

## **Worldviews, Science and Common Property Governance:**

**Nyika vanhu: The land is the People:**

**An examination of natural resource management in Zimbabwe's Communal Lands**

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“A new type of thinking is essential if mankind is to survive.” Albert Einstein.

Exactly a decade ago, in September 1992, Mary Clark addressed the third annual conference of the Association for the Study of Common Property, in Washington DC. Her subject was “Worldviews, Science and the Politics of Social Change.”

This paper takes up the challenge she laid down when she said, in concluding her address:

“Many cultures, past and present, have done a better job than the modern West has of living amicably together, of allocating wealth in socially non-destructive ways, and of living more-or-less benignly off their natural resources. ...It seems to me that our job as ‘scientists’ or ‘scholars’ or what ever we label ourselves, is to identify the attributes of the social patterns that seem to promote these things.” (Clark M 1992;7)

Western Science has been dominated by reductionist methodology since the days of Rene' Descartes. It was born out of our worldview. The social sciences have not been exempt from this. Witness Radcliffe Brown writing in 1952, who stated “(T)he basis of science is systematic classification. It is the first task of social statics to make some attempt to compare forms of social life in order to arrive at classifications.” (Radcliffe-Browne1952: 7)

As one of the Founding Fathers of modern Social Anthropology he never the less grappled with ways of accommodating reductionism with ideas of process and complexity. Thus he borrowed from Compté in stating that there were two sets of problems – one of “social statics” as illustrated above - and the other of “social dynamics” which was to “discover conditions of change” ( Ibid.). He added that it is also important in any analysis to understand that although systems and process can be broken down into compartments for ease of understanding or comparison, it is important to remember “the theory of Montesquieu (which is the) theory of a total social system, according to which all the features of social life are united into a coherent whole.” (Ibid:6)

Radcliffe-Brown went on to suggest that it was “useful” to study social life among human beings as “an adaptational system” in which one could distinguish three aspects of the total system. He regarded these as “the way in which social life is adjusted to the physical environment... the ecological adaptation”; then there are the “institutional arrangements by which an orderly life is maintained.... The institutional aspect of social adaptation;” and thirdly “ there is the social process by which an individual acquires habits and mental characteristics that fit him for a place in the social life... This we call the cultural adaptation..” (Ibid;9)<sup>1</sup> It is useful to study

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<sup>1</sup> One of the problems of writing about complexity is the tendency for language to become more and more abstruse. One is almost left with the impression that this is sometimes deliberate. This tendency to create “busy work” to borrow a phrase from Mary Clark

Radcliffe-Brown's seminal work if we are to explore the changes that have taken place (and continue to take place) in our understanding of mankind and the environment of which he is a part. For instance, while he rightly pointed to the need to study cultural adaptation, Radcliffe-Brown, and his contemporaries, saw this in the context of the Spencerian theory of social- Darwinism.

"The theory of social evolution was formulated by Sir Herbert Spencer as part of his formulation of the general theory of evolution. According to that theory the development of life on the earth constitutes a single process to which Spencer applied the term 'evolution'. The theory of 'organic' and 'super-organic' (social) evolution can be reduced to two essential propositions:

- (1) That both in the development of forms of organic life and in the development of forms of human social life there has been a process of diversification by which many different forms of organic life or of social life have developed out of a very much smaller number of original forms.
- (2) That there has been a general trend of development by which more complex forms of structure and organisation (organic or social) have arisen from simpler form." (Radcliffe-Brown 1952:8)

(Radcliffe-Brown may have had a feeling of unease which was to surface in more recent discourse by current scientists when he added the caveat: "We can give provisional acceptance to Spencer's fundamental theory, while rejecting the various pseudo-historical speculations which he added to it." (Ibid; 8)

We are creatures of our culture. Scientists -- and this includes social scientists -- no matter how they strive for objectivity, cannot be entirely free of the perceptions that guide their thoughts. This paper, I have no doubt, reflects my worldview -- that of an African of mostly European descent, with a life-time of professional involvement in rural Eastern and Southern Africa. For as Mary Clark affirms:

"We each live and act on the basis of the mental model of the world that we have in our heads...it encompasses everything ... we 'know', including the cosmology of one's culture..." She goes on to add: "Human thought grows only within language and since language can exist only in society, all thought is rooted in society. **This statement is extremely important, for it reminds us that *no fact, no idea, no thought can ever be wholly free from cultural bias.***" (Clark M 1989:213.)

### **The Development of Western Worldviews:**

Modern western democracies are based on the idea that an individual's right to freedom is the paramount social value. It is the function of the state to protect that right. There is a strong belief in such values as 'scientific rationality', 'efficiency', 'the work ethic' and 'free markets'. Indeed it is perhaps true of the American notion of democracy that the 'free market' and democracy are somehow synonymous.

But it has not always been so.

