

‘Squatting’ as a means of establishing authority over forest land in Zimbabwe: A missing dimension to land reform

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Abstract

An analysis of squatting around a protected forest in north-western Zimbabwe is done in the paper to further scholarship that focuses on the ‘negotiability’ over access to land in a broad political economic context of an unfolding land reform. This case focuses on the politics of that broader process at a micro-level in one district perceived by the government as having excess land while the reality on the ground is more complex. Land reform in Zimbabwe has largely focused on land privately owned by white commercial farmers and neglected State land, particularly national parks and forests. Some districts such as the one the paper focuses on are defined as having adequate land for its inhabitants, albeit in a patron-client manner. The paper therefore analyses the contestation by people who invaded a protected State forest thereby resisting this general misconception surrounding state land. The paper examines the unfolding struggles over land around the forest in relation to the complex negotiations over property and authority in the country. The paper also analyses the power relations among the players who ‘invaded’ the State forest which is at the centre of this paper. Different layers of the exercise of authority are witnessed where at the national level, ruling party leaders have provided a framework for giving land to peasants which in turn unleashes local level actors (political leaders) to seize the opportunity to exercise authority by leading land invasions and squatting. We conclude by suggesting that in situations of conflict and uncertainty, examining authority relations (processes of legitimacy) may provide useful insights about the connections between authority and property.

Key Words: Land, forests, property, authority, legitimacy, power relations, struggles

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Introduction

In this paper, we attempt to explore what forest land invasion and allocations in relation to negotiations over property regarding forest land and resources and their implications for authority relations over state land and beyond that. Following similar arguments made by Sikor (2008) we make an attempt to use the contestations, invasions and allocations in a State forest in Zimbabwe as a means to examine contestations over authority and how that in turn influences social practices amongst different actors. Forest invasions bring forth struggles over property regarding land and other forest resources such as trees and wildlife. Such struggles tend to be about use rights over forests as well as control over land. Control in this instance being used with reference to the capacity of legal-political structures to define and oversee the use rights of different people. As a result, invasions tend to symbolize many forms of struggles/contestations about control over natural resources (land, forests, wildlife), as do other forms of resistance (Scott, 1985). At the same time, control over land is a critical element in the relations of authority between institutions and social actors. Land invasions and the struggles that they unleash, ultimately provided us a trajectory through which to examine processes that define our understandings of authority (Sikor, 2008, Fay, 2008).

On the other hand, we also make an attempt along the same lines as Peters (1984), to examine struggles over resources and over power in relation to what they symbolize for different sets of people in and around Mafungautsi State Forest in north-western Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe has proved to be a rich country for research around agrarian change and land reform in general over the last two decades (Moyo, 1995, Stoneman, 1988 Raftopolous, 2001, Kinsey, 1999) and especially in the last five years due to the accelerated land reform taking place there and a lot of scholarship has been derived from the experiences there (Kinsey 2004, Worby 2002). However, in all the writing, there has not been any insights regarding the fate of protected areas and especially forests. Moore (1998; 2005) has written about the struggle over land by a group of disenfranchised people in the eastern part of the country that covers a small part of forest land on which their struggle is based. This paper examines some of the issues surrounding State land as typified by a protected forest in north-western Zimbabwe. Nyambara (2002) also wrote about the 'squatting' complexity over communal land in the same area but did not look at the issue of protected forests nor the issue of State land. Whereas it is true that State land around protected areas only constitute 12 per cent of Zimbabwe's land area but for the areas in which these are found they represent large tracts of land. More so given the history of expropriation from local groups of people who had to make do with the loss of that land. Compared to South Africa where restitution was and is being used to address the problem of such disenfranchisement, in Zimbabwe this option was never undertaken nor is it considered. The redistributive form of agrarian change has largely focused on privately owned farmland and to a lesser extent, State agricultural land, thereby leaving out

State protected land such as protected forests. This paper provides insights from one of such protected forests that are owned and managed by the State through the Forestry Commission of Zimbabwe, which has a long history of squatting dating back to the early 1970s.

We therefore attempt to use these concepts in illuminating the struggles over land around the Mafungautsi State Forest in north-western Zimbabwe. We first provide a brief background to the land issue in Zimbabwe before providing a description about the Mafungautsi case. The material upon which paper is based is then presented in the form of some selected interview details which are followed by a discussion before some conclusions are drawn out.

