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**Disciplining Nature.
Land, Environment and Political Coercion
in Colonial Southern Africa**

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Abstract*

During the colonial period in most parts of Eastern and Southern Africa environment and conservation issues were intimately related to the fulfilment of the economic and political aims of colonial powers: the control of people and of natural resources. In settler colonies the questions of land and of environment degradation were assumed as part of the colonial discourse, of the political control, of development strategies. Environment protection became the cornerstone of mechanisms of power by which African people and African economic systems were victims of an extraordinary level of planning. Particularly, in Southern Rhodesia colonial authorities intervened on both indigenous systems of land tenure and techniques of agricultural production by the strengthening of its administrative coercive apparatus

The paper discuss issues concerning ideas and practices through which the colonial state in Southern Africa transformed African societies and institutions in order both to foster the development of an European settler economy and to control native population.

Science, nature and empire

In Sub-Saharan Africa the issues of land, of agricultural production and of environment conservation represent important topics of discussion and analysis. Because of their relevance for agriculture and rural development, we have to address these questions by analysing and discussing colonial policies and their authoritarian and coercive interventions. Indeed, during the colonial era two questions characterised the policy aiming at “re-defining” African agrarian systems: firstly, the access and the control of land by African farmers (land tenure), and secondly the policies of environmental protection (land conservation). Colonial administrators strongly intervened in reorganising African agricultural production. Their interventions were based on the belief of the necessity of “modernising” the cultivation methods of African people, considered backward and inefficient. However, colonial science was not in a position to fully understand the situation and operated, as we will see, with ambivalent methods both in the restructuring of land systems and in the protection of the environment.

This article intends to discuss these elements through the analysis of the transformation of indigenous agricultural systems occurred during the colonial period, with particular attention to the settler colonies.

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In the settler colonies of Southern Africa policies oriented to environmental protection and to the reform of the so-called “customary” land tenure are a clear example of the strong level of pressure exercised by colonial powers on indigenous populations relegated into the native reserves. In Southern Africa during the colonial period many governmental commissions emphasised the risks of: overpopulation, land shortage, erosion of lands, conditions of desertification, and famine. Indeed, understanding the key elements of agrarian history in Southern Africa is important because today «rural peoples’ demands can only be understood in the context of the history of conquest and dispossession, of territorial segregation and political exclusion» (Murray, Williams 1994: 316).

Settler societies transmitted ideas and conceptions of political investment on the land that went beyond the simple commercial expansion of the empire. The Australian use of the term settler suggests meanings of transformation and the frontier idea of the progress juxtaposed to the backward country (Griffiths 1997).

Fundamental for the colonial state was the notion that power and knowledge were mutually forged. For Said imperialism and colonialism «both are supported and perhaps even impelled by impressive ideological formations that include notions that certain territories and people require and beseech domination, as well as forms of knowledge affiliated with domination» (Said 1993: 9).

Colonialism reinforced a “science for development”. In the settler colonies ecology - a way to describe the natural environment, but also a philosophy, an ideology, a science - expressed the tensions tied to the environmental constraints Europeans faced in spreading their agriculture in the pre-European ecosystems: for this reason some scholars see ecology as a «science of the empire» (Libby 1997). Therefore, ecology is a way for reinterpreting colonial history, given that environmental changes are still «an unexplored aspect of colonialism» (Beinart, Coates 1995).

Environmental history has widened the frontiers of the traditional historical research, entering in areas usually considered as reserved to other disciplines. Historians of the environment have stressed how climate, land, diseases etc., are important issues *per se* and not only as a background for social history, giving in such a way importance to the material and cultural meaning of the natural world.

One of the issues discussed is how colonial science and politics have been insensitive to local ecological situations (Beinart 1984; Anderson, Grove 1987). In his research in a Kenyan rural area Anderson underlines that since the 1920s, in colonial view, «Baringo was becoming a desert, it was alleged, as a result of overcrowding and mismanagement» (Anderson 2002: 1). African studies have begun to study the effects of colonial politics and practices on environment (Beinart 2000), included the appropriation of natural resources, of forests, of minerals, of land by chartered companies and by settlers, and to critically discuss about the deterministic visions of the environment supported by

colonialism. As Fanon reminds us, daily racism of the settlers metaphorically attributed animal characteristics to the colonised people (Fanon 1971).

