who have been resettled and who have found it difficult to produce on farms. Thus the years 2000 -2005 has seen a gradual resurfacing of deserts on most farms along highways in Zimbabwe piles of dry wood are common sight. What is disturbing is that not much effort is being used to curb such practices.

While the economic environment benefits the new farmers their social life style was not fully transformed as most of the resettled people continue to regard their original home as ‘kumusha’. No permanent structures have been developed on the new farms developed on the new sites. For the simple reason that the new farmers had and have no title deeds or leases this is perhaps what is prompting people to be reckless with the new environment. Unless the government takes steps to rectify this anomaly the environmental legacy inherited from the colonial era will continue for posterity

The government of Zimbabwe has the blessings of the ministry of natural resources and the environment as well as the fully capacitated Environmental Management Agency (E M A) but if people are not informed and empowered through community based programmes the issue of environmental degradation is here to stay in all its dimension. Thus the position of local authorities on the conservation of the environment should receive great recognition.

Whilst the fast track land resettlement programme averted the total collapse of the delicate ecosystem in some reserves especially those which are adjacent to former commercial white farming areas. The geographical location of Buhera district under region 5 and far away from any commercial farm has left the people with no choice except to resort to river – island cultivation. Save river has of late become a hive of farming activities especially the stretch from Sabi drift to Berchnough Bridge is under green maize throughout the year. The thick island forest along Save river which used to be a habitat for monkeys birds and aquatic life have now been cleared for farming purposes with irrigated maize planted as early as September. Ploughs are used for tilling the land thereby loosening soil for easy wash away. All major pools along the river are now filled with sand threatening downstream irrigation schemes at Berchnough bridge and Chisumbanje respectively. Rivers are often taken as no man’s land hence traditional chiefs’ hands were tied to curtail the looming environmental disaster of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Thus there is need for the ministry of natural resources and environment to take up measures against this lawlessness spilling over from the fast track land resettlement programme. Dalelo (2010, 13) shares the same concern when he says ‘We have

squandered the earth's wealth to meet our needs without regard for other living creatures or generations still to come.' In light of this sad development traditional chiefs should be empowered to enforce the environmental ethics so as to preserve the natural environment.

## CONCLUSION

The research has established that the pre-colonial African thinking had an appreciation of the environment and its sustainable use as demonstrated by the farming methods such as terracing, shifting cultivation, intercropping among others that remain in line with the safeguard for sustainable development. Taboos as enforced by traditional leaders assisted in forming the epicenter of environmental ethics as well. This ideology was complemented by the African cosmic view of the universe whose emphasis is on the relationship between the dead, the living and the yet to come in preserving the natural eco – system. However, the colonial land policies in Rhodesia now Zimbabwe were the *casus belli* for land degradation especially in the congested Tribal Trust Lands where the land hungry indigenous peasants resorted to stream bank cultivation. The newly born baby (Zimbabwe) inherited a colonial legacy of environmental degradation as manifested by the expedited land reform programme. Therefore, both the colonial and post – independent governments in Zimbabwe displayed a deficiency of sound environmental policies hence there is need to rewind the clock back to the pre-colonial African philosophy on the preservation and conservation of natural resources through a communal approach.

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