Background

In 1999, disgruntled by the declining economic conditions in Zimbabwe, representatives of various interest groups (including labour, employers, capital and the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions) formed an opposition political party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) that posed the first serious threat to the government since it came into power in 1980. The government, faced with this threat, came up with a draft constitution that proposed compulsory acquisition of land without compensation but this was rejected in a referendum in 2000 (United Nations, 2005; and Human Rights Watch, 2002) after the opposition party campaigned for a 'No' vote. Now facing increased threat from the opposition MDC, the government revived its call for radical land redistribution to fulfill the independence promises, thereby officially supporting the commercial farm occupations that were led by the war veterans in 1999. In July 2000, the government officially announced that it was embarking on a new resettlement programme, the Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP) that targeted to acquire 3,000 farms for resettlement purposes (Human Rights Watch, 2002; and United Nations, 2005). Even though the government claimed that the initiation of the FTLRP aimed to address the historical imbalances, there were other hidden objectives (Human Rights Watch, 2002; and United Nations, 2005). For example, initiating the FTLRP was also done to protect the interests of the ruling party that was facing increasing competition from the opposition party. In February 2001, 2,706 farms were gazetted for compulsory acquisition by the government and these farms covered a total of six million hectares (Ministry of Lands and Rural Resettlement, April 2001). In April, the programme aimed to acquire 8.3 million hectares from the large scale commercial farming sector for redistribution (Ministry of Lands and Rural Resettlement, June 2001). In October, the government announced that it would list 4558 farms for redistribution, covering a total of 8.3 million hectares. In February 2002, a total of 4874 farms covering 9.23 million hectares were listed for Acquisition (United Nations Development Programme, 2002).

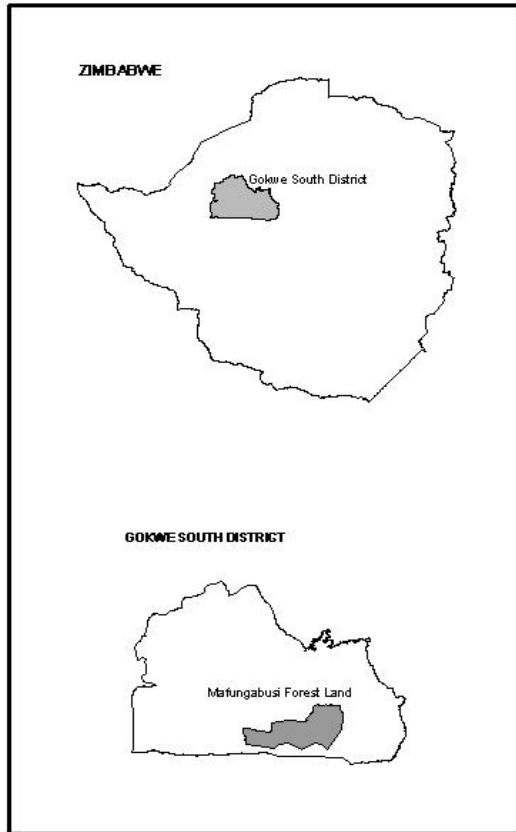
The Mafungautsi Forest

Mafungautsi State Forest lies in Gokwe South District, Midlands Province, north-western Zimbabwe (Figure 1). It is the third largest of the indigenous State forests in Zimbabwe and is unique in that, except for the small area

occupied by small scale commercial farms on the southern-eastern part of the forest, it is entirely surrounded by communal areas. When it was first demarcated as a state forest in 1953, the forest was 101,000 ha in size (Vermeulen, 1997). In 1972, the Northern part of the forest was reclassified as a communal area and some parts of the Southern part were gazetted, leaving the forest with a total of 82,100 ha. The forest makes up 17% of the district. 73% of the district is covered by communal areas and the remaining 10% by national parks and small-scale commercial farms

