

## **The Meanings of Boundaries: Contested Landscapes of Resource Use in Malawi**

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This paper examines the changing meanings of boundaries that demarcate community, private, and public land in Malawi and their roles in shaping resource use. Boundaries have long been a central concept in many social science disciplines, and recently considerable attention has been given to the ways that boundaries—whether physical or socio-cultural—are socially constructed and contested. In some cases landscapes are said to reflect multiple overlapping or multi-layered boundaries asserted by competing social groups. In other cases boundaries are said to be blurred, or even erased, through social contests and competing discourses. The authors of this paper, one a geographer, one an anthropologist, suggest that such choices in analytical language and metaphors tend to obscure certain key social dynamics in which boundaries play a central role.

Specifically, the paper argues that in the two case studies presented from southern and central Malawi, social contests focus not on competing (‘overlapping’, or ‘multi-layered’) sets of spatially-defined boundaries but over the meanings of *de jure* boundaries that demarcate community, private, and state land. In asserting rights to use resources on private and state land, villagers do not seek to shift or eliminate the boundaries marking community and private or state land or to assert alternative sets of spatial boundaries. Instead, the key contests over boundaries in these case studies involve efforts to re-define the meanings of existing boundaries—that is, how boundaries define rights and obligations among communities, private landowners, and the state. Similarly, language and metaphors centered on the notion of ‘blurring’ of boundaries may be misleading—boundaries in these case studies are not blurred but remain relatively stable and widely observed. Instead, boundaries serve as a focal point for discursive strategies to rework the social relations defined by those boundaries.

The paper suggests an analytical approach that focuses not on multi-layered spatial boundaries nor the blurring of boundaries but on how boundaries help shape discursive strategies in which local villagers propose and act on claims to particular places and resources on private and state land rather than proposing alternative boundaries as lines-on-the-map. Thus, boundaries play a key role in creating a contested landscape characterized not by linear divisions of space but by multiple discursive struggles over access and control of particular places and resources.

Probably the most extensive literature on boundaries has been provided by political scientists and political geographers, though this literature has dealt almost exclusively with boundaries between nation-states. This literature reflects an early awareness that boundaries not only separate different social groups but also serve as meeting places between groups, and thus force peoples on either side of the boundary to define their relationships to one another. For example, in their classic work *Boundaries: National Autonomy and Its Limits*, Brown and Shue (1981) ask what kinds of moral duties one nation holds in respect to its neighbors. That is, boundaries define not only spatial relationships but also the social relationships between groups. More recent literature, particularly from critical geography, has focused on the ways that these relationships (that is, the social meanings of boundaries) are socially constructed and contested through competing socio-cultural and historical discourses. These studies have considered the permeability of boundaries, the blurring or 'disappearance' of boundaries, the role of boundaries in constructing social identities, and the importance of different spatial scales of boundary construction (Newman and Paasi 1998).

Although these recent works represent important advances in emphasizing the on-going social construction of boundaries, this 'postmodern' bent presents the danger of exaggerating the fluidity of boundaries. As this article suggests, although the meanings or social relationships embodied in boundaries may be contested, in many cases boundaries continue to play an important role in shaping social relations and the use of resources. Moreover, despite awareness of the importance of understanding boundaries at multiple scales, the political science and political geography literature largely maintains its focus on boundaries between nation-states.

By contrast, in the past 15 years or so a considerable literature has emerged in political ecology and agrarian studies (representing the works of geographers, anthropologists, historians, sociologists and others) that examines the relationships between competing social groups often at the scale of individual communities. A central theme in these areas of study is the struggle by communities against the privatization or government control of land and resources to which local people make historical and cultural claims (Berry 1993; Peet and Watts 1996; Peluso 1992; Peters 1984, 1992b, 1994). In particular, some of the more recent political ecology literature, following Gramsci (1971; also Thompson 1991), emphasizes the links between symbolic and material struggles, in which landscapes become symbolically 'contested terrain' where local story-telling is used to undermine the legitimacy of state or private control (Moore 1993; Neumann 1992). While this literature has made important contributions in drawing attention to the contested nature of boundaries and showing how discourses about boundaries reflect broader socio-cultural and historical struggles, too little attention has been given to the specific ways that struggles over the meanings of boundaries shape the use of resources. A notable exception is the brilliant work of Peluso (1992), who draws on Scott (1985) and others to show how local narratives about historical obligations between Javanese kings and peasants are used to legitimize the exercise of various forms of 'everyday resistance' by forest communities, including sabotage against forests controlled by the Indonesian government.

Despite these valuable contributions, writers of the political ecology and agrarian studies literature appear to be struggling to find appropriate metaphors and language to address the concept of boundaries. Some of the most valuable efforts involve variations on the notion of 'mapping' (or 'counter-mapping') the landscape to locate the multiple overlapping, or multi-layered sets of boundaries representing the differing perceptions of particular social groups. Rocheleau and Edmunds (1997), for example, speak of 'multidimensional' African landscapes of nested and overlapping boundaries, where rights to use particular resources (specifically, trees)

vary by space, time, the gender of the resource user, and the specific types of trees and their products or uses. Similarly, Peluso (1996) describes ‘property zones’ in Indonesia that vary both spatially and temporally and according to particular social groups and resource uses.

While these spatial metaphors appropriately draw attention to the complexity of differing social conceptions of rights to use particular resources, they also convey a potentially misleading sense of spatial boundedness and rigidity in ideas of property. As the works of Rocheleau and Peluso themselves (and others) have shown, ideas of legitimate use of resources are constantly shifting and often reflect not linear cognitive divisions of space but the unbounded, shifting everyday practices and politics of resource use among social groups. Schroeder (1997), for example, shows how gendered rights to land shift back and forth over time through complex interactions between local practices and changing development priorities. There is a tension, in fact, between efforts to encourage local people to ‘map’ their landscapes (even in multiple dimensions) and the recognition that the fluidity and ambiguity of concepts of property rights that are inseparable from everyday practices and politics may be obscured by the seemingly unambiguous, rigid, and socially and politically decontextualized lines on a map.

This paper suggests that a more useful approach for considering the role of boundaries may be conveyed through the concept of contested landscape. In this approach, relatively stable *de jure* boundaries marking community, private, and state land may be viewed as framing landscapes characterized not by alternative, overlapping sets of linear boundaries but by multiple discursive contests over particular places and resources. This approach begins with the observation that even where they are contested, boundaries often serve as a focal point (or, more appropriately, a line) from which multiple discourses over control of resources emerge. Drawing on recent works in political geography (Newman and Paasi 1998), the emphasis is not on the erasure of boundaries (which, contrary to some of the ‘postmodern’ literature, appears relatively rare in practice) but on the ongoing contests over the meanings of boundaries. Because boundaries force social groups on each side of a property line to define their relationship to each other, including ideas about legitimate access and control over resources, the key social contests often involve questions about the appropriate kinds of relationships between the social groups on each side of the line. This approach borrows from Moore’s (1993) use of the concept of ‘contested terrain’, and from the many authors (only a few of whom are cited here) who have documented contested claims over resources, but applies the term ‘landscape’ to emphasize that notions of rights to resources are specific to the multiple individual features of the landscape—land, water, trees, animals, and so on. This approach also draws from Basso’s (1996) work on the Western Apache which shows that ideas of ownership and belonging often are not bounded as linear divisions of space but are specific to individual “places”, particular locations and resources. As the case studies from Malawi illustrate, boundaries become key elements in discursive contests among small farming communities, private landowners, and the government over legitimate access and control of specific resources in particular places.