Only with the dawn of the "Age of Reason" did Western thought and Western society embrace these new ideas. Prior to that the power of the Church had ordered society according to the Theory of Values, "embracing all human interests and activities in a system of which the apex was religion." (Tawney R. H 1962)

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(1989:xix) coupled with the extensive use of an intellectual argot actually seems to me to detract from, rather than enhance, academic excellence. Radcliffe-Browne possessed an ability to expound complex ideas in simple English -- a gift that many modern social scientists might try to emulate

Between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a social, political and religious upheaval created the present way Westerners see their world. Nation states replaced feudal fiefdoms and a capitalist middle-class came to dominate the political arena. The birth of modern science challenged the accepted wisdom of the church. Culminating in the Industrial Revolution and the shift of population from rural to urban living, Western worldviews reflected these developments.

Thus Western received wisdom came to accept certain basic assumptions formed by leading philosophers, scientists and political thinkers dating from that period.

From Thomas Hobbes came the notion of “possessive individualism as the moral basis for society” (Clark 1989:261). He believed that self-interest was the fundamental human trait and the prime mover of human action. Each person owned himself. The marketplace was the logical extension of this premise, where each individual could freely sell or refuse to sell, his goods and his labour.

These ideas were enlarged by Adam Smith (1776) in his “Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations” who argued vigorously against any form of government ‘protectionism. “(T)he sovereign state is ..totally unsuited for superintending the industry of private people..”

Reinforcing the Puritan and Protestant drive to justify bourgeoisie dominance of a capitalist world, the philosopher-scientists of the Age of Reason produced respectable and reasoned explanations. Rene Descartes, developed many of the revelations of science into a mechanistic view of life. Cartesian reductionism in order to study and explain our environment is still an acceptable methodology. Newton demonstrated that there were explainable causes of events. All this confirmed the Christian assumption that Man (meaning of course Western man) occupied a special place somewhere at the top of the scheme of things, being made in the image of God. He was above and separate from Nature. Even women failed to really figure in this arrangement!

Thus even before the advent of Darwin and “Origin of the Species” Western science’s worldview was one of ‘progress’ from disorder to order; from simple to more complex; the lower to the higher; the lesser to the greater. Homo Sapiens sapiens was obviously the most evolved being on the planet.

From Darwin it was but a short step to Spencer and the development of social-Darwinism. Societies evolved from simple savagery to modern, sophisticated states. And since success is measured by accumulations of wealth; by military muscle; by the spread of national influence and demonstrable pre-eminence on the scientific frontier, there develops an ethno-centric confidence in the rightness of these views.

Small wonder that until very recently, most Western assessments of alternative views and systems of resource management were biased – to borrow Clark’s term. There is an inevitable partisan belief in the need to provide interventions that help “developing”<sup>2</sup> communities (and nations) appreciate the benefits that flow from embracing these sorts of visions. For it is only by doing so that they can “develop” from disorderly, inefficient and wasteful societies into modern, market driven democracies with all the visible benefits that are supposed to flow from such an arrangement.

[It is this worldview -- centred on extractive production and consumerism; on the ability of science to overcome the vagaries on Nature; on the need to reduce problems to simple linear elements in order to find simple linear answers -- that explains the](#)

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<sup>2</sup> The wide use of this adjective is itself revealing. Developing from what to what, one might ask?

persistence of inappropriate science, and inappropriate methodologies flowing from that science, being applied in the field of rural community development.

Melissa Leach et al, in “The Lie of the Land” explore “(T)he driving force behind much environmental policy in Africa”. This “is a set of powerful, widely perceived images of environmental change.” This change is all downhill: it includes “over-grazing and the ‘desertification’ of drylands; the widespread existence of a ‘wood fuel crisis’; the rapid and recent removal of once pristine forests, soil erosion, and the mining of natural resources caused by rapidly growing populations. So self-evident do these phenomena appear that they are regarded as common knowledge among development professionals in African governments, international donor agencies, and non-governmental organisations. They have acquired the status of conventional wisdom.” (Leach M and R Mearns 1996;1)

In other words, they are a reflection of their worldviews.

“These orthodoxies assign to African farmers, hunters and herders a particular role as agents as well as victims, of environmental change. If current trends are to be reversed, it is implied, local land-use practices will have to be transformed and made less destructive. *Yet the development policies and programmes that result commonly prove to be at best neutral and at worst deleterious in their consequences for rural people and for the natural-resource base on which their livelihoods often substantially depend.*” (ibid 2) (My italics)

Why, in the face of continued failure to affect desired improvements, are attempts so seldom made to challenge the premises upon which such strategies are founded? And even when they are, all too often, in my experience, it is not the received wisdom of Western science that is questioned. Rather are answers sought which reinforce that science by suggesting that it is the target community that is unable (or unwilling) to wholeheartedly accept the obvious benefits that such interventions would provide. It is their refusal to abandon their own notions of tenure that is the cause of failure. Or it is because the target community has a “high leisure preference”; or it is lack of political commitment that is to blame. In terms of the perceptions of the development agents it is not hard to find empirical “evidence” to support these views – particularly as they re-enforce their stereotyping which is itself yet another reflection of their worldview.

Thus strategies for the conservation and development of natural resources flounder in negative feed back loops. Donors, NGO’s and government agencies<sup>3</sup> are overwhelmed by failure. Their pessimism grows as they witness the increasing need to provide welfare rather than development and by the increasing futility of pouring large sums of money into projects that achieve nothing but the aggrandisement of a few local elites and often handsome financial reward for the agents of these organisations. And in the mean time the environment appears to degrade at an alarming rate. People get poorer. And the cycle repeats itself.