In the 1970s a new attention to these topics emerged, in particular in the research works carried out at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. Among these, Kjekshus's work was a product of such reorientation in the studies: stimulated by new analyses of that period, the study was interested in discussing the role of Africans «as people living close to their environments, but as masters and shapers of them, not as their prisoners» (Kjekshus 1996: xxx, first edition 1977). That generation of scholars reacted to the representations of the Africans as “passive victims” of their environment, opening therefore new spaces of work within the historiographic debate.

More recently some studies have discussed the issue of land tenure reform and of environmental protection opening an articulated debate on rural development in Africa, presenting the activities of local communities as essentially benign rather than destructive, and taking into account local knowledge (Toulmin, Quan 2000; Juul, Lund 2002; Benjaminsen, Lund 2003; Potts, Bowyer-Bower 2004).

Since the 1920s of the past century colonial attention was drawn on the issues of environmental protection through policies of “technical development”. The common property systems were seen as obstacles to national progress, obstacles that could only be overcome through the subjugation of nature by more rational systems (Igoe 2004: 81). The language of “betterment planning” and of environmentalism was incorporated within the colonial bureaucratic apparatus aiming at transforming traditional African agriculture. The “objective” language of colonial science represented «the virtuous face of colonialism» (Beinart 1989: 159). In Southern Africa, where colonialism was characterised by massive land expropriations, presenting African agriculture as ecologically irresponsible created the political space for the exercise of a «paternalistic authoritarianism» (Berman 1990). As the colonial officer and anthropologist Meek observed, the ideology of conservation gave legitimacy to the maintenance of the control of the colonial state on the native reserves (Meek 1968, first edition 1946).

The language of the environment was part of a wide and rigid control system on the reserves and it depoliticised the issue of the land and its distribution. Indeed, interventions were based on the necessity of environmental protection as well as of the defence of soils from ecological degradation. They were stemmed on technocratic approaches, rules, and mechanisms that will be maintained within the processes of land reform and rural development of the post-independence period. For instance, the Ujamaa reform in Tanzania, by means of politics of villagization, expressed similarities with the colonial policy of physical and territorial planning. In Zimbabwe the government policy shows a return to the ideas of some colonial technocrats (Chaumba, Scoones,

Wolmer 2003) in which the «enduring appeal of technical development» (Alexander 2000) is still relevant. Post-colonial governments have not defied consolidated practices and beliefs about development, the so-called «purposive rationality» (Drinkwater 1991). The «small tyranny» (Worby 1998) of technocratic norms is under discussion, but it still continues to offer the justifications for state intervention. Like colonial governments, independent states could have different ideas about forms and modalities of implementation of a technical approach to development, but not on the effectiveness of the approach. Nowadays many policies share the colonial beliefs on the "destructivity" of indigenous agriculture and, starting from these conceptions, experts draw to a long series of arguments considered orthodox (Leach, Mearns 1996) through which Africans are depicted as botanical "levellers" (Beinart 2000: 277).

Land tenure and agricultural colonial policies

A work on the colonial expansion reminds us how the colonial experience in the periphery generated pioneering conservationist practices and new European considerations on nature (Grove, Worster, Crosby 1995). Indigenous people have been subjected to «the colonization of their lands and cultures» (Smith 1999). To colonial observers, native "constructions" were of little value. As Kreike (2004: 13) writes about Namibia «homesteads with elaborate grain storage facilities and palisades were referred to as huts, carefully managed fruit trees were characterised as wild, intensive mound agriculture was dismissed as subsistence cultivation, and wells were denigrated as water holes».