## **Poverty, population, and tree scarcity**

The struggles that emerge in the two case studies presented in this paper are representative of the severe problems associated with poverty and natural resource degradation in Malawi generally. Malawi is one of Africa’s poorest nations, reflecting a long history of neglect and exploitation of the smallholder sector under the British colonial government and the postcolonial regime of the late ‘Life-President’, Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda. For the 87 percent of the population who live in rural areas and depend mainly upon agriculture for their

livelihoods, forests and woodlands represent crucial sources of firewood, poles, timber, fiber, and traditional medicine. Severe and chronic poverty is endemic, and alternatives to these forest products (e.g. electricity or kerosene for cooking) are far beyond the financial reach of all but a tiny minority of rural people. At the same time, Malawi's population density and birth rate are among the highest in Africa. Current population density nationally is 105 persons per square kilometer, and is much higher in the Southern Region. By varying accounts, the population is growing at a rate of 2.5-3.5 percent per year. This conjunction of poverty and population growth along with the increase in commercial exploitation of natural resources places exceptional pressures on the nation's forests and woodlands. Malawi has the highest rate of forest destruction (1.6 percent) in southern Africa, and the second highest (after Sierra Leone) in sub-Saharan Africa (WRI 1998: 292).

Although the most severe deforestation is seen in densely-populated customary lands (especially in the crowded Southern Region), the intense pressures on forests and woodlands are spilling over into both public and private areas that once received relatively strong protection during the colonial period and under the Banda regime. Only about 38 percent of Malawi is forested, and of this forested area an estimated 48 percent is under customary tenure (under the authority of local chiefs and headmen). However, most of this forested area is in the relatively thinly populated areas of the Northern and Central regions (Malawi 1994: 17). In the densely populated areas of the Southern and Central regions, most of the remaining forested areas are under private and state ownership. Especially in the crowded Southern and Central Regions, virtually every inch of cultivable land in customary areas is already under cultivation with little or no fallow, and with no substantial areas of intact forest or woodlands. In most of these areas, the only forested areas that remain are in cemeteries (where trees are generally protected) and on neighboring private and public lands. Many rural people compensate for this scarcity by switching to inferior fuels such as crop residues, and some build houses of mud brick instead of wood-frame construction. However, the inconvenience and additional work involved with these substitutes have encouraged many to rely more heavily on tree products taken from public and private lands. Especially after the end of the authoritarian Banda regime in 1994, tree theft from public and private lands accelerated dramatically (in some areas whole forests disappeared almost literally overnight).

The current acceleration in deforestation, including illegal cutting on private and public lands, has multiple causes. In contemporary, post-Banda Malawi, 'democracy' is often equated by rural people with the right to use resources that, they claim, were wrongfully denied to them in the past. The Malawi government routinely berates people involved in tree theft, using such words as "reckless" and "wanton" to describe their actions. To those doing the cutting, however, these actions are perceived as a matter of necessity, and are often justified in relation to long-standing grievances and cultural claims. Illegal cutting was not absent in Banda's time but the sanctions for being caught could be severe. In addition to the fear of punishment, however, people also recall how the state services, including the feared Malawi Young Pioneers, turned a blind eye to some of the severe depredations of state agencies. In the Balaka area, for example, which has become an area to which people in the Mchombo research area (described below) migrate, residents recall how the soldiers from the army base in Zomba routinely came to cut huge numbers of trees for their buildings and other needs. Such examples can be found in other areas. Residents in any one area, then, experienced both the sanctioned restrictions on protected areas and the clear flouting of the rules by privileged groups. Similarly, many saw their "customary" land being relabeled leasehold and allocated to politically influential leaders. It is

not surprising, then, that one of the most popular political stances taken by the new candidates in the run-up to the first free elections in independent Malawi in 1994 was the promise that many of the areas hitherto barred to people would be opened to them. (Later, this caused considerable trouble in several key protected areas of the country, which cannot be discussed here.) The overall effect, however, along with the general euphoric sense that “democracy” meant the overthrow of all confining rules, has been the acceleration in use of all natural resources, including forests.

A further contributing factor to this acceleration has been the relative absence of stiff sanctions. The ability of people to make inroads into public lands has been facilitated by the fact that the government services have been severely starved of funds as part of the government’s need to cut expenditures. Also, the forays into private and state forests have proved difficult to stem because of a similar decline in police effectiveness and a parallel rise in crime. It also seems that the advent of democratic politics has made elected officials less keen to take a hard line on protecting forest and other reserves for fear of alienating key constituencies.

In short, while the pace of deforestation on public and private lands has accelerated recently, the popular beliefs and practices that underlie these actions draw both on deeper historical and cultural precedents and on more recent political changes. Here, we concentrate mainly on the former: the recent increases in tree theft represent quantitative shifts in long-standing social and cultural contests over forested areas. The two case studies presented in this paper illustrate some of the ways that history, culture, and discourse shape these on-going struggles to define locally-acknowledged rights over key material resources.

The cases presented describe findings from two related sets of fieldwork. In southern Malawi, the Mchombo village research site is part of an on-going study of socio-economic change in six village areas first begun in 1986 (Peters 1992a, 1997; Peters and Herrera 1989). Additional fieldwork, which included the Napolo village research site in the Central Region of Malawi, was conducted over a 12-month period in 1995 and 1996 and concentrated specifically on local use and management of tree resources (Walker 1997). Both sets of field studies used a multi-method approach that included social survey methods, recording of oral and archival history, in-depth interviews with key informants, and ethnography. In the 1995-6 comparative study by Walker, all 89 households in Mchombo village participated through multiple surveys and semi-structured interviews, as did the 65 households of Napolo village. Key informants from surrounding villages were also interviewed. (All local personal and place names in this paper are pseudonyms.)

### **Mchombo village: claiming a commons on private land**

The people of Mchombo village in southern Malawi depend heavily on forests on local private estate lands for firewood, poles and timber, fiber, and traditional medicine. This dependence reflects both the scarcity of trees within the boundaries of Mchombo village and historical patterns of resource use in which the boundaries between village and estate rights to use trees on private land have long been a source of conflict. Popular stories and representations among people in Mchombo village play a key role in this conflict by portraying local estate owners as villains and challenging the legitimacy of the owners’ right to prohibit local people from using private forests.