The underlying geology in Mafungautsi consist of Karoo basalt and sedimentary deposits and these are only exposed along the major rivers where the sand has been completely eroded (Mudekwe, 2003). The dominant soils in the forest are Kalahari sands, although a few patches occur with sodic and heavy clay soils. The Kalahari sands are highly susceptible to soil erosion when cultivated for crop production. The Mafungautsi Kalahari sands have low clay and silt particles (3% clay and 2% silt) and therefore cannot stabilise organic matter significantly (Zingore *et al.*, 2005). The soils therefore have little content of organic matter, a crucial element for sustainable crop production by subsistence farms (household food self sufficiency oriented farmers) who use little or no fertilisers and mostly rely on nutrients mineralised from organic matter (Zingore *et al.*, 2005). In their study, Zingore *et al.* (2005) found that soil organic matter in the Mafungautsi Kalahari sands declines rapidly after cultivation and no meaningful crop production can be achieved after five to ten years of crop production without inputs of manure or fertilizer. The soils found in valleys are however different and much more varied and consists of alluvial deposits from the upper slopes. These therefore tend to be loam soils that are deep, moderately drained and highly favoured for agricultural purposes (Mudekwe, 2003).

Figure 1: Location of Mafungautsi State Forest



Mafungautsi Forest is an example of what is classified as 'Zambeian dry deciduous forest' (White, 1983; Frost, 1996). The woodland is dominated by *Brachystegia spiciformis* but with a high proportion (about 25 % of all stems) of the Zimbabwe teak (*Baikiaea plurijuga*), a leguminous tree valuable for timber (Vermeulen, 1994). *Baikiaea plurijuga* is well adapted to the very deep, nutrient poor Kalahari sands due to its very deep rooting system. Most of the large specimens of *Baikiaea plurijuga* were removed by selective logging that took place between 1989-1992. A few other commercial timber species, such as *Pterocarpus angolensis*, are also found in the forest. Grasslands in the forest occur only in river valleys where shallower water tables during the rains exclude the trees that are generally sensitive to water logging. Grass cover is low in the woodlands on the plateau where the deep-rooted trees out-compete grasses in accessing soil water. In general, human intervention and other disturbances may change the structure and diversity of the forest (Childes and Walker, 1987; Vermeulen, 1994). These changes could be undesirable but could also be manipulated to maintain the forest in the state most suited to fulfilling stakeholders' needs.

The forest is a source of four rivers, namely, Sengwa, Ngondoma, Mbumbusi and Lutope that drain into the Zambezi River and the Kariba Dam, a source of hydroelectricity power in Zimbabwe. The forests is a source of several resources including timber, thatch grass (*Hyperrhenia femitina*), broom grass (*Aristida junciformis*), honey, mushrooms, timber, wild animals – [Few wild animals are found in the forest and include: zebra, kudu, bush pig, warthog, reedbuck, bushbuck, buffalo, hare, hyena and duiker (Maturure *et al.*, 1994)],

poles, herbs, tea leaves and firewood. Timber, poles and wild animals are however, not part of the resource sharing agreement.

The stakeholders in Mafungautsi

There are several stakeholders in Mafungautsi and these can be grouped into two major groups, district level and local level stakeholders. District level stakeholders include: the FC, Rural District Council (RDC), The Ministry of Youth Gender and Employment Creation (MYDGEC), the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), the Department of Agricultural Research and Extension Services (AREX), and the District Administrator (DA). Except for AREX and the FC, all the other district level stakeholders are not actively involved in facilitating processes in communities. Local level stakeholders include: local leadership authorities (chiefs, headmen, and village heads), village development committees (VIDCOs), ward development committees (WADCOs), Resource Management Committees (RMC) and their subcommittees, resource user groups (that were initiated under the ACM research process), local councillors and local extension agents. The roles of these stakeholders are outlined in Table 3.

Table 3: Stakeholders and their roles in Mafungautsi (Adapted from Matose, 2002).