Agrarian transformations were accompanied by perceptions and preoccupations about nature and environment. Alfred Milner, the governor of Transvaal during the period 1901-5 and the architect of the reconstruction after the Anglo-Boer War, promoted development plans that he articulated on the basis of the imperial ideas of a modern and progressive agriculture combined with racial supremacy (Milton 1997). In South Africa the movements towards the enclosures shaped the agrarian question, in particular after the Fencing Act of 1883 in the Cape Colony. In this way the control of the land by the white minority became *de jure* in the confrontation with claims and demands made by the native majority that was deprived of their land (Van Sitter 2002). In particular the South African highveld was central to agrarian transformations and a critical site for struggles between white landowners and black tenants (Beinart 2003).

Beyond racial supremacy, the settler ideology was justified on the basis of the idea of superiority of Western "scientific" methods of production and of private property. Conceptual approaches derived from the experience of the West were diffused in African colonies. The colonial intervention insisted on the effectiveness of the system of mixed farming that in XX century was exported from Europe towards the African colonies. However, before the imposition of the colonial system,

Africans were already “mixed farmers” given that they practiced agriculture and cattle breeding. But their methods did not fit the systems of mixed agriculture considered as ideal by the Europeans. Indeed the two elements (cultivation and cattle breeding) had to integrate each other by means of the use of manure, fodder, draught power and, above all, the access to the land had to be transformed into individual freehold tenure (Wolmer, Scoones 2000).

In colonial administrators’ comments, the mixed farming system became an integrant part of a process of transformation representing the modernity and offered the premises for interventions based on mechanisms of Darwinian evolutionism. The old system of agriculture considered backward, primitive and destructive of the environment should have been transformed by new agricultural techniques. Science and ideology of the mixed farming were fundamental for the processes of centralization described in the following paragraph, favouring mechanisms of intervention more and more coercive on small African peasant production.

In Southern Rhodesia, for example, in 1921 the Chief Agriculturalist wrote that the only practical method by which soil fertility could be economically maintained was by adopting mixed farming (Mundy 1921). Of particular interest, since the 1920s, was the work of the American missionary Alvord in the mission of Mount Selinda. According to Alvord «the foundation of permanent agriculture for the Africans is based on mixed farming, that is cattle and tillage» (National Archives of Zimbabwe - NAZ - 1943). Alvord intended to favour the cause of development of a modern agriculture together with civilised ways of life by means of the adoption of new agricultural systems. According to him Africans «have developed a clearly defined practice spoken of by European as ‘Kaffir farming’. Their methods are wasteful, slovenly and unnecessarily ineffective, and if continued, will be ruinous to the future interests of Rhodesia» (Alvord 1929: 9).¹ However other witnesses in the colony gave different evidence. For instance, the missionary Cripps wrote that he was particularly impressed by the indigenous agriculture of Mashonaland both for the patient hard working of the Natives and for their great capability of adaptation to local climate conditions (Cripps 1927: 129). In 1915 the Native Commissioner (NC) of Charter wrote: «Natives are very precise in their agricultural activities. They are increasing their yields and expanding their cultivated fields» (Public Record Office - PRO - 1915). The NC of Makoni in his reports highlighted the interest of the Natives to cultivate crops for the markets in the district. The farmers in the Chiduku reserve produced grains not only for their consumption but also for the sale in the market of Rusape, while the NC of Inyanga affirmed: «an active class of small farmers is evolving; (...) the Natives of the colony (...) are producers with increasing potentialities» (NAZ 1921).

¹ For a critical analysis on these aspects see: Drinkwater 1991.

On the other hand, little attention was given to the incapability of many white farmers who were not an example of mixed farmers. The Department of Agriculture in its report of 1928 declared: «very few farmers produce forage in sufficient amount for their cattle. The winter ploughing is widely neglected (...) many failures had been unambiguously the result of lack of adequate methods» (Southern Rhodesia, Department of Agriculture 1928: 14).

Meanwhile colonial practices aimed at redefining indigenous systems of land tenure. In 1923 a Rhodesian administrator asserted: «individual tenure appeals to the progressive Native, because it enable him to adopt advanced methods (...) which are impossible when living the kraal life» (Wilson 1923). The dissolution of communal systems in favour of the strengthening of individual property became a central feature within the discussion. However, colonial governments did not implement such a policy, if not in a limited way.