In attacking the cause of so much failure and frustration, it would be remiss of me not to mention that there are many academics and development professionals such as are gathered here, who do indeed challenge the folly of this scenario. Melissa Leach, Scoones, Little, Clark, Murphree and many others in the ecology-social science nexus, have with painstaking and elegant erudition demonstrated the need for what Clark (quoting Einstein) has suggested -- the need for a new way of thinking. Yet

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<sup>3</sup> Most government agents by virtue of their education have come to embrace the orthodoxies of western science. Most civil servants perceive such strategies as decentralisation to local level as a threat to their security. They are often the last to opt for innovative and participatory approaches to development.

there remains a pervasive reluctance on the part of governments, many NGOs and donors to make a paradigm shift, so imbued is the narrative of development discourse with ideas embedded in western worldviews about property, linear “development” and neo-liberal economics. This paper offers yet another plea for such a paradigm shift amongst those involved in what is perhaps the most crucial dilemma facing our time. However, in order to do that it is necessary, I believe, to visit what Irene Dankelman (1999) calls the cosmo-vision<sup>4</sup> of that part of Africa in which I was born, lived, worked and studied. Centred on Zimbabwe, this includes much of the SADC region.

### **An alternative worldview: “*Nyika Vanhu: The Land is the People*”**

As a young colonial District Officer, one of my duties was to re-hear cases uplifted from chiefs courts. These were not strictly speaking appeals. They were re-trials. This was the interface between customary law and the impositions of “Common Law” – in the case of Zimbabwe, Roman-Dutch Law. Procedure and evidence was regulated by the practise of Common Law and Statute Law. The trial was a case of record. Evidence was reduced to writing. By way of contrast, in the court of the chief (*dare ra'she*) trials were conducted according to customary procedures. Hearsay evidence – indeed any evidence – was permitted. Trials were not committed to writing. Witnesses included anyone who felt like partaking in proceedings. The process was inclusive rather than exclusive and the desired outcome was reconciliation. Although there were principals, the notion of a single plaintiff and a single respondent was replaced by one where by a case involved at the very least two extended families. And as each extended family was in turn related to others it meant that anyone who wished to could be involved as a witness or advocate for either and sometimes both parties. Seduction and divorce cases predominated.

On a particular day, I was hearing evidence concerning such matters.

A young woman's father was suing for damages for the seduction of his daughter. Her father's sister was present in support of the girl. It was she who dominated the court and persisted in giving opinions and offering evidence indiscriminately. Most district officers allowed a degree of leniency in these matters, only committing the trial to paper once a sort of understanding had been reached. In other words they allowed (as much as they could) the customary procedures of the traditional courts to prevail, even if this meant laundering the trial record to fit the conclusions. However, hearsay evidence was never permitted. And in cases of seduction or adultery it was necessary (in order to avoid being upset on appeal) to record corroborative evidence. The Old Lady knew nothing of these finer points of procedure and evidence and ranted on over a lengthy period about how her charge had been seduced by the respondent. In response he insisted that she was guilty of a monstrous prevarication and that he had never so much as touched her. In fact he averred he hardly knew her. Growing weary of the interminable argument I eventually insisted that the plaintiffs produce corroborative evidence to support their case. This produced a snort of derision from the Old Lady who stared contemptuously at me and said “ It may be that in *Chirungu* (European customary behaviour) it is common to fornicate in the market-place and thus provide eyewitness evidence of one's doings. But it is not *Chivanhu*.” (The “Peoples' way – i.e. not THEIR way)

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<sup>4</sup> Dankelman suggests that “‘community’ is embedded in its specific culture, which is a product of the history of the community and encompasses its cosmovision (including spirituality) its knowledge systems, social organisation and its productive day to day practises.” Her notion of worldview leans heavily on the inclusion of the spiritual dimension.

I can think of no better illustration of worldviews in confrontation.

### *Nyika Vanhu:*

The Shona<sup>5</sup> dictum “*Nyika Vanhu*” is the essence of their traditional worldview. The dictionary translation of *Nyika* is “territory of a chief” (Hannan, 1984: 489). “*Vanhu*” is translated as “people” (Hannon, 1984: 390). Thus “The Land is the People”, meaning it is people that give cognitive meaning to territory. But *nyika vanhu* means more than this.

*Nyika* as territory includes all the natural resources (*zvisikwa* – lit. things created) as well as *vanhu* - people. People includes all people *with inherent rights* to the territory. People does not include those with no entitlement to the *nyika* - those who do not belong. (For example, Europeans who are not really people at all, but *Varungu* – Aliens). For those who do belong, *Vanhu* is not simply those who happen to be occupying the corporeal world. *Vanhu* includes the departed as well as those yet unborn. Indeed the departed are the “*varidzi venyika*”<sup>6</sup> meaning “the owners of the *nyika*” and are thus to be revered, cherished and obeyed in matters concerning *nyika*. Traditionally Shona religious belief is centred on a Supreme Being -Mwari. Mwari while far from otiose, is generally approached through a hierarchy of spirits, representing departed members of society. The more powerful they were in the corporeal world, the more powerful they remain in the dimension of the Shades. In Shona myth and tradition the most powerful royal lineages converge and merge with the spirit of Mwari – the Supreme Being – God.