Level	Stakeholder/ Organisation	Role in the management of the forest
District level stakeholders	Forestry Commission	A state body specifically mandated to provide advice on, and control, management and exploitation of forest resources. The FC has regulatory roles as well as extension roles.
	Department of Agricultural Research and Extension (AREX)	Government department that carries out agricultural extension in communal areas. It is responsible for providing technical extension services to forest users and training e.g. on beekeeping.
	Department of Natural Resources	Secretariat to the Natural Resources Board, nationally their role is advisory, regulatory, and supervisory in relation to all natural resources.
	The Ministry of Youth, Gender and Employment Creation	Ministry that coordinates government activities on rural development activities. It is responsible for providing training to communities, the RMCs on various issues including proposal writing. It is also responsible for monitoring community participation in development projects
	Rural District Council (RDC)	This is the local government authority. The RDC has a Rural District Development Committee (RDDC) that coordinates all council activities. It is responsible for formulating and implementing by-laws, and consolidating ward development plans into the district five-year plan.
	The District Administrator (DA)	The DA chairs the RDC and is an employee and representative of the Ministry of Local Government, Rural and Urban Development
Local level stakeholders	Traditional leaders (Chiefs, Headmen and village heads)	They play a supportive role to the RMCs and also help in policing issues.
	The District Administrator's Office	Represents the Minister responsible local governance at the district level
	Councillors	These are elected people who chair the WADCOs and are responsible for forwarding the ward development plans to the Rural District Council.

Village Development Committees (VIDCOS) and Ward Development Committees (WADCOS)	<p>VIDCOS were created by the 1984 Prime Ministerial Directive to give a democratic orientation to the process of planning for local development. The VIDCO is the lowest unit of government administration, whose role is to identify needs of people in their villages and articulate them in the form of village development plans. These plans are presented to the WADCO.</p> <p>The WADCO draws its memberships from the chairpersons of the VIDCOS in the ward and is chaired by an elected councillor. It is responsible for consolidating the various VIDCO plans into a WARD development plan to be presented to the Rural District Development Committee</p>
Resource Management Committees	Were formed by the FC initiative to represent their communities and act as a link between the communities and the FC. Their main roles included, issuing out permits to resource harvesters, controlling and monitoring resource harvesting and keeping the community bank account
The resource users	These are local people who utilise forest resources as well as help in the management of the forest. Their participation is mainly through the RMC.

Settlement history in Mafungautsi State Forest

People living in the North and South of Mafungautsi forest have different histories and they were affected differently by forest management policies in Mafungautsi. Their histories are presented separately in the next sections.

Mafungautsi North

This is where, Batanai, one of the study sites is located. In the 1940s, some of the early settlers used to live at Raji (now the small scale commercial farming areas). They were later forced to move and join others who were settled at Bandakamwe area around the head waters of Lutope River in the eastern part of the forest when the Raji area was converted to a commercial farm (Matose 2002).

In 1954, the forest was converted to a state forest. However, up to 1963, the takeover of the forest by the FC had little effect to the lives of the forest dwellers, who continued to perform their religious rituals and ceremonies to ensure plentiful harvests as well as continued flow of water in rivers in the forest. In 1963, the inhabitants at Bandakamwe were asked to move to the western part of the forest to an area that came to be known as Zanda Plateau. The FC recommended this area as suitable for settlement. The relationship between the FC and the forest residents was cordial and the forest residents helped the FC to put out forest fires when they occurred without any payment. However, in the 1970s the FC began to issue rules and regulations to be followed by the residents, for example, large game hunting was prohibited. The FC officials also began to issue permits for people to harvest forest products. However, during the late 1970s at the peak of the liberation war struggle, the FC employees stopped their forest service. Some families took this opportunity to move back to Bandakamwe, whilst others moved into the forest to settle. Movement into the forest and reclaiming of land by the local people was based on the assumption that the war was fought to regain access to land that local people had lost to the colonial government (Matose, 2002).

At independence, the FC employees came back to work and their first assignment was to evict the new settlers who had moved into the forest in 1981 and those who had moved back to Bandakamwe. Again there was a cordial relationship between the FC and the forest residents even after the evictions and the FC permit system for harvesting resources was resumed. However, the relationship broke down in 1983 in conjunction with the rise of dissident activities in the forest. This was partly because the new government had failed to address issues of land equity after independence. In 1985, the FC camp and equipment in the forest were set on fire (Matose, 2002). The burning of the FC camp and also the rumours that the forest residents were harbouring the dissidents provoked the government to issue a three months eviction notice to the residents at Zanda in 1986. Before the eviction notice period had elapsed, the army came and set fire to structures that belonged to the forest residents. The forest residents moved out of the forest and were accommodated in villages adjacent to the forest. When the hostilities between the two parties, the FC and local communities, ended in 1987, most displaced residents were anxious to return to Zanda, but they were never invited back. The residents were, however, afraid to take their own initiative as some of them had been evicted several times before. As a result, they lived on the fringes of their forest homeland, hoping that the FC would one day allow them access into the forest land for cultivation and settlement. (Matose, 2002). The introduction of the FTLRP in 2000 was therefore taken as an opportunity by some local people to reclaim their land in Mafungautsi forest (More details about settlements in the forest after the FTLRP are provided below).