As part of a unique project of agricultural development, environmental protection policy was combined to programmes whose aims were to create a class of master farmers or yeomen: native petty landowners, market-oriented, specialised in cash crops production, and able to adopt modern agricultural techniques.² The formation of this class of agricultural producers was considered important both in order to favour the spread of the civilization, and to modify traditional agricultural systems. At the same time the plans of reorganisation of the agrarian sector would have to stimulate the abandonment of agricultural activities by inefficient farmers who would have been transferred towards other productive activities (labourers in large-scale farms, mines, wages activities in urban areas).

The supporters of this policy dreamed the formation of a vigorous yeomanry, in effective possess of their land, and practicing a sustainable agriculture. In South Africa the idea of creating a class of yeomen developed a progressive ethos who paved the way for a long-lasting, even if not easy, alliance between the technocrats of the Department of Agriculture and a small but influential group of landowners both Afrikaner and English speaking.

Between the '40s and the '50s such a policy was reinforced in British East and Southern Africa. Indeed, after Second World War the goal of transforming African societies by means of new models of land usage, private ownership, and new structures of social organisation became more explicit.

In Kenya in 1954 the Swynnerton Plan started. It aimed to favour the development of a class of modern native small farmers who had to contribute to the economic development and to a more efficient agriculture. The colonial government developed in Kenya a land reform that wanted to address, through a rapid change of the policies on land, the Mau Mau revolt. The two pillars of the

² Master farmer is «a plowholder who has reached certain minimum standards of crop and animal husbandry laid down by the Agriculture Department». This definition is from: Johnson 1964.

Swynnerton Plan were the processes of consolidation of agricultural and residential areas and the assignments of individual registered title deeds that would guarantee security of tenure, incentives for investments, greater environmental protection and an easier access to credit (Swynnerton 1954). The case of Kenya represented an exception in the historical panorama of the processes of individualization of land tenure. While supporting that kind of evolution, the colonial state did not really transform the traditional systems, highlighting a continuous ambiguity between individual freehold tenure as a way for developing African agriculture and a policy of control (when not of destruction) of the productive potentialities of African peasantry. A phenomenon indicated by Stoneman in reference to Southern Rhodesia when he said that African peasants were transformed in poor farmers engaged in a subsistence agriculture in overcrowded reserves, while white farmers were transformed in a rural bourgeoisie with an unjustified reputation of being essential to the future abilities of the country to nourish itself (Stoneman 1981: 134).

Kenyan scholar Okoth-Ogendo (1993) considers that such policies were "diversionary" in the sense that they failed to adequately address the question of environmental protection and to reform the customary land tenure. He argues that, in reality, they protected settler society and economy to the detriment of African farmers, increasing the resentments against the colonial state.

We must bear in mind that still today ideas and conceptions inherited by colonial history are important within the proposals of agrarian reform and rural development while the transformation of land tenure is an unsolved issue. Indeed, the various stakeholders involved in land reform programmes are still presenting the question of property rights through two major positions: those supporting individual (private) property and those supporting customary land systems. There has been a sort of evolutionary idea of the transformation: "modern and advanced" land usages could be only obtained by privatizations. In particular, there is a strong insistence in the debate on the great effectiveness of the freehold tenure in increasing productivity; a technocratic argument strongly supported by the World Bank which in 1981 stressed the importance of the evolutionary process towards private property: «Since countries (and regions) are at different stages of this transition, Africa has diverse and changing land rights. Agricultural modernization combined with population pressure will make land titling necessary» (World Bank 1981: 104). However, a new position based on the recognition of new informal rights (Benjaminsen, Lund 2003) is nowadays developing. The World Bank itself is now considering the possibility of multiple accesses to land, even if it insists on secure access to the land which will guarantee more investment and less environmental degradation (World Bank 2003).