Mchombo village is located on the south bank of the Thondwe River, approximately 25 kilometers south and west of Zomba Township in densely-populated southern Malawi, in the heart of the old European tobacco estate areas of the Shire Highlands. The village is

approximately one kilometer square, and is situated between several small, semi-defunct African-owned estates to the north and east, and other densely populated smallholder villages to the south and west. Almost all families (some 89 households) depend on agriculture as their main source of livelihood, although about a third of income, on average, comes from off-farm sources, including small-scale businesses, and wages earned both in the villages and in the urban areas of Zomba and Blantyre.

The history of Mchombo village is closely tied to the history of the European estates during the colonial period. Mchombo village is situated on land first claimed by the A. L. Bruce 'Magomero' Estate in 1894, part of an expanse that stretched across 648 square kilometers (Malawi 1956; see also White 1985). Although there is evidence that Mchombo was one of the original Nyanja villages in the area (Malawi 1956) and should have been exempted from *thangata* (a form of tied labor) under the terms of the original Certificates of Claim, in practice all Africans on the Bruce Estates were required to perform *thangata*. Under this regime (the term *thangata* was appropriated by European estate owners from a pre-existing form of group labor under the authority of the village headman), husbands were required to work for the estate for two to three months each year during the key periods in the agricultural calendar, and wives were required to assist at times of peak labor demand. Failure to meet *thangata* requirements could be punished by eviction, having one's house torn down, or other abuses. A commission of inquiry later concluded that "the treatment of labour and the system of tenancy on the Bruce Estates ...were in several respects illegal and oppressive..." (Malawi 1946).

Despite the harsh conditions under *thangata*, life for Africans on the European estates of the Shire Highlands was not without certain advantages over conditions on the crowded customary lands (Lijenda-Chanza 1995). One particular advantage of life on the European estates was the relative abundance of land and natural resources. Thus, despite the harsh demands of *thangata*, and the consequent flight from the estates by some African tenants, there appear also to have been constant flows of people onto estates. Earlier in the period, these flows were fed by immigration from Portuguese East Africa (Mozambique) but later by the growth of population and the pressure on customary lands in the estate areas. Nevertheless, for most of the period, the estates were thinly populated in relation to the crowded customary areas. During the 1940s and 50s, estates were broken up, some being bought in smaller holdings by European residents, some by government for its resettlement schemes initiated in the late 1940s and early 50s. As this process of break-up and purchasing took place, some Africans were evicted by owners because land without 'surplus' African populations commanded a higher price. The resettlement schemes were intended both to absorb such populations along with those pushed out by urban expansion in the south, and to introduce modern farming methods (see Peters 1997). During the 1950s, as noted above, small parcels of land were also purchased by the new African elite. As a result of all these changes in land ownership, by the mid 1950s, the government recorded only seven African households remaining in Mchombo village.

In part because of the relatively thin population on the estates, local environmental problems were limited. Although all land in the area was owned by the estate, both local people and estate managers described the areas around existing villages on the estates as 'village' land, and the boundaries between 'village' land and the estate land were usually clearly recognized. The people of Mchombo and nearby villages recall that up to the late 1950s much of the estate land remained as uncultivated 'bush'. Most recall, for example, that unlike today there were no bare hills because there was sufficient land that no one needed to cultivate in these marginal areas. The forest on estate land was sufficient to provide wild game, trees for fruit and medicine,

fiber, and firewood and poles. Some of the oldest residents also describe much larger concentrations of game animals, especially buck (which were hunted up until the 1950s in the eastern portion of the research area), but also predators such as hyenas, leopards and even occasional lions. Abiti Matiya, a woman in her 90s, recalls that when she came from Mozambique and settled in the area as a young mother, “This place was very forested. You couldn’t let a child out alone to pee because of the wild animals.”

Although successive European estate owners attempted to control access by Africans to forested areas, these efforts were largely ineffective. Collection of firewood, fruit, fiber, and medicine was in effect unregulated, and people became accustomed to using the undeveloped areas of the estates as de facto reserves for these tree products. Collecting poles and timber, however, was somewhat more complicated. By 1946, the land on which Mchombo village is situated had been sold to A. J. W. Hornby, who was the Assistant Director of Agriculture and an ardent promoter of conservation. Under Hornby, Africans wanting to cut poles or timber were required to obtain approval from estate foremen, who would check to confirm that individuals had fulfilled their *thangata* requirements. So long as an individual was registered and in good standing, however, permission was routinely granted.

Even these minimal regulations were often ignored. The requirement to formally request permission to cut trees was considered inconvenient and was resented by many Africans, and compliance was at best partial. Policing was spotty, and unapproved cutting was widespread. Hornby employed African forest rangers, but the instances in which violators were actually caught and punished were few. There were only a small number of rangers, and these were said to mainly patrol the areas close to the homes of the Europeans. In areas farther from the Europeans’ homes, there was little effective enforcement. Even in the cases where violators were caught, people today say that the rangers often took pity on the violators and let them go with a warning or accepted a small bribe to ignore the offense. When asked how often people would actually be apprehended and punished, Village Headman Mchombo recalls, “It was a rare thing.” Thus, in effect, all tree products, including large poles and timber, were relatively abundant and easily available.

With the independence period in the late 1950s, however, the situation for people in Mchombo village changed dramatically. With African political control imminent and with tobacco profits small or negative, by the mid-1950s many Europeans returned to their native countries. By 1954, Mchombo village had been purchased by a Mrs. V. M. de Vogt, a South African, who attempted and failed to evict the seven remaining households in order to grow tobacco. After she failed to persuade the government to buy her land in 1956, people in Mchombo village recall that de Vogt apparently abandoned the estate. Mchombo village was later reclassified as customary land, but much of the surrounding area was sold to middle-class Africans who started small estates on which to grow tobacco (then licensed only for estates) as well as maize and other food crops. These families still own many of the small estates surrounding Mchombo today.

This re-shuffling of ownership in the 1950s and 1960s had important consequences for Mchombo village up to the present. The new African estate owners, unlike their European predecessors, controlled relatively small areas where incursions by neighboring villagers could be more easily monitored. Moreover, these new African owners intended to cultivate much of the area that had earlier been left as woodland and forest. Smallholders residing on these new small estates were evicted, and many resettled in the neighboring areas that had been reclassified as customary land, including Mchombo village.

At the same time, the government initiated large-scale programs to re-locate small farmers from the most crowded customary lands to the less populated former estate areas. In the late 1950s the local Traditional Authority came to ask on behalf of the government that the people of Mchombo village accept new families from crowded areas of Mulanje, Thyolo, and Chiradzulu. From only seven households, Mchombo quickly began to fill up. The re-settlement programs continued until the mid 1970s, when Village Headman Mchombo recalls that there were about 80 households. Today there are 89. Thus, from the late 1950s to the mid 1990s the population of the village multiplied more than 12 times.