Mafungautsi South

This is the where Gababe and Ndarire sites are located. Forest management policies had little impact on people living in Mafungautsi South as most of them are immigrants into the area. Most of the immigrants are Shona people who were evicted in 1953 from Rhodesdale. It was only around the 1970s that people in Mafungautsi South started experiencing the impact of the takeover of the forest by the FC. The FC officials started moving in the villages announcing that it was now illegal to harvest certain types of resources like timber. The forest boundary was also declared. However, at the end of the liberation war, some people also moved to settle in the forest at Zanda. Those who moved to settle in the forest were later evicted by the army in 1986.

In 1989, some people who had fields that were adjacent to the forest, lost them as the FC redrew the forest boundary. In 1992, the relations of people in Mafungautsi South and the Forestry Commission worsened because the FC granted a logging company a concession to cut commercial timber. The benefits were never shared with local communities even though people who had fields that were adjacent to the forest suffered losses as their crops were damaged during the logging sessions.

Settlements in the forest after the introduction of the FTLRP in 2000

When the FTLRP was introduced in the year 2000, some local people (calling themselves war veterans) pioneered the settlement at Zanda Plateau in the forest saying they were reclaiming their land that was taken by the colonialists. As soon as they went into the forest, there were several reports of

poaching of wildlife as well as rampant tree cutting, by the settlers as they cleared land to make way for their homesteads, fields and gardens. The new settlers settled on the designated resource collection areas for two of the RMC areas close to Zanda namely Chemusonde and Kupfuma Ishungu. Discussions with local community members in 2002 revealed that about 75 families had settled in the forest and other community members were angry about this development complaining that they had taken care of the forest ever since and their management efforts were about to be wasted. The Chemusonde and Kupfuma Ishungu RMCs completely stopped functioning as the new settlers settled in areas where they used to harvest resources. It is important to mention that, even though the members of the RMC in the affected areas had stopped operating, no other alternative resource management systems were put in place by the new forest settlers.

By, 2004 there were now about 200 households at Zanda Plateau occupying a forest area that stretched for 16km³, and they had cleared trees to pave way for a road that connected the new area with an existing main road. They however encountered a problem when the road reached the FC Lutope Camp as the FC officer rejected the settlers' request to let their road pass through the camp. According to the FC extension officer, the number of people who resided in the forest however changed with time – increasing towards the agricultural season, but decreasing afterwards as some of the residents went back to their original homes in the communities for security reasons since the settlements were not yet legalised. One member of the Batanai area, and a settler in the forest (Mr Givas), when asked about area of land cleared by settlers for agricultural purposes, said that, '*vanhu vanongotema kusvika panoperera simba ravo*' - meaning - there are no rules being followed when clearing the land for agricultural purposes: people just clear areas as big as they had energy to do so. Mr Givas later indicated that he himself had so far cleared 30 acres and that many people had cleared similar pieces of land.

The issue of the forest settlers was one of the major issues raised at the pre-grass cutting workshop held in April 2004. This was an annual event that was organized by the FC, where members from all the RMCs around Mafungautsi area met to discuss the various issues they faced and to set harvesting permit and selling prices for the various forest products. Part of the minutes of this meeting are presented in Box 1.