At the same time the debate on the environmental degradation is connected to the excessive emphasis on the centrality of land tenure in relation to the management and to the sustainability of

land use. This was strengthened after independence following the Hardin's famous metaphor (the so-called "tragedy of the commons") (Hardin 1968) that considered indispensable the private property of the land rights because communal systems were the root cause of the environmental damages. This position represents what some authors such as Platteau (2000) have defined the myths that have continued to supply a powerful control of the dominant analyses and that are responsible of the technocratic approaches to the land management. The experience of the last twenty years has demonstrated the little importance of the model of Hardin, favouring the development of new positions about the communal land tenure, an important element for the acquisition of incomes and livelihoods by the people across the continent (Cousins 2000). At the same time, however, as the Zimbabwean experience demonstrates «the quest for "order" and the imprint of technocracy continue to run deep when it comes to land-use, planning, resettlement and rural development» (Chaumba, Scoones, Wolmer 2003: 550).

The "betterment planning"

While colonial governments favoured the appropriation of natural resources by the settlers, the preoccupations about the protection of soil, waters, forests and wildlife grew.

On the one hand, this favoured initiatives aiming at creating national parks by means of authoritarian intervention based on exclusion of local people. Wild animals were transformed from *res nullius* into public property through their inclusion into state custodianship (MacKenzie 1988). Many were the damages provoked to African societies from the Cape to Kenya by interventions on forest and natural resources because of the expropriations of lands and the consequent transfer of local populations into the native reserves (MacKenzie 1988).³ The ideology of conservation in South Africa, for instance, represents instruments of divisive politics. National parks must be protected by people: this fortress approach to conservation has transformed parks into «islands under siege» (Carruthers 1997: 126). The purity of the conceptions on wilderness led to the eviction of people through exclusionary interventions (Carruthers 1995). The fortress conservation idea will survive to the colonial period and, in many cases, will continue in independent states and in international agencies policies. Emblematic is the case of the Mkomazi Game Reserve in Tanzania where since 1988 initiatives of eviction of the inhabitants were resumed: the Tanzanian government saw, like during the colonial period, the eviction as the only way in order to safeguard the environment (Brockington 2002).

On the other hand, colonial officers insisted for the introduction of norms considered as essential for the efficient use of the resources and to guarantee the future of agriculture. Attempts to control soils

³ From an historical point of view an interesting case of authoritarian intervention during the colonial period is that of Mapotos Hills in Zimbabwe: see Ranger 1989; Ranger 1999.

erosion in African reserves were used to legitimate, on the one side, the segregationist imperatives aimed at definitely defeating any possible competition between African and settler agriculture and, on the other side, in order to guarantee an adequate availability of cheap manpower for the European economy (Palmer 1977). Within the white community the need to define how behaving with African farmers became more and more evident as they “progressed” and, therefore, how canalizing and managing their “advance”. A colonial administrator of Southern Rhodesia wrote in 1923 that the aims of colonial policy are to assure «the development of the Natives in order to reduce their conflict or the competition with the whites, socially, economically and politically» (Wilson 1923: 88).

The conservationist position masked the real attempts of control of the colonial state: the central issue was, as Cooper (1987) reminds, that one «of order and control». Anderson (1984) emphasises how the insistence of settlers on the destructive elements of African agriculture hid the necessity to legitimate the expropriations of lands. To this purpose, Grove (1989), among others, has clearly presented how the conservationist ethics has supplied the “appropriated language” with which it was justified in the Cape Colony the racial discrimination and the expropriations of lands.

Because of soils erosion, Africans were accused of land mismanagement. However, many studies (Bruce 1993; Horowitz, Little 1987) have signalled high levels of crisis and land degradation in situations of individual tenure too. Environmental problems affected also the areas of European settlement, although the settlers were never accused of environmental destruction. Mulwafu (2002) indicated that, while native reserves in colonial Malawi were targeted by policies of environmental protection, the severe and diffused problems of soils erosion in white owned large-scale farms were ignored by the colonial government. On the contrary, state subsidies, prices and inputs support, encouraged, in many cases, inappropriate uses of land among white farmers (Crush, Jeeves 1997: 2).

In the 1930s the experience of the American Dust Bowl led colonial conservation officers to believe that some African areas were also becoming a Dust Bowl. In East Africa, for instance, as Anderson (1984) says, colonial government and settlers stirred up anxiety about the destructive capacity of African traditional agriculture as part of their justification of land appropriation and of control of indigenous agricultural methods and techniques.