With these changes in land ownership and population came dramatic changes in the landscape. With a much greater population density inside the boundaries of the village, the remaining patches of woodland within the village disappeared. Today virtually every inch of land (except the cemetery) is cleared for cultivation. The disappearance of trees within the village also created new difficulties in obtaining tree products, forcing local people to rely more heavily on the estate lands. However, unlike the Europeans, the new African estate owners clearly intended to keep smallholders out. Abiti Nzeru, now in her late 60s, recalls the transition:

“When Hornby was here it was all bush, and people had no problem to get firewood. It wasn’t stealing, there was no problem... In those days the land was free, before those African people bought the land from the Europeans. We had no difficulty getting wood before the Africans bought the land from the Europeans... nobody was stopping people from collecting firewood... But nowadays people are having difficulty getting trees from the estate land because the Africans bought it from the Europeans. Now you can be chased or taken to court.”

Despite the increased difficulty of obtaining trees from the estate lands, most people in Mchombo village today still rely heavily on the estates (Table 1). For most, the additional effort and risk involved in stealing wood from the estates is a minor inconvenience compared to the cost of buying wood or the reduction of food and cash crops involved with allocating portions of their tiny landholdings to tree planting. In part because people in Mchombo have been using the estate lands as a de facto forest reserve for generations, few feel any moral compunction about stealing from the estates (the research team for this study was surprised at how openly people discussed the matter of stealing). Of the 92 percent of households that identify estate lands as their primary source for at least one type of tree product (poles, firewood, fruit, fiber, medicine), 70 percent report openly that “we steal” (timakuba) these trees. Another 23 percent report that they “buy” (timagula) the trees they take, and two percent say they bribe forest guards. There is considerable evidence, however, that a substantial proportion of “purchases” are made from forest guards without the knowledge of the owners, and thus constitute another form of stealing.

**Table 1: Primary source of poles and firewood, Mchombo village (N=89 households)**

Source:	ESTATES	OWN COMPOUND	RIVER	FALLOW	OTHER
POLES	59%	23%	4%	4%	10%
FIREWOOD	65%	19%	6%	5%	5%



In particular, people in Mchombo rely heavily on trees taken from the Madsen Estate, across the Thondwe River. In the past, the people of Mchombo relied on trees taken from the Chasowa and Magunda estates and other small estates nearby, but over time the trees in these places disappeared. The exception is the Madsen Estate. Aerial photography shows that from the late 1950s to the mid-1990s, the forest on the Madsen Estate substantially increased, whereas forests on neighboring estates declined because they were cleared for cultivation and through overuse by both estate owners and neighboring villagers. The late Mr. Madsen (a mixed-race Malawian) was said to have been “very strict”, and patrolled his estate and his forests with a gun, reducing the effect of tree poaching by villagers. But the reasons for the failure of Madsen to fully develop the estate are somewhat unclear. Today, when asked why the forests on the Madsen estate grew while forests on other estates declined, Mrs. Madsen says that her family wanted to preserve trees to supply firewood to relatives in the city (a theme that resonates with government conservation rhetoric). Another likely explanation is that the Madsen family had more attractive commercial opportunities in the urban center of Blantyre and that the estate was simply neglected (this is a pattern that appears to have begun recently on the nearby Kachulu estate). Although Mrs. Madsen claims that her relatives in town will be coming soon to cultivate the land, her relatives come rarely to the estate and have shown little interest in farming. People in Mchombo village complain bitterly that even though the land is unused, Mrs. Madsen refuses to allow local people to either borrow or rent land from her.

Now a disabled widow, Mrs. Madsen, is able to cultivate only a small portion of her 28 hectares, and is able to employ only four forest guards, who cannot effectively keep neighboring villagers out of the re-generated forest on her land. Mrs. Madsen’s neighbors, Mr. & Mrs. Magunda, summarize the situation:

“There are only a few watchmen [at Madsen’s]. For example, at this time at noon maybe the watchmen are at their houses [having their mid-day meal] and the people can go into that area and start cutting and get whatever they need. Many people rely on [Madsen’s] forest for firewood and poles because they don’t have woodlots at their houses or fields. At [Madsen’s] place they even cut live trees for making burley [tobacco] sheds.”

Mrs. Madsen perceives this situation as a violation of her rights, and, like many estate owners in the area, she attributes the problem of tree poaching to the “laziness”, “greed”, and “jealousy” of neighboring villagers:

“This estate was bought with a lot of money. Those [villagers] were also given land on which to cultivate. They were free to preserve their own trees... I don’t have enough money to pay more guards. If you come in this room, you will see a lot of machetes, axes, and pangas [knives]. These were taken from people stealing trees from my estate.”

People in Mchombo village see the situation differently. Only a few deny that Mrs. Madsen “owns” the estate (claiming that Mr. Madsen acquired it illegally). But almost all portray Mrs. Madsen and her late husband as heartless for preventing people from using trees on the estate. In particular, people emphasize the few instances of violence used by the estate as evidence of the cruelty of the Madsens and their willingness to use unwarranted measures against decent people. This representation of the Madsens as local villains, in combination with the historical memory of access to trees on estate lands under the Europeans, serves as cultural and

historical justification for continued incursions onto the Madsen Estate. Even Chief Mchombo and his wife are vocal in their resentment of Mrs. Madsen:

Mrs. Mchombo: “Most people steal [trees from Madsen estate] because Mrs. Madsen is a very difficult woman... Even if you go to ask for firewood for a funeral she does not allow you. My husband went there to beg for firewood for Mr. Masauli’s funeral, but she refused.”

Chief Mchombo: “We are crying for that land. If she could only give us a small portion... we would be very happy.”

Mrs. Mchombo: “It’s just that she’s cruel.”

Although there is undoubtedly some truth to this picture of Mrs. Madsen as a ‘cruel’ landowner, this depiction is at odds with the impressions of the research team for this study (one research assistant described her as “charming and humble”, i.e. modest), and it is clear that this depiction of her cruelty serves a practical purpose for people in Mchombo in providing a justification for stealing trees from her land. Mr. Chinkanda, for example, who was evicted from his former home when the Madsen estate was purchased in the late 1950s, complains that if someone is honest and simply asks Mrs. Madsen for permission to cut trees, she will refuse unless they pay her in cash or perform various types of labor for her. Thus, Mrs. Madsen asserts her right to control the value of products from her property, whereas neighboring villagers believe that the trees should be available to all and see her insistence that they pay cash or perform labor as more evidence of her ‘cruelty’. Thus, Mr. Chinkanda explains, people usually choose to steal what they need.