Box 1: Minutes of the pre-grass cutting workshop held on 6-7April 2004 at Lutope Camp

A group consisting of members from Rugare Tasungunuka and Chemusonde RMC areas was asked to discuss and make recommendations on how the issue of the settlers could be solved and their main recommendations were that: a) the settlers should be removed and this should be done immediately. Their reason being that, the new settlers were now monopolising the forest resources and were making harvesting of resources difficult for those coming from areas out of the forest. The forest settlers were now asking villagers from communities surrounding the forest to pay them for harvesting resources as they claimed that the resources were now in their private agricultural fields and therefore belonged to them; and b) the residents should be barred from using any of the forest resources as these are a common property belonging to all the villagers in Chemusonde and Kupfuma Ishungu RMC area.

³ Because of the dangers involved in carrying this kind of research, I failed to measure the width of the cleared area so as to come up with a total area cleared by the new settlers.

During the discussions that followed the presentation by this group, the FC officer highlighted that the first recommendation was not that easy to effect. He however, said that a land committee being chaired by Mr. John Nkomo⁴ has been set up and was looking into this issue. The officer however, went on to say that at a ruling party meeting that has been held recently, it was highlighted that these settlers will be removed and will be resettled elsewhere as the government would not degazette any forest areas. One RMC member, who is also a village head, from Sokwela RMC later told participants at the workshop that so far he has had a lot of pressure from his RMC area as they also wanted to go and settle in the forest. He said that told them that those who 'invaded' the forest were not there to stay and were going to be removed soon. However, he said that if these settlers were not removed in the coming two years, the whole forest could disappear as those outside are watching and waiting for an opportunity to do so. The workshop participants later agreed that, the Council Chair and the District Administrator who were also participants of the workshop, should take this as a priority and remind the governor of their province about the potential threat that the new settlers posed to the existence of the forest.

An issue about the Rugare Tasungunuka RMC area, where the villagers were said to have cleared 50 acres each in the forest for agricultural fields, was also discussed at the same workshop and it was agreed that this would be dealt with separately as there were no settlers in the forest but only fields. Suggestions were that the responsible authorities (the FC and other departments) should initiate meetings with the communities involved and try to map out a way forward. The events in Rugare Tasungunuka had sparked debates in other RMC areas and RMC members had started negotiating with the FC in order to get agricultural fields in the forest. In a discussion with the chair of Chemwiro Masawi's RMC, (a neighboring RMC to Rugare Tasungunuka – see Figure 4), he said that their RMC area was aware of the events happening in Rugare Tasungunuka and they did not agree with this unlawful acquisition of land for agricultural purposes. He however said that their RMC was trying by all means to prevent this from happening in their area, but that they acquire land legally in the forest to set up an agricultural project to create employment for the youth, so that they could grow crops and sell them at a market since their RMC was close to the road.

Discussion with one officer of the Forestry Commission's Forestry Protection Unit, Mr Makore in October 2007 revealed that about 600 families now resided in the forest. The number of settlers had continued to increase and in September 2006 (in addition to the Zanda Plateau, there were new settlers at Bhandakamwe, Ngondoma and Mbumbuzi areas, with the highest number of settlers at Zanda, followed by Ngondoma and then Bhandakamwe. The new settlements at Ndondoma and Mbumbuzi disturbed resource management activities by Gababe area (and also the Chemwiro Masawi RMC) and Batanai area respectively, as the settlements were in the areas where they harvested their grass resources. As more people continued to move into new areas, in September 2006, the FC Provincial Manager for Midlands Province and the other officers from various organizations organized a meeting with the new settlers in the forest and told them to move out. Those who did not move out were arrested and taken to the police (the FPU sought help from Lupane). However, Chief Njelele⁵ called the police and told them that the arrested people had not committed any crime as they had settled in his area – the people were later released. The forest settlers were said to be getting great harvests and were practicing shifting cultivation. It was alleged that each person had so far cleared a total of 50 acres in the new areas. When asked why the new settlers had such huge fields and were practicing shifting cultivation in the forest, one of the forest residents said that said that it was

⁴ He was the chair of the land committee that was set up by the Zimbabwean Government to preside over land redistribution

⁵ It was alleged that the chief also had a 30-acre-field in the forest and settlers in the forest had to work on his field for free – probably in return for protection. The DA was also said to have a field in the forests and normally hired workers to work on it and was only seen in forest during harvest time when collecting the harvest.

because year by year they grow crops on virgin fields – he said that the soils were infertile such that those who did not have fertilizers could get very poor harvests.