Therefore, science was invoked to reorganise native agriculture (Scoones 1996; Beinart 1996) The policy of centralization provide for the evolution of agriculture, the transformation of land tenure, as already mentioned, and an outright reorganisation of rural areas. Village communities had to adopt new systems of land use based on a clear demarcation between individual arable plots and grazing land. The goals of the reorganisation programmes of the agricultural systems were well expressed

by Kettlewell, colonial officer in the administration of Nyasaland since the 1930s and Director of Agriculture in the period 1951-59. He reckoned that the proposals made until then by the government in order to reorganise the agricultural systems of the rural communities had not been successful because native peasants had continued to cultivate the land with their traditional methods in areas that appeared overpopulated and misused (Kalinga 1993).

In Kenya, since the 1930s the complaints against the “destructivity” of the traditional African economy increased. The settlers expressed such attitude in front of the Kenya Land Commission (1932-34) where it was asserted that «unless methods are entirely changed, the great asset of this country, our land, will by degrees ruined». A settler described the Africans as «parasites», «mentally rigid» and «inefficient» (Kenya Land Commission, quoted in MacKenzie 2000: 705). Land shortage was accentuated, above all among the Kikuyu: the difficulty to resolve the Kikuyu question strengthened a policy of centralised land management. In Kenya, as elsewhere in Southern Africa, Western science provide for the necessary power to a project of “imperial progress”.

In Northern Rhodesia controls on the agricultural methods of the Africans increased. They aimed at limiting the dispersion of villages and at eliminating the traditional methods of cultivation, in particular *citemene* (the system of cutting down and burning trees before starting the clearing of the fields), even if it was clear that the productivity with this system was higher than by the cultivation with the hoe (Berry 1993).

In South Africa, in the same period, the government was committed to the protection of soils and in increasing agricultural productivity through programmes of betterment planning. The formulation and the implementation of the environmental protection strategies were particularly influenced by racial politics. This programme (started in 1939) entailed a sort of villagization of scattered African settlements, fencing of communal pastures and the separation of arable land from residential and grazing land. As Beinart remarks: «they probably constituted the most disruptive intervention into rural life since the conquest in the 19th century (...) Officials, justified it very largely on the basis of conservationist ideas (...) Many saw what they had done as a benevolent intervention, which would help to secure the basis for African agriculture in the long term» (Beinart 2003: xvi).

Coercive methods damaged the standard of life of the Africans, diminished the land available and provoked resistance phenomena towards the state. Later on, in 1955 the Tomlinson Commission proposed to assign the land on a freehold tenure basis in the reserves to a class of full time producers that operated in economically viable agricultural units. However the proposals of the Commission that foresaw, on the basis of the definition of the household minimum income, the need to transfer at least half of the rural population, were rejected by the government (Francis, Williams 1993). However, the betterment programmes continued as part of the wider programme

aiming at favouring the transfer of as much people as possible into the Bantustans, one of cornerstones of the segregationist politics of the apartheid regime (Delius, Schimer 2000).

In Southern Rhodesia the policy of centralization intended to rationalise the reserves into standardised systems in order to produce tidy societies submitted to the colonial system. Centralization started in 1929 in the reserve of Selukwe. The plan intended to subdivide the whole arable land in homogenous blocks in order to facilitate the works of environmental protection and villages had to be constructed between arable and grazing areas. It favoured the organic manure and the rotation of crops. The protection of the environment became the cornerstone of the reorganisation of agricultural systems with a twofold objective: reducing African competition and promoting “modern” agricultural techniques in the reserves where evicted people were moving. This led to new form of population pressure in the reserves and new phenomena of overstocking. The Report of the Native Production and Trade Commission in 1944 pointed out a high level of demographic pressure in the reserves (Southern Rhodesia 1945). For instance, in Buhera, where in the 1930s there was a strong influx of persons evicted from their ancestral lands, the NC in 1936 signalled that the reserve began to be overpopulated and therefore it will be necessary in the future to insist on a more economic usage of land; moreover the colonial administration would not take care of the people if they would refuse to adopt better systems of land usage (NAZ 1936).