Mwari is all-powerful. At the intercession of mortals or spirits he may decide on whether the rainy season will be bountiful or whether there will be drought. As Dzivaguru (The Great Pool) he is the embodiment of water, the provider of all life. He is the rain, the lightning and the granite monolith Rukunguwu from whence, every year, a spontaneous fire announces His Presence before the commencement of the rains. Mwari Mwenewevu is the Land and as Musikavanhu he is the Creator of People. Mwari embodies the notion of *nyika* on a pan-Shona scale. The *mhondoro*, the spirits of founding lineages, provide the linkage between chiefly *nyika* and Mwari. Lesser spirits (*midzimu*) provide similar linkages down to the ward and village and finally the level of the individual. Individuals on death move from the corporeal plain into that of the spiritual, yet remain part of the matrix which is encapsulated in the notion of *nyika vanhu*. Whisson, (1984) quoting LP Hartley’s “The Go-between” (??) states that the ‘past is another country’. In the traditional Shona worldview, *the past is part of the present country*. Time is not perceived in linear perspective. Rather is it a matrix of interrelated dimensions. “It is not physically separated but forms part of an integrated whole.” (Latham; 1987)

*Mhondoro* preside over territories. In “ideal” situations the present chiefly polity with which it is associated, coincides with the *mhondoro* territory. More usually due to migration, re-settlement and compression of territories by the colonial administration, the boundaries of the fossil polity no longer coincide with the reality of the present. Never the less these fossil polities are known. They have significance in the worldviews of their adherents. In the dynamics of the struggle for the control of territory and the acquisition of resources they often provide a charter for current claims to territory and resources.

<sup>5</sup> The Shona people are the ethnic majority of the Zimbabwean population.

<sup>6</sup> Also referred to as the *varidzi vepasi* – the owners of the soil.

Traditional political organisation is represented by a hierarchical arrangement of nested units of governance, starting at the village (*musha*) rising through the ward (*dunhu*) and culminating in the chiefdom (*nyika*). In pre-colonial history, states, (also termed *nyika*) incorporating many chiefdoms in a con-federal association, represented the apex of political hegemony. Scaled territorial units, with defined boundaries spatially represent this hierarchy of jurisdictions. The hierarchy of the spirit-world mirrors this arrangement, with mediums representing spirits at all levels – though obviously not all spirits have mediums.

Within this overall structure institutional arrangements are determined by a strong kinship system. Institutions are defined as the established norms of conduct for a defined group or society – for example the accepted rules of society governing the manner in which a commoner relates to his chief and vice versa. In popular parlance institutions may be said to be “the rules of the game”. In this essay, I define an “organisation” as an arrangement of institutionalised activities within the body politic. People have a position within a social system. The role they perform in terms of their position is determined by the organisation. For example, a soldier’s role is defined by his position (rank) within the organisation.

I make this distinction because of a common confusion in contemporary literature concerning the use of these terms. “Properly, institutions are underlying and persistent rules, customs, arrangements and patterns of behaviour and organisations the more immediate manifestation of these.” (Dovers, S; 2000:216.) However, borrowing from Dovers, “for the purposes of considering natural resource management arrangements “institutions” can serve as the overall term, with the proviso that the organisations so included would have a good degree of acceptance, predictability and longevity”. (Ibid: 216)

Worldviews legitimate institutional arrangements (organisation). Thus worldviews shape and regulate customary behaviour - what is socially sanctioned and what is acceptable.

This is defined in the vernacular as *kutonga*.

*Kutonga* means to try a case. It also means to rule over a group of people. Thus one may *tonga* a homestead (*mana*), a village (*musha*), a ward (*dunhu*) a chiefdom (*nyika*) or a country (*nyika*). You may also *tonga* a case at your court. Thus *kutonga* is how activities are controlled and regulated. It is the organised force that underpins institutional arrangements. How one *tonga*’s is determined by one’s worldview and the worldview of the *tonga*’d.

To capture these perceptions I must use another Shona dictum: “*Ishe vanhu ndi’she*: The chief is the people: the people are the chief.” This is simply explained. By the power of their acceptance of his station, the people determine the power and position of the chief. This maxim encapsulates an institutional reality that I believe has profound implications. It implies that the head of a socio-political unit (be it village, ward, chiefdom or state) governs by general consensus. That there are corrupt leaders, lazy leaders and despotic leaders is not contested. But such leaders represent a haemorrhage in the system not a norm - they represent a Watergate not a Magna Carta.

*Ishe vanhu, vanhu ndi’she* allows the whole system to be flexible and adaptive in the face of impinging issues and events – both endogenous and exogenous. It may be argued that this sort of consensus governance slows the pace of change to that of the most conservative. This may be true, some of the time. But it also provides a mechanism for society to adapt to change without serious rupture. This is because changes to worldviews are brought about with the minimum of trauma by a process of



incremental adaptations congruent with current perceptions. Thus, a synthesis of the socio-sphere, the biosphere and what Toffler (1980) calls the techno-sphere is best maintained. However, for this to work effectively, certain conditions seem to be required. These conditions as will be discussed below, appear to coincide with criteria enumerated by scholarship (See Barrow and Murphree, 2000, Murphree 2000, Ostrom, 1998). The success or failure of community based management of resources, hangs on a complex set of issues. Of these perhaps one of the most critical is a determination of the appropriate unit of jurisdiction, its degree of legitimacy and cohesion.