In addition, many people in Mchombo pointedly frame Mrs. Madsen’s ‘cruelty’ in relation to the (supposedly) more lenient approach taken by European estate owners under colonial rule. Although accounts vary somewhat about how ‘strict’ the Europeans were, all people in Mchombo who were alive at the time agree that European estate owners generally allowed people to harvest trees from estate land for certain purposes, especially for building houses. People were forbidden from cutting near streams, and in theory people could be punished for failing to ask permission to cut in other areas. But instances of people being caught taking trees from estate land were few, and in most cases violators were issued only a warning or given a minor punishment:

Interviewer: [In the old days] where were you getting trees?

Mrs. Batiya: In the hills [estate land]. People were allowed to cut down trees.

Interviewer: Were the white people not very strict?

Mrs. Batiya: No. It was when these other [Malawian] people bought the land that they started to put strict rules not to collect firewood or poles.

Although there are many rumors about brutal punishments administered by Malawian estate owners (including one story about a man who allegedly died from a beating by Madsen’s guards), none of these stories could be confirmed, and it appears that these stories serve not so much to deter incursions onto the Madsen estate as to reinforce the perception of Mrs. Madsen’s cruelty, especially in relation to the local historical access rights to forests on estate land under

the Europeans. Notably, these stories depicting the cruelty of Malawian estate owners today are reminiscent of earlier stories about the cruelty of the European owners who were said to have torn down the houses of people who fell behind in their *thangata* duties (when there appear to have been relatively few actual examples of such acts). These stories also point to the selective vilification of private land owners in different periods. During the colonial period, the cruelties of *thangata* served as a key rhetorical device in the struggle against European control. Today, these earlier cruelties are submerged in village discourses in favor of emphasizing the generosity of European estate owners who allowed local people to use trees, creating a foil against which to highlight the 'greed' and selfishness of modern landowners.

Another important battleground in the discourse over control of trees on the Madsen Estate revolves around the question of Mrs. Madsen's potential heirs. As an elderly woman living alone (except for her staff), the matter of who will control the land after Mrs. Madsen's death is a matter of great interest to local people. Mrs. Madsen has no children of her own (it is rumored that she was barren, further diminishing her status in the local culture), but she does have a sister with children who live in the urban area of Blantyre. Mrs. Madsen refers to these as her 'children', and she vigorously maintains that these 'children' will soon come to take over the estate, and that she is keeping the land, including the forests, for them. In the local culture, reserving land for children is an accepted principle. However, people in Mchombo village emphasize that she has no children of her own, and therefore has no right to retain such a large area of unused land. Chief Mchombo states flatly that "she has no children" and therefore should give the land to people in Mchombo village. However, in the matrilineal kinship system of the region, a sister's children are indeed Mrs. Madsen's 'children' (she would be addressed as 'mai' mother by them, and would address them as 'ana' children). Chief Mchombo and others discount her claim to treat them as her own children, however, in part by emphasizing that these 'children' live in the city and rarely come to the estate. Thus, the normally accepted practices of matrilineal inheritance rights here become another site of contestation over the right to control resources on the estate.

This disagreement between the residents of Mchombo village and Mrs. Madsen about who should be considered her rightful heirs is intriguing because it takes place in a situation where matrilineal inheritance has prevailed over a threatened patrilineal model. All the private estates referred to here were purchased by Malawian men. In brief, these tended to be civil servants who learned of the availability of such small land areas for sale as part of their close interaction with European colonial officers. The latter tended to hold a negative view of matrilineal inheritance and most of the new resettlement and agricultural schemes were explicitly designed to replace the matrilineal system that was assumed to deprive men of the incentive to invest in their land with one privileging male ownership and patrilineal inheritance. The pattern of purchase of small estates by the then exceedingly small African professional elite was seen as part of the "inevitable" evolution towards patrilineal inheritance and patrilineal (and patriarchal) forms of authority. The research in southern Malawi by Peters (1997) and Walker (1997), however, is showing that, on the contrary, in the majority of cases, the inheritance pattern shifts back towards the matrilineal form dominant in the area. Hence, Mrs. Madsen is not threatened by anyone with removal in favor of her husband's patrilineal heirs (his brothers, if he had no children). No one in Mchombo village has recourse to the idea that Mrs. Madsen has no right to the estate because she is "merely" a wife. Rather, their challenge to her right to treat her sister's children as her "own" children remains within the matrilineal norm. Their case turns not on the notion that it is her husband's heirs who have the right to the estate (this has never been

mentioned) but on their attempt to suggest that she has no children of her own and that those (sister's) children are uninterested in the estate since they live and work in the town. It remains to be seen what happens on her death or her inability to manage the estate any longer. The example of other estates in the area suggests one other possibility in addition to the two already raised (the inheritance by her sister's children or the appropriation, possibly through force, by local villagers): that the matrilineal heirs of her husband would make a claim.

In summary, up to the late 1950s, the population of Mchombo village remained relatively low. The small population of Mchombo village came to depend on the nearby wooded areas of the estates, and European owners made little, or sporadic, efforts to regulate this use, largely because of the relatively low level of demand. By the late 1950s, however, waves of re-settled smallholders began moving into the village, precipitating dramatic deforestation. At precisely the same time the new African estate owners attempted to more vigorously enforce rules against tree cutting. Today, however, only the Madsen Estate still has substantial numbers of trees; the other estates are heavily cultivated with only small or no stands of trees.

This history has become a central part of local narratives used by people in Mchombo village to claim resources on the Madsen estate. In the struggle over control of the trees on the Madsen property, Mrs. Madsen and the people of Mchombo village compete to portray each other as “greedy”, “cruel” or “jealous”. Local villagers depict Mrs. Madsen as a “cruel” person, justifying their choice to steal from her land. This ‘cruelty’ is emphasized in local discourses through selective reference to the allegedly more generous attitude of the previous European estate owners. Mrs. Madsen, on the other hand, appeals both to the legal purchase and private ownership of the estate, and to her duty to her ‘children’. (Notably, in their respective efforts to control land and resources through differing interpretations of inheritance rights, both local villagers and Mrs. Madsen struggle within the established framework of matrilineal inheritance despite countervailing circumstances that would appear to create possibilities for a more radical re-working of rights.)

Despite Mrs. Madsen's efforts to defend the legitimacy of her control of trees on her land, the discursive battle appears to be slowly being won by the people of Mchombo village. Today the people of Mchombo depend heavily on trees from the Madsen estate for their everyday needs, and Mrs. Madsen's appeals to the rights of purchase and inheritance seem to hold little sway in respect to trees. Moreover, these claims to resources on the Madsen estate appear to be expanding: whereas people in Mchombo reported first stealing small quantities of dead wood for fuel, today some people are said to cut and steal whole live trees, and there is even whispering about using land on the Madsen estate for cultivation. Thus, although the boundary, as such, between the Madsen estate and Mchombo village remains largely unchallenged, the meanings of this boundary—who can use which resources on the Madsen estate and under what conditions—are a matter of intense discursive struggle. Over time, there remains the question of whether this continuous chipping away at the rights of private property on the Madsen estate will ultimately undermine the notion of the boundary itself.