The government continued, in the 1940s and in the 1950s its politics by strengthening authoritarian procedures. The already quoted Commission stressed that «the maximum benefits, both for the state and for the native agriculture and animal husbandry, can only be obtained by compulsory planning of production» (Southern Rhodesia 1945: 36). In 1941 the Natural Resources Act was approved. The law represented a programme of limitations imposed on native agriculture: it empowered the NCs to «depasture stock, give orders on methods of cultivation, prohibit the cultivation of land, and control water» (Worby 2000: 105). While the centralization programme became more and more coercive, it was transformed in an ambitious plan of total reorganisation of the native reserves that culminated in the promulgation 1951 of the Native Land Husbandry Act. It redefined agricultural practices by means of a spirit of discipline, obligating the Africans to till the land with new modalities and trying to transform the land tenure on individual basis.

The programme determined drastic reorganisations of methods of agriculture, of landscapes and of social organisations. Traditional systems of agriculture were forbidden in the conviction that they exposed the territory to serious phenomena of erosion. This was the case of *dambo* gardens, a system of land usage that associated safe settlements on hills with the cultivation in the valleys in rich humid areas and that were particularly suitable for intensive and highly productive agricultural activities (Scoones 1997). The same happened in other African contexts. In Namibia colonialist

destroyed Ovambo floodplain's *oshilongo* environment and transformed the *ofuga*-wilderness into an *oshilongo* landscape of farms and villages, in a sort of re-creation of a new Eden (Kreike 2004: 2).

We can say that a period of control and obligation for African farmers developed. Often the NCs, instead of the persuasion, passed to order what had to be done: to abandon the houses, to suspend the ploughings of extensive type, to start the construction of fencing, to begin the rotation of crops, following the indications of colonial technicians. The colonial administrators became «virtual policemen» prosecuting «agricultural crimes» (Alexander 2000: 134). The NC of Makoni in its report of 1941 reported: «rigid measures must be taken at the beginning of the ploughing season in order to prevent the Natives to till the grazing area and to damage the activities protecting the land» (NAZ 1941). The NC of Makoni in giving evidence in front of the Commission on Trade in 1944 confirmed this attitude. He reaffirmed the need to continue with systems of obligation given that «the Natives dislike any restriction intensively» (NAZ 1945: pp. 1089-1114). In effects African agriculture was criminalized, even if some NCs, like that one of Mrewa, in 1925 reported: «the fields have been prepared for the crop season, trees and stocks still resist together with a certain amount of unburned wood; this prevents the washing away of land (...) Too much often we condemn the native methods of agriculture (...) If trying to produce a harvest with the minimum risk of failure can be called laziness, then we are all equally guilty» (NAZ 1925).

Although the administrators expected by these interventions benefits in terms of productivity, of protection of environment and of attainment of certainty of tenure, the programmes did not fulfil their goals and they were not able to control the problems of soils erosion, of population increase and of livestock pressure on grazing lands (Southern Rhodesia 1960: 17). However, despite the aims of conservation, the situation both from the point of view of conservation and of productivity worsened. In the 1940s various reports gave evidence of an increase of phenomena of overpopulation and of overgrazing in the reserves (NAZ 1942; 1944; 1947). The reform programmes, however, widened the colonial administrative control system: they redefined customary laws and communal tenure in favour of the conception of the individual tenure system, assigning to the government the task of controlling the management of agricultural resources.

African rights on the land became even more subordinate to the imperatives of the conservationist preoccupations and to the requirements of territorial segregation. Rural populations expressed hostility towards a policy aiming at transferring them from their areas of traditional settlement, while they considered the governmental intervention «an attempt to evaluate the agricultural potentialities of the reserves with the aim of take advantage from them for the benefit of the white population» (Palmer 1968: 51).