### **Community:**

This advances us to the point where it is no longer possible to avoid discourse on the vexed question of “community” and what is meant by that term. “Community is one of the most vague and elusive concepts in social science and continues to defy precise definitions.” (Barrow and Murphree 2000; 24)

Never the less it is a useful construct for paradigms illustrating the complexity of the interrelated issues involved.

Barrow and Murphree (ibid pages 26 and 27) suggest that there are four essential elements that must be present to give functional meaning to what we may refer to here as a community. Certainly for the purposes of development discourse they provide a useful framework for analysis.

### Cohesion:

“This refers to a sense of common identity and interest which serves to bring people together for collaborative action, and leads them to collectively differentiate themselves from others.” (Ibid; 26)

### Demarcation:

Demarcation sets the boundaries of jurisdiction for the community and is usually based on a delineated spatial area together with its enclosed resources. In some instances it is based on an accepted jurisdiction over a given set of resources. The point is that the demarcation sets spatial and jurisdictional boundaries over access to and denial of resources and allows for organised activity

### Legitimacy

“Just as collective organisation requires demarcation, it also requires legitimacy for its process and leadership., which needs to relate both to power and authority. External authority can confer legitimacy.” This tends to be a necessity but the most important legitimisation is internal, arising from “socio-cultural and socio-economic criteria.” (ibid; 27)

### Resilience

Resilience is the organisational capacity to adapt in both “content and structure” (ibid). It is essential for the management of risk in uncertain environments and livelihood systems. Without resilience communities can not survive and endure.



Barrow and Murphree conclude their analysis with a definition of their perception of community.

“For the purposes of our topic community is defined functionally as a principle manifest in social groupings with the actual or potential cohesion, incentive, demarcation, legitimacy and resilience to organise themselves for effective common pool natural resource management at levels below and beyond the reach of state bureaucratic management.” Barrow and Murphree 2001; 27)

This definition leads us into the issues of scale and level of management

### **Scale, levels of management and de aggregation of authority.**

Scale (Latin: *scala*: a ladder or steps) implies graduations in magnitude. Within the traditional Shona social system, for example, there is a progression from homestead to village, to ward and then to chieftdom. The form of governance at each level is similar. However, the scale of power over people and territory differs greatly. The hypothesis of vesting control at the lowest practical level of the scale of nested jurisdictions is well known and needs no elaboration here. The conundrum remains, however, as to what is the lowest level –what is Schumaker’s (1976) “small is beautiful”? Is Murphree’s notion of “jurisdictional parsimony” (Murphree 2000) the most pragmatic answer?<sup>7</sup> At what functional level are Ostrom’s (1990) eight design principles most appropriate? And of course, how is a highly centralised state, such as is found in most post-colonial governments, persuaded to de aggregate authority?

#### **De-aggregation:**

Of these questions, the most critical in practical terms, is de-aggregation. Unless sufficient power and authority is vested in local level communities the chances of effective local self-government are diminished. How de aggregation is applied is critical. It may be in the shape of de –concentration, (de-centralisation) with a top-down system of accountability, termed delegation in the language of bureaucracy. It may be some form of devolution that implies a surrender of elements of authority and a top-down accountability. It may be a mixture of these two elements, referred to in some literature as co-management.

Or it may be that the State bureaucracy clings to the myth of *de jure* central control but lacks the capacity to administer such a system, so that local level traditional institutions *de facto* provide most, if not all of the instruments of governance. (see Anstey 2001, Latham 1993)

### **Indigenous Holism: Upper Guruve Communal land: some reflections**

A longitudinal study of a ward in one of Zimbabwe’s communal lands is instructive. It illustrates how local communities adapt to decades of state interventions. Generally these have diluted local capacity to manage resources. At worst they have been disruptive, because of a failure to de aggregate authority in such a way as to integrate exogenous institutional changes with indigenous institutions. Often it has been because of a lack of understanding of perceptions and worldviews of the target community. None of the examples demonstrates real growth and development of local capacity for governance or a sustainable improvement in the conservation and

<sup>7</sup> Murphree posits that “small is good” rather than “best”. But he qualifies this by suggesting that there must be a fit between the size of the unit and the resource being managed. Clearly this unit must also have some socio-political or institutional credence to provide a mechanism for functional governance.

management of natural resources. In all the examples, however, the resilience and capacity of local communities to adapt and modify their institutional arrangements in order to maintain congruence between their worldviews and their environment is well illustrated.