New settlers in the forest have also included people from outside the local Mafungautsi communities as an interview with one settler (Mrs. Mpofu) revealed. Mrs Mpofu was one of the settlers in the Zanda area and was a war veteran. The ACM research team gave her a lift from Lutope Forest Camp to Gokwe Business Center. While in transit she narrated her ordeal in the forest and shared with the ACM team micro politics and power dynamics taking place in the forest. Mrs Mpofu originally came from Jahana area of Gokwe District. The main reason why she left Jahana was that the arable land she had was not enough for her family. Before she settled at Zanda she was staying at Gokwe center where she bought three residential stands and she was currently developing. In 2003 She came to know about the ‘scramble for land’ at Zanda Plateau through some forest settlers who supplied her with groundnuts that she processed into peanut butter (Mrs Mpofu had a small peanut butter making enterprise at her home at Gokwe Business Center). More details about this interview are provided in Box 2 below:

Box 2: An interview with Mrs. Mpofu from Zanda on 18/07/04

The settlers from Zanda told me that there was abundant land in the forest and anyone who wanted land was welcome. They said the government had blessed the occupation of the forest by the people who were evicted from there during the dissident era. They said since some of the people who had been evicted had either passed away or moved to other areas, other people like me could also settle in the forest since there was a lot of land. So in October 2003 I came to the forest and cleared a field. I built a make shift house because most the time I was at Gokwe center where I am busy constructing my three houses. This year I am expecting three tonnes of maize and several bags of ground nuts. When I settled in the forest my only intention was to grow crops and raise enough money to finish my houses at Gokwe’.

When I settled in the forest I had one aim: to grow crops for sale so that I could raise enough money to finish constructing my houses at Gokwe center. The impression I got from those who were already in the forest when I settled here was that the government was aware that peasants had occupied part of the forest. I was also told that the government had ceded the invaded area to the peasants who were living in the forest. Recently, I started facing problems with the leadership in the forest. There are three types of leaders in the forest namely kraalheads, the ward coordinator and the ruling party officers. The kraalheads used to allocate the land but now the ward coordinator is playing a very active role. New settlers are asked to pay \$100 000 to the ward coordinator so that the land seeker’s ‘application’ can be processed. Yesterday (17/7/04) two people paid \$100 000 each to the ward coordinator so that they could get permission to settle in the forest. The money is shared with the kraalheads. I was also irked by weekly contributions of \$5000 per farmer which the ward coordinator says ‘*ndeyekuronga kuti mugare muno*’ – meaning – it’s for us to arrange for you to stay in the forest. They say the money will be given to Chief Nemangwe (as a bribe) so that the chief fights for the invaders when the government tries to evict them from the forest. Everyone is expected to pay all the monies the leadership asks for. If you refuse or fail to pay you are labelled as a traitor. We hold endless meetings in the forest where people are asked to pay more and more money but no one knows where the money goes. We are also expected to attend several meetings they hold at Nyaradza Business Center, which is far away from the forest. I once told them that I could not attend all the meetings at Nyaradza because I have problems with my legs and they said each day I fail to attend a meeting, I should pay a fine of \$2000 ‘to pay those who would have gone to listen on my behalf’. Recently FPU’s from the FC came and addressed us. They said they wanted to know if more people had settled in the forest in addition to the ones who were counted at the height of the farm invasions. From the FPU’s talk I picked that the government is planning to evict us from the forest. At one of the routine meetings I indicated that since we were going to be evicted by the government, there was no need for us to keep on paying ‘protection levies’. I also suggested that since we were inevitably going to be evicted we were supposed to stop chopping down trees. The local