The forced removals and the constant and coercive colonial intervention increased the anti-colonial and nationalist feelings, diffused more and more wide protests that favoured the support of nationalist movements by rural populations, such as in the cases of the revolt Mau Mau in Kenya and of the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe. As much historiography testifies (Bundy 1984; Ranger 1985; Beinart, Bundy 1987; Berman, Lonsdale, 1992; MacKenzie 1998) the modes of resistance made by the populations of South Africa and of the Southern region have been important and they must be taken in consideration today within the current programmes of land reform.

Conclusive remarks

In colonial period, the rural population in Southern Africa has been victim of an extraordinary level of planning and control by the state, where the environmentalism was expressed in the exercise of power. The history of rural development and of environment is therefore strictly linked to the historical processes of exclusion and homogenization of people and individuals, of creation of stereotypes, of strong polarization (we/they, civilization/barbarism), and of an usage of science in order to attain the goals of control, both during colonialism and post-independence (Adams, Mulligan 2003).

If the new division of spaces and the concentration of the population in zones identified for residential use facilitated the administrative control, it favoured the controversies on the access to the land. This was in sharp contrast with one of the aims of the programme, the certainty of land rights. Indeed it is likely that in many cases the disputes on the land were caused just by the policy of centralization (Andersson 1999).

Following the evolution of economic interests conflicts increased. In Kenya, where programmes of individual land titles were pursued, reforms became spaces of social conflict while they were incapable to resolve the complex issue of land rights and of multiform relationships concerning the access to the land by individuals or groups (Haugerud 1989; MacKenzie 1989). The attempt of fixing clear and uncontested rules has, to the contrary, determined uncertain and confused rights. It is erroneous to think in an automatic way that individual title deeds mean immediate incentives and guarantees for the landholders and that they can guarantee more secure rights on land: instead of eliminating traditional rights, often new rights entered in conflict (Shipton, Mitzi 1992).

Today in Africa a dual system of land tenure exists: old and new rules are used in order to claim the rights on the land. The debate continues to be concentrated on the evolutionist model that foresees the transition from the communal system to the individual one. It insists on the greater effectiveness of individual tenure in generating productive growth. The productivity of land is presented as dependent, almost exclusively, by the land tenure, and, only secondarily, by the effects deriving by the historical and social specificities and the access to inputs, technologies and services.

On the other hand, “environmental” policies met the opposition of the population and they did not fulfil their objectives of improvement of the cultivation activities and of protection of the environment. Several are the criticisms expressed. First, the emphasis on the undisputable supremacy of a scientific and technical approach; second, the belief that such an approach is superior to whatever local knowledge and capability; third, that agricultural systems have had linear processes of evolution; fourth that only the individual (private) property is able to improving agriculture; and finally that the land tenure reform must be supported and to proceed in parallel with the transformations of agricultural methods and practices (Wolmer, Scoones 2000). These are questions which are still relevant: in particular in order to achieve more effective environmental policy the gap between natural and social science, and western versus local understandings must be reduced (Homewood 2004).

Today, conservation discussion has much to learn from history. Many ideas considered as intuitive must be regarded as baseless dogma. In particular, «the challenge of decolonizing the mind is urgent and of huge significance to the future of conservation» (Adams, Mulligan 2003: 44). Certainly, «the driving force behind much environmental policy in Africa is a set of powerful, widely perceived images of environmental change. They include overgrazing and the “desertification” of dryland, the widespread existence of a “woodfuel 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 their prevalence is generally 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: an integral part of the lexicon of development» (Leach, Mearns 1996: 1).

The quoted work raises a series of important questions concerning the history of development in Africa. However, according to other scholars (Woodhouse, Bernstein, Hulme, 2000; Bernstein, Woodhouse 2001), it does not adequately consider the historical transformations, in particular the widespread processes of commoditization and individualization of the land tenure, a sort of modern “enclosures” that reduce the access to the land for the poor and do not always favour dynamics of sustainable rural development and local democratization. Therefore, the transformations of the methods of use of lands and resources in the subsistence economy generated by commoditization processes in XX century Africa, together with the specific issues highlighted by environmental policies in different local contexts (Beinart, McGregor 2003: 16) need new studies and historiographical research.

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