Murisa Dunhu:

In the Murisa traditional ward<sup>8</sup> (*dunhu*), within the *nyika* of Chief Bepura, in the upper Guruve Communal Land, the villagers from the twelve villages comprising the community deliberated on the need for a dipping tank for their cattle. Cattle need to be dipped against tick infestation (on a regular fortnightly basis) and their nearest dip was up to twelve kilometers away. So they determined on building their own tank. A site was selected that was central to the ward. Each householder initially contributed two bags of maize to a community chest. The maize was sold and the money put in a savings account at the nearest bank, in Mvurwi, fifty kilometers distant. Consultations took place with the veterinary officer who advised them that because the water supply from the river was erratic they should consider building a dam so that the dip would be assured of a perennial supply of water. The dam site was chosen with help from Agritex.<sup>9</sup> Further collections of maize took place to augment the community chest. All this took place from 1982 through 1984.

The local government council was approached for help, as the inhabitants are all ratepayers. Council insisted that all the money collected by the community, which was accruing interest in the bank, be withdrawn and lodged with council. Council would then proceed to lobby for donor help and would, it said, assist with some council funding as well. Five years passed with no progress. A long and bitter wrangle ensued between the *dunhu* committee and the council. In the end, surprisingly, the committee won and managed to withdraw their money from council. They re-deposited it in another bank in the same centre, one that gave them better terms and more flexible access to withdrawals. They then set about looking for a donor. In 1995/6 they finally succeeded in being included in a donor sponsored scheme for developing water sources for agro-forestry schemes. "*By this time, we were very good at preparing proposals and so our scheme was favoured over others.*" (Secretary to scheme: pers. com. July, 1999.) Another long wait to coincide with the next dry season followed this success. However, the women involved seized the opportunity offered to start an irrigated garden near the dam site by sand bagging the stream. Funded by the donor, they fenced their plot (allocated by the *samusha* and with the *sadunhu*'s approval) and planted crops. Water was and still is, carried to the garden in buckets.

In the dry season of 1997/8 a dam building firm was finally contracted by the dam development committee to construct the dam. Agritex paid a cursory visit and once more approved the site, the day before the bulldozer moved in. Five days later the dam was completed. It filled in its first season. In its second season, exceptional prolonged rains caused the dam to overflow along the wall. It also developed a bad leak. The committee then solicited the help of a small NGO that managed to source funding for the dam to be inspected by an engineer. At the same time, commercial farms bordering on the CA agreed to help effect the necessary repairs, on condition that villagers helped with hand labour. In due course the engineer's report was

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<sup>8</sup> The traditional ward differs as to composition of villages and territorial boundary from the official council ward covering this area.

<sup>9</sup> The Government department of agriculture and technical services.

produced. It stated that the spillway needed to be lowered and an emergency spillway built before the next rainy season. There after the leak could be repaired in the following dry season.

The committee headed symbolically by the *sadunhu* mobilized the surrounding villagers to clear the spillway using hand labour. It is significant that the women of the garden club figured prominently in this work. It is also interesting that the Murisa community had been successful in ousting the previous councillor (who came from outside their traditional ward) and getting their own nominee elected at the last local government elections.

The new councillor is well placed. He is the younger brother of the influential *samusha* in whose area the dam is built; he is chairman of the dam committee; chairman of the local ruling party committee and his younger brother is a member of the provincial politburo. Having achieved a minor coup by his election to council, real-world situations outside the control of the community have intervened yet again.

The local government council has collapsed (this is the second time in five years that this has happened); the post referendum and pre-election violence has seen the withdrawal of the Donor and the commercial farmers. The latter have been subjected to severe intimidation and violence from younger elements within the Murisa community, lead by so-called war veterans. (The leader of the group operating in this area comes from one of the twelve villages. He is the local leader of the ZANU (PF) youth wing, now in his early forties. On the farms he poses as a "Warvet" and has built up a mythical history of exploits during the liberation war, at the conclusion of which, he could have been no more than twenty years old.) This same group has even threatened the councillor with death or beating, simply because he has received kinsmen from Harare in his home. Any one working in Harare was deemed an MDC supporter and thus a potential influence on rural kin.<sup>10</sup> Under these traumatic circumstances the project has received yet another setback. Notwithstanding this, on my last visit to the area (September 2001) community leaders and the *sadunhu* expressed impatience at the delays. They implored me to contact the farmers and the donor. They were dismayed and mystified when I reported to them an absence of any further help from either quarter.<sup>11</sup> (Outsider's worldviews and notions of democracy clearly influenced their decision to withdraw, even if it meant that the majority "innocent" members of the community would now suffer for the "sins" of their (mostly) younger unemployed youth.)

The dam project was originally drawn to our attention because the local *sadunhu* wanted to show us the site for a dip tank (not the dam). When later we asked the committee what had motivated their continued endeavours in the face of so many set backs and delays they were unanimous. They still aim to build a dip tank.

This little group of people, with a negligible power base, took on "City Hall" and eventually won. They persisted long enough to exhaust the local council who gave in and let them have their money back. They mobilised themselves to collect money for their project. They learnt the "art" or science of preparing project proposals. They

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<sup>10</sup> The tensions and conflict caused by the intense political activity, stimulated from outside the community, clearly illustrates the dynamic interaction between "local" and "outside" influences. Note should be taken of the impact of migrants who frequently return to their homes. It is also important to note from this example, how even important figures, forming part of local elites, can be challenged in their elitist roles of "gate-keepers" to resources and power.

