

LOCAL SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS AND SUSTAINING THE COMMONS IN  
RURAL AFRICA.

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by

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### Introduction

Common property resources (CPRs) have been a major research concern for the last four decades. Their study is now quite central to environmental sustainability issues. This is as it should be as the concept of CPR is a universal one. There is also ample evidence of concern for the degradation of this resource base (Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987; Berkes and Farvar, 1989 and Feeny, 1986).

This paper is aimed at CPR conceptualization in Sub-Saharan Africa. Its central theme is that such conceptualization of CPRs has largely been built around a partial view of the commons - a view largely derived from the dominant interpretation of resources. Resources are generally understood from the material human needs. Non-material roles played by a resource base such as the commons are relegated to a very insignificant place. For Africa, it is suggested that this does not augur well for the sustainability of the commons. Before this is attempted, a brief examination of major CPR analytical frameworks is necessary.

### Central Issues in the Commons Debate

CPR debates have largely been on:

1. The characteristics of different concepts and definitions of CPRs (dealing with such issues as types and controls on tenure and access, notions of exclusion, subtractability, cooperativeness among users, etc (Berkes and Farvar, 1989; Berkes, 1989 and Oakerson, 1986));
2. The place of CPRs in property rights regimes (i.e. res nullius (open access), res publica (public property) and res communes (common property) the role of each in resource management and the merits and demerits of each in sustaining the resource bases (Berkes, 1989; Bromley and Cernea, 1989 and Gibbs and Bromley, 1989));
3. The functions of CPRs in providing livelihood security, issues of equity and conflict resolution; modes of productions (especially in small communities); the contribution of CPR management principles to sustainability and local self-sufficiency and related matters (Berkes and Farvar, 1989 and McCay and Acheson, 1987));
4. The widespread discussions supporting or refuting the very influential "tragedy of the commons" thesis by Hardin, (1968); and

5. The role of institutional arrangements that guide CPR management (Ciriacy-Wantrup and Bishop, 1975; Gibbs and Bromley, 1989; Grima and Berkes, 1989 and Ostrom, 1987).

The multiplicity of issues suggests the breadth of conceptualizing CPRs. Several perspectives have been employed in fathoming the subject. Some perspectives have been built around economics (indeed economics has dominated discussion). There have been perspectives with a human-ecological slant (Berkes, 1989 and McCay and Acheson, 1987). An institutional arrangement perspective has also been an important element in most CPR work. The prevalent underlying assumption, however, has been that the commons exist for the purpose of providing material resources for human material needs. It is a perspective that derives from the dominant view that resources emanate from human appraisal of those aspects of the physical environment considered usable (Mitchell, 1989). CPR thinking has then analysed how communal or group management takes place built around notions of reciprocity, common survival, cooperativeness or lack of it, etc. It is this materialistic concept of resources that is at issue here.

#### CPRs as Social Institutions

I have suggested elsewhere that for Africa, it is essential to marshal more than the material resources that derive from the physical attributes of any area (Matowanyika, 1990). It is also important to mobilize an often spurned set of resources best summarized as cultural heritage resources. In agreement with several writers on this issues (e.g. Warren and others, 1989) I suggest that there are several attributes of the African cultural heritage which can be brought to bare on sustaining rural Africa. Such attributes include local knowledge bases and local social institutions and CPR systems.

The idea that the commons themselves can be treated as social institutions has been suggested by several people (e.g. Ciriacy-Wantrup and Bishop, 1975; Gibbs and Bromley, 1989; Grima and Berkes, 1989; McCay, 1987 and Ostrom, 1987). The notion has been presented by Young (1982:15) this way:

In essence, resource regimes are social institutions that serve to order the actions of those interested in the use of various natural resources. Like all social institutions, they are recognized patterns of behavior around which expectations converge.

He also clearly states, in addition to the definition of social institutions in the above quote, that resource regimes are a subset of social institutions (pg19) with recognizable social conventions and sanctioning processes. The common approach in CPR

debates is to seek the other social institutions expected to guide a group's behavior in extracting resources, in exercising restraint, meting out punishments to detractors, seeking allocative mechanisms and other issues pertinent to resource management and conservation. Common property regimes have been cast in the mold of groups of individuals who collectively exercise their rights in benefitting from the commons. Typical resource management sectors are irrigation, pastures and rangeland use, community forestry, fishing and others (Grima and Bromley, 1989).