### **Napolo Village: claiming a commons on public land**

Just as the people of Mchombo village deploy cultural and historical claims in their struggle to control trees on private estate land, the people of Napolo village in the Central Region of Malawi struggle to maintain and expand access to trees and other natural resources on neighboring national park land. Like the people of Mchombo village, the people of Napolo have come to depend heavily on access to these resources that fall outside the formal boundaries of

their village, and they creatively use local history, culture, and discourse to justify and reinforce their access to these resources.

Napolo village is located in northwestern Kasungu District at the border of Malawi and Zambia, adjacent to the large Kasungu National Park; a sparsely-populated, undeveloped area that is geographically, economically, and politically at Malawi's periphery. Napolo village is situated on approximately four square kilometers of land bordered on three sides by relatively heavily populated smallholder villages and by a large forested area of the national park to the west. As in Mchombo village, virtually everyone in Napolo depends on farming for their livelihoods, though a few find jobs in the urban areas of Kasungu and Lilongwe, and across the border in Lusaka.

Although the Central Region became the focus of expansion for European tobacco estates by the early 1920s, the European estates never expanded as far as Napolo village and never competed for smallholder land. Land available to the village was, however, substantially restricted by the creation of the Kasungu National Park. With a major outbreak of sleeping sickness in 1922, the government attempted to control the spread of the disease by creating the park and re-locating the inhabitants to areas outside its boundaries (Chinthayo-Banda 1982; McCracken 1987; Ng'oma 1987). Napolo was not among the re-settled villages, but the village may have at one time occupied land that is now inside the park. The present Village Headman Napolo and others date the first settlement of the village to 1918. At the time, the entire area was 'bush', (mchire) and villagers were reportedly attacked by lions. In 1920 the village relocated to Zambia. In 1933, after the park was established and the increased human population on the east side of the Ntchenda River had driven away the lions, Village Headman Napolo moved his people back to what is today Napolo village. But the village had a new neighbor—the 231,600 hectare Kasungu National Park. People in Napolo today claim that the park took part of the land they originally settled in 1918, and that the government should give it back.

Despite the presence of the National Park, land was relatively abundant throughout the colonial period, and the landscape remained heavily wooded. From the late 1960s, however, both natural population growth and immigration from other areas of Kasungu and neighboring Mzimba District contributed to a significant transformation of the local environment. Village Headman Napolo observes, "It wasn't like this before, there were big trees here like the ones that are found in the park today." Similarly, Andrew Mkanda, who arrived in 1935, expresses the view held by all older people in the village: "All this area you see was all bush... Now the trees have disappeared as many people cut them down to open new fields."

Although population increase has added to land pressure in Napolo, other factors have contributed as well. In particular, the closing of traditional routes of labor migration and an increase in cash crop production have played important roles. McCracken (1987) has observed that as early as the 1920s, large-scale migration of male labor out of Kasungu District reduced the amount of land that could be cultivated (mainly by wives) in the home villages, contributing to re-growth of large areas of woodlands. With the closing of opportunities for labor migration to other southern African countries in 1980s, more male labor was available in the home village, with a consequent increase in the area and intensity of cultivation. At the same time, the scarcity of wage opportunities encouraged some households to expand their production of commercial crops to earn cash. However, because smallholders are reluctant to become overly dependent on cash crops, many have attempted to maintain the amount of land devoted to food crops while expanding their total cultivated area by clearing areas previously left fallow in order to plant tobacco, soy beans, sunflower seeds, and other commercial crops.

Land pressure in the area has also been exacerbated by land sales and speculation by local chiefs. Since 1971, it has been possible to acquire government leases on customary land with the permission of the local chief or village headman at a small cost. These leases became extremely popular in the Central Region, where middle-class Malawians have opened many small tobacco estates. The number of leases issued in Kasungu District (ADD) increased rapidly through the late 1980s, and by 1984/85 private leasehold land accounted for 25 percent of all arable land in Kasungu district (Dickerman and Bloch 1991: 4, 47). The popularity of leases encouraged some chiefs to retain customary land under their control for speculative purposes, and it is widely reported that chiefs and headmen accept money from prospective leaseholders. In the vicinity of Napolo Village five new estates have been created since the late 1980s. In Napolo there are two leaseholders, one of whom is the village headman himself. The other is Mr. Katanga, a former truck driver for a large estate near Lilongwe, who purchased a lease in 1989 for 54 hectares of customary land, about 14 percent of the total area of the village.

With population growth, increased cash crop production, and the withdrawal of land for private leasehold estates, the amount of forested land within the boundaries of the village has declined rapidly. The pattern of deforestation in Napolo village is less complete and more variable than in Mchombo village, reflecting the more differentiated pattern of land ownership. However, aerial photographs from 1962 and 1995 show an increase in cultivated area from 38 to 71 percent of land within the boundaries of the village (Walker 1997). This land clearing has produced a patchwork pattern, with intensively cultivated areas interspersed with patches of long-term fallow and, in a few cases, small areas of individually-controlled forest that have not been cultivated within local memory. These remaining areas of forest and long-term fallow are controlled by a small minority in the village, usually the descendents of the first settlers who claimed large areas. Most people in the village, however, do not have enough land to practice long-term fallow. Despite the relative abundance of land in the Central Region generally, the bottom 25 percent of landholders in Napolo village have an average of just over one hectare, considered the minimum to support a family.

With increasing land scarcity and declining fallow, there is increasing concern about tree scarcity. Firewood poses few problems, and small and large landholders alike obtain most of the firewood they need from the remaining patches of woodland in the village (land-poor households often steal small quantities of firewood from the fallow lands of their better-endowed neighbors). Obtaining poles, however, is a different matter. Even land holders with substantial fallow areas often are unable to obtain trees of the right size and species for construction. Most fallow areas have trees that are less than 10 years old and that can provide poles adequate only for constructing granaries, latrines, or other small domestic structures. For heavy roof rafters and structural supports, only large trees of certain types will do (the local favorite is muwanga, or *Pericopsis angolensis*). For these larger poles, most people in the village, including some of the larger landholders, rely primarily on trees cut illegally in the neighboring Kasungu National Park. While in the park to collect poles, people also often collect fiber, wild fruit and medicine from tree bark and roots (Table 2).

**Table 2: Primary source of poles and firewood, Napolo village (N=65 households)**

Source:	Park	FALLOW	estates
POLES	71%	27%	2%
FIREWOOD	38%	58%	3%

Like those who steal wood from the estates around Mchombo village, people in Napolo see stealing poles and other tree products from the National Park as an inconvenience and a risk. The park is a considerable distance from those households on the eastern side of Napolo village, involving a 20-30 minute walk in each direction, and the large poles needed are often heavy and must be carried out one at a time, always on the head. In addition, people worry about being caught by park rangers. Actual cases of people being caught stealing are few (below), but the potential for being caught remains a concern. Large-scale cutting in the park (including by local estate owners) is usually done at night.