<sup>11</sup> Prof. Marshall Murphree describes adaptive management by stating simply "in every programme the wheels fall off. Adaptive management occurs when communities develop mechanisms to put the wheels back on track" (Quoted by Sithole, B 1999: 3). The American Army has an acronym for this. They say it is a SNAFU: Situation normal, absolute "foul" up.

braved the world of banking and finance. They built the dam, albeit without technical support, so it leaks.

They are still pursuing their goal of a dip tank. Indeed they have expanded their ambitions to include a secondary school<sup>12</sup> which will receive its water from the dam.

### **Centralization:**

In 1950 colonial government planners, alarmed at the apparent increase in population and the deteriorating state of land and grazing, introduced a system of village "centralisation". Villages were consolidated along watersheds. Arable lands were demarcated as were grazing areas. Later under the Land Husbandry Act of 1952 this was taken a step further with individual land rights being issued to those currently tilling the soil. The whole nature of scattered settlement and the intensive cultivation of home gardens was no longer possible.<sup>13</sup> Spatial separation of resources meant farmers spent a great deal of time moving between their lands and their homes. Cattle were grazed communally in demarcated grazing areas. During school term, this meant a further division of household labour, as children were not available to herd their beasts. Water points were located in river valleys and streams always some distance away from the new village "lines".

### **The Land Husbandry Act:**

Murisa, along with most rural communities vigorously opposed the Land Husbandry Act. Campaigns of resistance included refusal to dig contour banks, that were mandatory requirements of the Act; ploughing new lands in the areas demarcated as "grazing areas"; refusing to register land and grazing rights etc. The Land Husbandry Act incorporated some excellent features, (in the perception of the planners with their precise western worldviews) such as land use planning, conservation of arable areas, protection of stream banks and water ways and the clear allocation of use rights to individuals. It met with huge opposition because it totally ignored Shona worldviews and the customary law governing land and resource tenure. By arbitrarily fixing a date upon which use rights to land and grazing would be allocated, it automatically excluded many people - particularly young and middle aged men in oscillating employment. The colonial technocrats who designed the Land Husbandry Act, failed to comprehend the nature of common property regimes. By interfering with the traditional rules of access and exclusion, they awakened fears and concerns about use rights that led to such widespread opposition that the Act was abandoned in the late nineteen sixties.

Today, twenty years after independence much has changed. In Murisa ward, settlement patterns have largely reverted to pre nineteen fifties scattered homesteads. Homesteads are located much nearer to sources of water (usually natural springs, shallow-wells and perennial pools in rivers and streams). Homestead gardens are the main source of food crops. The "arable holdings" of Land Husbandry days are seen as a supplementary source of farming where crops are grown for market - or as one man put it, "Our home gardens are for our food. On the "makandiwa"<sup>14</sup> we grow crops for sale. It is a gamble." Contour banks are still in place and maintained. They are regarded as necessary conservation measures as well as providing useful lines of demarcation between use-right landholders.

**Local Government structures;**

<sup>12</sup> The school opened in January 2001

<sup>13</sup> Cultivation of home gardens was in fact expressly forbidden. (personal observation)

<sup>14</sup> Makandiwa: from the word contour, denoting lands separated by contour ridges.

A further state intrusion into the community was the introduction of new institutional arrangements of local government. Although councils existed before Independence, they had not significantly intruded upon traditional structures. Indeed the post-colonial planners considered them archaic institutions that enshrined ethnicity.

Under the Rural District Councils Act, "village" and "ward" divisions no longer represented traditional units of governance. Members of as many as three *misha* would constitute a village area. Boundaries of village areas, controlled by village committees, were arbitrarily drawn and in most cases did not follow traditional boundaries. This also applied at ward level. The Rural District Councils Act made the council the *de jure* administrator of land on behalf of the President (in whom all communal land became vested). This meant that instead of the *samusha*, *sadunhu* and *ishe* controlling land tenure issues through their *matare*, local councillors assisted by village and ward committees now claimed this authority. Similarly, because land and resources were a council responsibility, all development programmes and projects were the domain of *vidcos* and *wardcos*.<sup>15</sup> These arrangements ran contrary to the existing traditional system of governance and the accepted perceptions of the Murisa community. Inevitable frictions arose. At best the two systems operated in tandem. At worst neither system operated effectively. In some instances this led to a break down in control over resources and the creation of conditions similar to "open access". At time of writing the government has passed into law the Traditional Leaders Act which returns the powers of traditional governance to chiefs, headmen and village heads. In effect this restores what was in many respects the *de facto* situation in Murisa.

### **Discourse:**

The complex and intricate dynamics of interaction between people and their environment constitute the arena of adaptive management. It is in this area, where the sociosphere and the biosphere intersect, that communities engage in strategies to access and utilise the inventory of resources at their disposal. Whether they are successful or not seems to depend not on random chance but on sets of identifiable criteria.

Within all societies, there are recognised institutions for governance. This is equally true of "small societies" as it is of highly "developed" nation states. A cardinal mistake -- one that is made all too often by politicians, bureaucrats and (alas) even development practitioners and academics -- is to ignore these institutions and with well meaning but disastrous interventions attempt to introduce new technologies or ideologies that are contrary to the perceptions of the target group.