leadership did not like what I said. In particular the ward coordinator said that I was influencing other settlers to revolt against him. He does not want to hear anyone who says that the settlers will be evicted one day. But some kraalheads supported me especially on the issue of weekly contribution. I was called to a tribunal where I was strongly reprimanded but I refused to withdraw my statements. I vowed that I was never going to pay any money because I had just realized that all the settlers in the forest were illegal. They also said I was selling them out to the FC because I sometimes visit the FC camp at Lutope where my sister works. But I told that being a settler in the forest does not stop me from visiting my sister at the FC. I am now fed up with the politics in the forest and I have decided to move out. I only told a few friends about this. If the leadership knows about it now, they might harass me or even burn my produce. The other problem is that the people in the forest do not want to develop their families. All they want is to gamble and drink beer. Every weekend there is a beer party where animals are slaughtered. If you are a settler you are expected to also brew beer. If you do not they ask you to pay something so that they can 'quench their thirst'. *Manje zvinangwa zvakasiyana. Ini ndirikufunga zvekupedza kuvaka dzimba dzangu paGokwe umwe arikuti deno ndawana mari ndimwe doro, hapana chatingaronga kana takasiyana seizvi* meaning we have different objectives, mine is to finish building my houses at Gokwe and yet some want to raise money for drinking beer – with these different objectives it is difficult to work together. I am leaving the forest as soon as I finish transporting all my produce to Gokwe. I have realised that the government is very clear on the land issue, they are saying if there are any people who are occupying a piece of land they were not given, such people should move out-people in the forest were not given that land. Soon the government will come and case them away. I do not want to be chased away like a thief. Those settlers want to fight with the government, they will not win. The government is very powerful. Whether one fought in the war or not, if the government wants to evict them it will do it easily.

The settlements in the forest affected management activities in the forest (a) as the new settlers settled in areas where the resource management committee areas were supposed to manage and (b) as RMC members felt threatened when carrying out their patrols in the forest. One RMC member from Gababe RMC, a member of the monitoring sub-committee that is responsible for spearheading monitoring activities and carrying out patrols in the forest said that after his encounter with the new settlers in the forest, he became very scared of going back to do patrols. He narrated the following story

One day when I was patrolling the forest I came across a group of the new settlers and I thought they were poachers. I told them that I was an RMC member and that poaching was not allowed in this forest. Upon hearing this, the settlers were angry and each person picked up all kinds of weapons (axes, hoes, etc) and they told me that if I wanted to live I should leave immediately. I was so scared, and I dropped to my knees and started clapping my hands as I did not know what to do. The war veterans then told me to stand up and go home and never to come back to their area again.

A discussion with a member of the Batanai RMC revealed that in general people were not happy about the events in the forest as there were no rules and regulations governing use of resources and people were just cutting down trees in a greedy way. When asked about his vision for the forest area, the RMC member he wanted the FC and the DA to support the move by people into the forest and work with the local councilor to bring order into the forest – he said that there was a reason why people moved into those areas - these people used to live in the forest and were asked to move out of the forest during the war, and now they were claiming their land back. According to the RMC member, the way forward now was for the FC to come up with strict by-laws in terms of what these settlers should or should not do as well as come up a limit of how much land a person should clear. He went on to say that so far, most people have cleared vast pieces of land that was being underutilized.

Discussion

- Access to productive land in a rich wetland area inside a protected forest: agriculture in a special niche
- Access to a multiplicity of forest resources: wildlife (game meat), forest foods (fruits, honey, mushrooms), timber
- Proximity to ancestral sites of significance: sacred sites such as pools
- *Kutora*⁶ represents a complex form of asserting rights for those long considered passive peasants.
- Forest dwellers breaking free from a choreographed land to the people movement in which they are actively pursuing a separate agenda from that of the ruling government by reclaiming State land
- A struggle within a larger struggle. The negotiations by different peasants to gain access to a means of livelihood through squatting, raising issues of power, access and land/resource relations
- Authority over the future of the forest – who has the legitimacy to decide?

Conclusions: *Kutora* as a new means for asserting property relations on forest lands

We conclude by suggesting that in situations of conflict and uncertainty, examining authority relations (processes of legitimacy) may provide useful insights about the connections between authority and property. *Kutora* represents a complex form of asserting rights for those long considered passive peasants. A struggle within a larger struggle. Forest dwellers breaking free from a choreographed land to the people movement in which they are actively pursuing a separate agenda from that of the ruling government by taking land from it.

As time passes on, some of the people who are outside the forest are also gaining confidence to also move in and settle or clear land for settlement and initiate another trajectory of authority and the attendant contestations within communities and with the State.

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⁶ *Kutora* literally means "to take" but it has come to symbolise a discourse of taking over property after President Robert Mugabe used it to unleash farm invasions across Zimbabwe in 2000.

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