Where CPRs are land based, issues of tenure, territory, stewardship and group dynamics are important (e.g. Berkes, 1989). Several of the dominant social mechanisms applied in various resource regimes are comprehensively discussed by Regier and others (1989). All these investigations are very essential. However, the various components that are presented in these explanatory exercises treat commons largely as natural resource bases which exist for human exploitation. But within the African experience, indeed this is so in several other regions of the world, we need to go further. The cultural element of the commons management is not just to set the context against which resources are appraised. Rather we need to examine a much larger role. Commons themselves present more than a base for material resources. It is being suggested here that commons are very often the repository of several other social and community values which derive in the non-material realm. Ciriacy-Wantrup and Bishop (1975) caution that we should differentiate institutions for CPR management and the resources themselves. This is an important observation here as the one (the material resource base) must be separated from the management process. Although the management process is non-material, the predominant approaches still do not touch upon the ethic of the commons as an entity which is "by its very nature a socio-cultural system embedded in historically specific time and space" (Peters, 1987:172).

Omari (1990) in a very apposite article on the traditional African land ethic states that Africans have found it difficult to separate the religious and secular worlds. Africa has for long lived under a situation where material needs are interpreted in non-material processes. The two (the material and non-material) are intertwined processes. El-Jaili (1988) also posits that the study of material substance as the supreme reality beyond which few dare to explore is a very partial view of environmental management issues in several African contexts. He argues that such a view ignores the spiritual basis of the perceptions of environmental degradation in the Sahel. (His work is built largely on Sudan and within the tenets of Islam). He presents the issue of drought as presenting a material-spiritual nexus.

By elevating the commons to the status of being social institutions in their own right, with their own intrinsic values

beyond their role as resource bases, we accord them a more proper perception within rural Africa. The tendency so far has been to perceive them as being the object of management by other social institutions such as kinship systems, religious processes, reciprocity, rites of passage, patron-client relationships etc. The commons offer much more than a resource base around which other regulations, rules and conventions have developed. They can be presented as a physical manifestation of a material-non-material set of norms and values in rural societies in Africa. They are therefore at the centre of African cultural heritage. The commons do provide a complex set of biotic, abiotic and cultural resources. An illustration is presented next.

#### A Zimbabwean Example.

In a recent study of common lands in the Eastern parts of Zimbabwe I observed several features which can be interpreted as satisfying more than natural resource requirements. (1) The following is a summary of some of the issues:

<b>Social/Cultural Function</b>	<b>Features Observed in the Commons</b>
Religious/ Spiritual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Sites purported to be watering points for "guardian of the lands".</li> <li>-Sacred areas (most hills, several thickets) with explanations for status.</li> <li>-Ritual sites (e.g fig tree sites, hills, rocks)</li> <li>-rainmaking ceremony sites (e.g. cliff bottoms, trees)</li> </ul>
Aesthetic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-vegetated site</li> <li>-unusual geological sites</li> </ul>
Experiential	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-sites where individual had unusual experiences (such hills, rivers).</li> </ul>
Historical/ Cultural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-burial grounds of leaders (from periods in the past)</li> <li>-caves and other sites with history especially battle sites</li> <li>-extensive old terraces and ritual sites</li> <li>-unused old settlement sites</li> </ul>
Local Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-sites used to observe weather patterns (e.g. hilltops)</li> <li>-animal lairs</li> <li>-species identification</li> </ul>
Myths/Folklore	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-unique tree species</li> <li>-unusual geologic sites</li> <li>-pools</li> <li>-animal lairs</li> </ul>

These were all observed in addition to local regulations based on:

1. The extraction of specific resources such as clay for pottery, the collection of firewood, fruit, grass, fibres etc. Differing sets of extractive methods used in the area were observed.
2. The behaviour expected of people when washing pots, clothes, etc and the need to protect water sources and promote public health;

3. Vegetation and wildlife species that were not to be used or were to be used under specific conditions;
4. The behaviour expected towards wild animals such as baboons and snakes (and the conditions under which they could be killed);
5. Protection of parts of the local environment and the activities allowed in them;
6. The respect that was expected of various members of the community towards the land - as this was the ultimate security for all; and
7. The controlled use of chemicals (indigenous and introduced) both in the field and in rivers.

Several local controls were also observed and especially those that would threaten food and water supplies, those that would invoke the displeasure of the "guardians of the land", societal pressure, some more formal local institutions and the observance of rest days.

In addition to these, sites were also observed where one could clearly identify conditions of open access, and several public body uses, (such as gravel sites, public thoroughfares, dipping tanks etc) confirming the point raised by Bruce and Fortmann (1988) that various forms of property regimes will often exist on the same piece of land.