Although most people in Napolo see stealing from the park as an inconvenience, they do not see it as a matter of moral turpitude. The history of land alienation to create the park in 1922 remains very much a part of the local social memory, and most people feel that the government, not the local people, is in the wrong. Although the exact location of the area settled by the first Headman Napolo in 1918 is unclear, the present Headman Napolo claims that part of the village was within the boundaries of what is now the National Park. Headman Napolo also claims that there is a burial site inside the park with the remains of his ancestors, and that the government wrongfully took land belonging to the village. Regardless of the accuracy of this claim, this narrative has a powerful influence on people in Napolo (as well as other villages that claim to have been displaced from the park). Perceiving that they were wrongfully removed from the land, people in Napolo village see no moral problems with stealing from the park. Indeed, the research team was surprised at the almost defiant attitude with which people in Napolo declare that “we steal” (*timakuba*) from the park.

As in Mchombo village, these claims to resources in the park are in part justified through discourses that appear aimed at vilifying the landowner (in this case, the state). The authority of the state is represented by park rangers, who are widely said to be cruel in their treatment of villagers found taking trees or other resources from the park. Although Napolo villagers steal from the park every day, actual cases in which rangers catch people stealing are rare (not a single incident was recorded in the 12-month research period for this study). Yet story-telling about cases of mistreatment of villagers at the hands of rangers is something of a local pastime. Accounts of the punishments meted out by rangers vary considerably, from small fines to brutal and often seemingly eccentric punishments. A common story (never verified) is that people caught poaching game in the park are forced by rangers to cut off and eat the tail of their hunting dog—a form of punishment considered particularly despicable. However, as in Mchombo village, these stories about the cruelty of park rangers appear aimed not at deterring theft but at undermining the moral position of the government and hence challenging its right to prohibit local people from using resources inside the park.

This attitude is also reflected in growing demands that the government should give the land in the park back to the local villages. Although land scarcity in the area is caused by multiple factors (including sales to private estates, increased cash crop production, and population growth), people in Napolo village focus their discourse on the national park. Just as Mrs. Madsen in Mchombo village is portrayed as a local villain, virtually any problem in Napolo village (poverty, hunger, etc.) is routinely blamed on the park. People in Napolo village repeatedly urged the research team to appeal to the government to give them land in the park. In a focus group interview with the oldest residents of Napolo village, for example, the intended topic of tree planting quickly shifted to a discussion about the national park:

Mr. Makanda: “The government should think about us. It has plenty of land. [Laughs, points to game park.]... There is plenty of land there. [In the village] people are cultivating everywhere.”

Thus, the willingness of people in Napolo to steal trees from government land reflects not only the view that local people should have access to resources inside the park, but also that the land itself properly belongs to the local villages. Particularly in the post-Banda period of free speech, this discourse over re-drawing boundaries between customary and public land has penetrated all levels of politics, and local people in Napolo and other villages neighboring the national parks have sharpened their discursive weapons accordingly.

As in Mchombo village, another aspect of these discourses involves land scarcity and systems of inheritance. The clamor to re-claim land in the national park must be understood in the context of the absence of land-redistribution within the village. As discussed above, landholding in Napolo village is highly unequal, with the top 25 percent of landholders controlling more than 10 times as much land as the bottom 25 percent (Walker 1997: 170). This disparity is reflected in the absence of land-fallowing among the smaller landholders, whereas many larger landholders have substantial areas of land that are left fallow for 10 years or more. Although fallowing is considered a legitimate ‘use’ of land, local custom also holds that unused land may be redistributed by the village headman. Considering the serious land shortages experienced by some members of the community, and recognizing the fluidity of local ‘tradition’, it might be expected that there would be tension within the community over the question of re-distributing land to those in need.

Yet, when asked whether such a re-distribution has been considered, all members of Napolo village vehemently insist that “it is impossible”. The reason, cited by both large and small landholders, is that the larger landholders are ‘reserving land for their children’—an entirely legitimate claim in the local cultural context. However, in some cases, larger landholders claim they are reserving land for children who do not actually exist, or who are absent and unlikely to return to the village. Although the fiction of these ‘ghost children’ appears to be understood by everyone, there have been no efforts by even the most land-poor households to challenge these claims. Indeed, even the poorest households in the village vigorously defend the right of wealthy villagers to retain large holdings:

Interviewer: There are some people around here who have a lot of land and it is all ‘bush’. Is that true?

Mr. Mandala (head of a very land-poor household): Where is that! People are cultivating everywhere. [pause] The people who settled first have plenty of land, but they say they are keeping it for their children.

Interviewer: Do you think these people have enough land that they can give some of it to their children but also some to their friends?

Mr. Mandala: No... they need all that land... they keep it for their children.

One reason for the reluctance of land-poor households to challenge the right of others in the community to retain large landholdings is that most people see the idea of re-distribution within the village as hopeless (especially since the village headman is known to retain land to sell to prospective estate growers). A related reason is that any discussion of re-distributing land



within the village could potentially undermine claims for land in the national park. Whenever land was discussed in interviews, the conversations invariably turned to the question of opening land in the park for cultivation. For small landholders who believe that there is a real possibility that land in the park may be re-distributed (which was discussed in parliament in the post-Banda period), the polite fiction of ghost children serves the strategic purpose of supporting the argument that there is ‘no more land’ within the village. Thus, in asserting the right to retain land for children, people in Napolo village enhance the perception of ‘scarcity’ of land in their village, thereby bolstering their arguments for re-distributing land in the park to local people.

Thus, the boundary between village and state land in Napolo appears central to two key dynamics. As in Mchombo village, the boundary as such has not (yet) been significantly challenged. All people in Napolo village recognize and observe the boundary, at least with respect to the use of land (aerial photography shows a razor-sharp edge between the cultivated land in the village and the forested land in the park). However, the meaning of the boundary is challenged by people who assert that the alleged taking of their land by the government in 1922 justifies taking resources—namely trees from the park. The use of trees (and other resources) in the park is further justified by the alleged cruelty of park rangers, and the implied injustice of preventing people from using resources in the park when the government has ‘plenty of land’. At the same time, through the practice of taking trees and other resources from the park, the people of Napolo bolster claims of land scarcity within the boundaries of the village—a claim that appears aimed, ultimately, at challenging the boundary itself.