Modern scholarship is rediscovering the lessons of the sixties which posited that if development is to succeed it should be linked to genuine devolution or de centralisation of power to local level. (Green, J.W 1962). Development is "a process that needs democracy if any headway is to be made." (Derman et al 1990:2)

It is the postulate of this paper that rural communities do achieve remarkable "development" despite the inhibitions imposed on them from without. The evidence suggests that the enduring strength of indigenous institutions, in harmony with their worldviews and reinforced by local knowledge (civil science), provide the best vehicle for the sensitive process of adaptive management at local level. It is axiomatic, therefore, that what local communities need from outsiders is not dominance but technical, economic and administrative support to develop their own

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<sup>15</sup> Vidco =village development committee; Wardco = ward development committee

plans within their own set of priorities. This is the true meaning of "capacity building".

Stereotypes of peasant communities often highlight the feckless nature of traditional rural societies and hint at a limited stamina for any long-term objective. The case studies I have outlined in this paper indicate that where it matters to local communities in rural areas, they will persevere for decades, despite the interventions or neglect of outside agencies and government departments, to realise their objectives. Another simple truth that is largely ignored by the practitioners of various interventions needs underlining. Development and management of resources by local communities is perceived as part of a holistic and integrated worldview. Yet outside practitioners and advocates of conservation and development invariably embark on single resource interventions ranging from forestry to wildlife to water.

The case studies illustrate that in Zimbabwe<sup>16</sup>, at the lowest local level, planning and management of resources is conducted by the *dare*, headed by the *samusha* (village headman). The *dare* is usually an informal, representative organ of community governance to which any and all community members have access (including women). Meetings are concerned with all matters of common concern and a typical session may include the arbitration of cases ranging from adultery to cattle trespassing into crops; to discussion on projects such as development of facilities at the neighbourhood school, to criticism of borehole water point committee for failing to maintain the pump in sound condition; the need to approach the headman or councillor regarding illegal settlement and/or the desire by some younger members to be included in potential resettlement elsewhere; to the reprehensible behaviour of some community members who work in the field on *chisi*<sup>17</sup> days. In the other words the forum is a platform for any and all matters concerning the village to be debated. Decisions are theoretically by consensus and delivered by the headman in consultation with two or three trusted and acknowledged councillors / advisors (*makota*). At the ward headman and chiefly level similar assemblies (*dare*) are conducted.

These forums have relevance; they are representative and are not restrictive. They embrace the reality of local level life. They are the very antithesis of the bureaucratic tendency (adopted also by NGOs with a single issue focus) towards placing issues into different compartments. They are a credible, authentic institution of governance that taps into the immense strength of local level knowledge. Yet these indigenous community based institutions are seldom consulted nor do they have formal points of entry into the wider institutional arrangements such as Local Government councils and in the instance of water, the catchment council structures.

Social science acknowledges certain fundamental ingredients for successful CPR management. Most of these, as they apply to local communities are congruent with the traditional institutional arrangements of resource governance.. Indeed my research suggests that through time, local level adaptive management employs considerable energy to molding, rejecting or modifying "outsider" interventions so as to fit their local institutional conventions. In the process the strengths or advantages of either "system" are usually diminished and their operational effectiveness reduced. This is the all too obvious legacy of the often well-intentioned top- down interventions of the last 10 decades.

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<sup>16</sup> Although Zimbabwe forms the focus of this paper, my experience throughout the region suggests that the institutional arrangements, founded in their worldviews, are replicated in most rural communities in southern and eastern Africa.

<sup>17</sup> Chisi is a day of rest, similar to the Christian Sabbath on which it is forbidden to work in one's field.

## **Conclusion:**

What I have been suggesting in this paper may incline the reader to the view that I am adopting the role of hagiographer of the traditional “Little Society” and presenting it as an homogenous and harmonious group of equals. Far from it. The little society is as diverse and divergent as the larger world of which it is a part. What I am trying to emphasise, however, is that at local level the institutional arrangements of local traditional governance are what regulate society; that at local level it is local knowledge that is generally best equipped to deal with complexity and surprise and that as social scientists and practitioners we would be sensible to recognise the strength and elasticity of local institutions as the best instruments to manage and develop their resources in a manner most likely to be sustainable.

To do this devolution of power to appropriate levels is imperative. By the nature of their institutionalised devolution of power, through nested levels of spatial and jurisdictional authority, the indigenous system of governance provides for systematic devolution and creates an environment for bottom-up accountability: “*ishe vanhu, vanhu nd'she.*”

The paradoxical reason for failure of CPR management of resources lies in the reluctance or inability of central government structures to devolve power to appropriate levels of management. “The problem is that this requires also a shift of real decision-making powers from the national to the regional levels. National power groups normally, however, strongly resist giving up power once they have acquired it.” (Stohr B and Taylor D, 1981; 471)

***In the final analysis, it is not local level institutions that lack capacity to manage their own resources. It is external power, vested in state, regional and global politicians and bureaucrats that lacks the capacity to provide real devolution. The real threat to CPRs is not their lack of capacity to manage, it is the lack of these external authorities' capacity to release their hold on power that is the main factor inhibiting their ability to function effectively.***