The point here is that it is not adequate to identify the natural resources that are extracted from the commons and the institutional arrangements that exist to guide their allocation. The recognition that analysis must go beyond single resources to multiple resources is gratifying (Berkes, 1989). But it needs to be taken further. In rural Africa, so often the commons are a multipurpose human construct, the extraction of resources being only one of these. It is also pertinent to note that there is a high intergrativeness of rural African social institutions. Berry (1988) reminds us that people's relationships to land in Africa are frequently determined by their social institutions. The commons cannot be separated from these other social institutions used in local religious rites, or in the processes of mitigating against community stresses. Often the commons are the theatres within which solutions to these problems are sought, even when issues are related to food production on an individual household basis. Drought is one obvious example. African processes of ancestor worship and rainmaking in such situations are often acted out in the commons. The notion that land is protected by guardian spirits leads one to conclude that it is pertinent to add another component in the tenure ideologies. In addition to res nullius, res publica and res communes, it

becomes necessary to come up with an additional one: res communes et gentiales. The importance of considering such an approach is that in most Africa societies individual behaviour within the commons is often a religious phenomenon - a manifestation of individual communion with the guardians of the land. Communal rituals are an extension of this notion.

### Conflict in the Commons

Conflict often comes about when development proposals only recognize singular uses within the commons. The problem proposal are frequently those of afforestation and rangeland development. Proposals must recognize the array of issues such as those observed in Eastern Zimbabwe. Severe acceptance problems often ensue when this is not done. (This was indeed observed in the case mentioned above. In addition there were problems with road alignments, gravel pit sites and grazing scheme proposals).

When proposals are imposed, even with the apparent approval of local leaders, it is still essential to recognize that proposals that impinge on the commons also impinge on the broader societal cultural and spiritual well being of the locals. There will often be differences within the communities (and the reasons for these will range from local politics to socio-economic situations). But often enough development proposals account only for opinions expressed by the better off, inadvertently or otherwise (Chambers, 1983). This may not (and most likely does not) relegate frustrations of a non-material origin into insignificance, especially by those who are made worse off materially.

### Some Concluding Observations.

The position taken above is deeply rooted in African cultural heritage. It has been observed that African customs and traditions continue to play significant roles in resource management. In a recent wide ranging literature review of indigenous knowledge and resource management in arid and semi-arid Africa, Niamir (1990) has amply shown this to be the case. Several other studies provide details of land allocation systems guided by indigenous processes (Bruce, 1988; Bromley and Cernea, 1989 and Sandford, 1983). Commons are ubiquitous in Africa and have been so for a long time. Even where there have been significant movement of people during and after colonization, commons have been contrived (by both governments and people) as an important land use. Commons remain an important feature even in resettlement areas. Sometimes, even where land privatization has taken place through villagization programmes,



such as in Kenya, local peoples have continued to regard aspects of their own lands as belonging to the community at large. The case of sacred groves is given as an example by Riley and Brokensha (1988).

There is evidence in Africa that commons are coming under different kinds of pressure. Their transformation to state property is one case in point (Little and Brokensha, 1987, and Moorehead, 1989). Their transfer to private ownership is another (Peters, 1987). There is a denudation of African cultural attributes (Omari, 1990). These are all issues that require careful study. But in the process, it is prudent to note the position taken here, that is that commons are an integral part of the local social institutions in most cases.

As already mentioned, cultural heritage is an essential resource that is underutilized in Africa. It is essential that deeper thought be spared for this effort. If the broader view of the commons presented here is accepted as a significant institution, there are better chances that their protection can be promoted. In the process of studying the human ecological processes in Africa, the suggestions made here do not appear to have been understood. Incomplete and inadequate research in this regard, as in the case of so many other areas in Africa, hinders progress in general. Extending the study of CPRs in the direction suggested here should be fruitful.

When we impinge upon the commons, it is essential that we realize that we are infringing a much broader aspect of African well being. The tragedy of the African commons can be seen as the tragedy of the erosion of this African cultural heritage, a grossly underutilized resource in modern day endeavors in development. Omari (1990:174) states:

Communal solidarity which is part of the traditional African value system, should be utilized fully not only for the present generation but for the future as well.

Herein lies part of the challenge of sustaining the commons in rural Africa.

1) This study was undertaken during the period August 1989 at January 1990 as part of my PhD studies. A small area, 70 sq. km. in areal extent, with an estimated population of 2000 in a medium rainfall area in the Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe was studied. The site was deliberately chosen to highlight the very wide range of issues presented by the commons. The fieldwork was made possible by a research grant from the Ford Foundation.

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