## Conclusions

The case studies presented in this paper suggest that the recent emphasis in political geography and political ecology (and other areas of study) on the ‘blurring’ or disappearance of boundaries, or the idea of ‘multi-layered’ boundaries, may in some cases obscure important dynamics in which *de jure* boundaries as spatial concepts remain relatively stable and widely observed. In these cases, the most important social struggles do not involve efforts to challenge boundaries as spatial concepts but instead involve efforts to redefine the meanings of boundaries as they shape relations between different social groups. Even in situations where the legitimacy of boundaries is questioned, such longer-term efforts to undermine boundaries may give way, or, perhaps, take place simultaneously, with efforts to re-define the meanings of existing boundaries. In these situations, where spatial boundaries per se are not the focus of contestation, it is more appropriate to say that the meanings of boundaries are contested, rather than the boundaries are ‘blurred’. That is, multiple social groups are vying to assert their own culturally and historically-based claims to what rights and obligations a boundary signifies. In the course of these contests over the meanings of boundaries, groups clearly assert certain kinds of claims to resources, but these claims are rarely defined spatially except in relation to the *de jure* boundary: claims are made to trees or other resources across the boundary, but these claims are not conceptualized as linear divisions of the landscape, as in the concept of a ‘multidimensional’ map of overlapping boundaries. Rather, the claims asserted to resources across the boundary are discursively constructed as non spatially-bounded rights to the use of particular resources in particular places. Moreover, the concept of overlapping, linear boundaries may conceal the dynamic nature of claims to resources across boundaries, as these non spatially-bounded claims and practices change continuously through shifting discourses and relations of power.

These dynamics are illustrated in the case studies from Malawi, where people in both Mchombo and Napolo villages focus their efforts not on challenging the continued existence of

boundaries that divide the villages from private and state land, but on re-defining the meanings of these boundaries. In Mchombo village, a few people do question the legitimacy of the boundary between village land and the Madsen estate. But the more important challenge presented by villagers in Mchombo against Mrs. Madsen is whether she has a right to exclude local people from using trees on her land, even while her ownership of the land and her exclusive rights to the land itself (rather than the trees on the land) is not significantly challenged. The choice of people in Mchombo to focus on the question of which rights are implied by Mrs. Madsen's ownership of the land represents a strategic choice in a situation where power relations are such that an outright challenge to her ownership of the land is unlikely to prove effective. Similarly, in Napolo village people focus their discursive contests on challenging the right of the government to exclude villagers from using specific kinds of resources in the national park (particularly trees, but also other resources such as game). In Napolo, there is greater interest than in Mchombo in challenging the boundary itself (in part reflecting the current political climate in which discussions of re-distributing government land have become a well-used ploy among political leaders). Thus, local discursive efforts to re-define the meaning of the park boundary represent both important medium-term and long-term strategies: claiming the right to use trees in the park both provides access to an important resource and serves to support the claim that 'there is no more land' (hence no more trees) in Napolo village, a key part of a longer-term strategy to obtain full rights to the land in the park.

This focus on competing definitions of the meanings of boundaries draws attention to the difficulties involved with some of the metaphors and language used to describe concepts of boundaries and property rights. In their respective struggles to secure rights to use resources on private and state land, the people of Mchombo and Napolo villages do not propose alternative spatial boundaries. In Mchombo village, the claim to trees on the Madsen estate is spatially defined in the sense that they assert historical rights to use trees in proximity to their village—that is, in relation to the village boundary. However, this right is expressed not through spatial concepts but through various claims of fairness, compassion, and so on. When Mrs. Mchombo complains that Mrs. Madsen should allow people in Mchombo to cut firewood for the funeral of a respected village member, she is not asserting a claim to a particular space but to a particular kind of resource. In Napolo village, people do make certain kinds of spatial claims, arguing that parts of the original village occupied what is now park land. However, the claim to the right to use trees and other resources in the park is not expressed in spatial terms—people claim that because the park 'took' their land and because the government 'has plenty of land' they have a right to use trees in the park—implying all trees in the park. In part the non-spatial nature of this claim reflects the historical ambiguity about the original boundaries of the village. But this spatial ambiguity also serves an important strategic function: the actual area of village land 'taken' by the park was almost certainly small. With their lack of specific spatial definitions and focus on concepts of fairness ('the government has plenty of land') rather than spatial claims alone, the people of Napolo village open up opportunities for much more expansive (and expandable) claims than if they asserted specific sets of alternative boundaries based solely on particular spatial claims. Thus, such concepts as multi-layered boundaries or property zones not only tend to spatialize what are often non-spatial claims, but may also obscure some of the more interesting and complex discursive strategies that people pursue in relation to boundaries.

The case studies from Malawi also point to some of the difficulties with the concept of 'blurring' boundaries. As discussed above, boundaries and their meanings may be contested without being 'blurred' in the sense that 'blurring' implies a kind of erasure of boundaries.

Although people in both Mchombo and Napolo villages routinely challenge the kinds of rights and obligations properly associated with the boundary, they do not for the most part challenge the concept of the boundary itself. Even while they assert claims to certain types of resources on the other side of the boundary, the boundary remains intact in that it is clearly recognized as defining a different domain of rights from land within the village. One indication of the continued relevance of the boundary is the discursive process itself—the fact that people invest in the creation of elaborate historical and cultural narratives to justify various forms of expansion of rights across the boundary indicates that the boundary remains an important concept and social fact. However, the social relevance of the boundary to villagers is not as a single, spatial divider of a homogeneous entity, “property”. Rather, Mchombo and Napolo villagers assert rights only to certain types of resources. Whereas it might be argued that with respect to trees the boundary between community and private or state land has been ‘blurred’ by constant crossings, virtually no one in either village would even consider using private or state land for cultivation. That is, with respect to the use of land rather than trees, the boundary remains a formidable conceptual and social barrier even among people who routinely cross the same boundary for other purposes. This raises the important general observation that the meanings of boundaries are usually specific to particular types of resources—land, water, trees, game—and that spatial metaphors and language need to be used carefully to avoid obscuring these multiple meanings.

In conclusion, this paper suggests that in some circumstances, spatial metaphors and language may not adequately illuminate some of the important social dynamics that surround contests over property boundaries. Worse, in some cases, these metaphors and language may conceal certain non-spatial concepts and struggles over non spatially-bounded resources. A beginning point in addressing these difficulties may be to find ways to expand and develop a concept of contested landscape, in which property boundaries frame multiple social contests over particular kinds of resources in particular places without implying a misleadingly static or rigid sense of linear divisions across the landscape. Such an approach borrows from the works of political geographers and others who suggest that the importance of boundaries may lie not so much in the ways that they divide people and landscapes as in the ways that they constitute an arena where these groups struggle to define their respective rights and obligations. The concept of the contested landscape also draws heavily from fields such as political ecology in emphasizing that these struggles over the meanings of boundaries take place through discursive processes that derive from particular historical and cultural contexts and practices. The key theme tying these approaches together is the recognition that social and discursive struggle over boundaries not only attempt to redefine spaces, but, more importantly, assert different meanings for boundaries in ongoing struggles over social and political claims to resources. As such, spatial metaphors should be used with caution.

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