

The Political Economy of Zimbabwe's Communal Land (1890–2024)

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Abstract

This article employs a political economy perspective to analyse the political and economic trajectories that have shaped communal land tenure in relation to land grabs and displacements since their colonial creation. Using an integrative literature review, the paper focusses on three definitive phases in Zimbabwe's history, that is, the colonial period (1890s up to 1980 when the country got its independence from Britain, the post-independence period from the 1980s up to the year 2000 when the country embarked on the Fast Track Land Reform Programme and finally the post fast track era (2000 to 2024). The paper brings to the fore the idea that the deliberate tenure insecurity of Zimbabwe's communal land is historically rooted in colonial primitive accumulation by dispossession and that the post-colonial state inherited communal land administration that allows for arbitrary dispossession of land from communal land holders.

Keywords

Communal land, Zimbabwe, customary tenure, displacements, land grabbing, political economy

Introduction

Communal land is critical to the lives of rural populations who depend on it for livelihoods and social mooring (Chadambuka and Helliker, 2024). Communal land is mainly rural land that is possessed by communities or distinct families and it is common in Africa, Asia and South America (Boone, 2017). Holders usually access land through lineages and, in principle, they do not have transferrable rights but usufruct rights as governed by customary tenure (Barajas et al., 2024). Customary tenure is deeply embedded in the colonial racial bifurcation of land and is predominant in Sub-Saharan Africa, covering about 90% of the land (Boone, 2017). Individual rights exist for purposes of cultivation and residents alongside commons for grazing, water sources and sacred places. Some countries, such as Zambia, Kenya and Mozambique, accord statutory recognition to customary tenure that is similar to freehold.

With reference to Zimbabwe, Cousins (1993: 21) defines 'communal tenure' as 'a historically variable form of communal property which in the Communal Lands of Zimbabwe currently

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includes both individual proprietorship over arable land and homestead site, and common property with respect to grazing, woodland, water and other resources'. Hence, the only communal dimension of communal land tenure has involved collective access to grazing land and natural resources, as usage of homestead sites and arable land (for crops) is on a household basis. Ultimately, these areas fall within the realm of state-land. However, this land is mostly unregistered and therefore considered empty and susceptible to grabbing, usually with the involvement of the state, and in the process jeopardising the lives and livelihoods of the rural poor (Borras et al 2011). Colonialism marked the epitome of land grabbing from indigenous populations globally, and the 2007–2009 land grabs revived large-scale land appropriations resulting in massive displacement of communal landholders in the developing world (Borras et al 2011; Hall, 2011), Zimbabwe is not an exception. Zimbabwe's communal areas were once considered relatively secure, at least for the past two decades after independence (Matondi and Decker, 2011). However, contemporary land grabs invoke a rethinking of communal land tenure security in Zimbabwe. The large scale communal land acquisition of Chisumbanje ethanol project starting from 2008 to date, stands as one such example where thousands of hectares of land are being expropriated from communal landholders, prejudicing their lives and livelihoods in the process (Matondi and Nhliziyo, 2015). Hundreds of families were also displaced from Chiadzwa diamond fields in 2008, while some families continue to be displaced from their lands owing to the critical minerals rush, especially lithium (Chadambuka et al., 2024a; Matanzima, 2024). Others are displaced by urbanisation, especially in peri-urban areas (Chadambuka et al 2024b; Zamchiya et al 2021). Reports also reveal that the government of Zimbabwe has parcelled 7.5 million hectares of land, including communal land, to Arabian investors for carbon offsetting.

While literature on these issues is emerging, it is imperative to note that much literature on communal land in general including communal land grabs in general has been overshadowed by the 2000s Fast Track Land Reform Programme as scholars on land in Zimbabwe diverted their focus to the former commercial farms. For instance, one of Zimbabwe's leading land scholars, Sam Moyo, gives a detailed analysis of the political economy of land redistribution in Zimbabwe (Moyo, 2000b). Therefore, there has been a general neglect of communal land in general and communal land grabs in particular in Zimbabwean studies and specifically on studies that offer the political and economic dynamics shaping communal land in Zimbabwe. Yet the post 2000s dynamics show the need for a comprehensive revisit of communal land security threats and ensuing land grabs propagated by large-scale agriculture, mining and urbanisation. This study contributes towards filling this gap through offering a comprehensive analysis of the political economy of communal land from the colonial era up to the year 2024.

The paper offers a periodised analysis of the political economy of communal land in Zimbabwe and it seeks to answer the following questions: what were the political and economic rationales behind the creation of communal land in Zimbabwe? Why has communal and been considered secure and how and when did this change? What is the future of communal land in Zimbabwe, given the contemporary escalated communal land grabs and what is the role of the state and capital in all these dynamics? The article therefore details the structural arrangements (including land tenure, agricultural production, custom, chiefly authorities and land grabs) that constitute what is specific about communal areas (and the former Native Reserves/Tribal Trust Lands). It then offers a periodisation of the history of these areas, namely, under colonialism (1890s–1980), the early post-colonial period (1980–2000), and lastly, the post-2000 to 2024 period. In doing so, the discussion brings to light the importance of communal land to Zimbabwe's (rural) population and how the wider political and economic forces have shaped communal land tenure over these periods. The article, therefore, lays a crucial background for scholars with an interest in land and agrarian studies in general and communal land in particular. The article is structured this way; the next section

discusses the political economy of land and it is followed by a brief discussion of communal land globally and in Africa. The next section delves into the periodisation of the political economy dynamics shaping communal land in Zimbabwe, this is followed by a discussion section and the last section concludes the article.

The political economy of land

This paper analyses communal land in Zimbabwe using a political economy lens. The political economy examines the role of government in a market society and the extent to which political processes are subject to economic dynamics (Borras et al 2011). Central to the political economy are questions, including who owns what, who does what, who gets what and what do they do with the surplus wealth that has been created? (Bernstein, 2010). Borras et al (2011: 211), task scholars to further ask, what do they do to each other and how are political changes shaped by dynamic ecologies, and vice versa? The political economy is therefore very useful in understanding land issues worldwide (Borras et al., 2011: 211; Hall, 2004), including in Zimbabwe (Moyo, 2000b; Moyana 1984).

The political economy of land analyses how land is owned and demarcated allowing for, and defining its access, control and use (NELGA, 2021). Demarcation can be achieved violently, for instance, through invasion, eviction, military intervention or robbery. Economic needs for land at times shape how land is demarcated and owned. The state as the authoritative entity may use its power to override how land is owned and demarcated, hence land demarcation and ownership are political and embedded in various power relations. For instance, colonial administrations expropriated fertile land as a way of forcing Africans as labourers into a settler economy (Arrighi, 1967; Hall 2004). Demarcation facilitates land allocation through titles or leasing with the state responsible for the commodification of land through privatisation, titling and registration (NELGA, 2021). Commodification of land through the market thus allows those with capital and influence to acquire more land, with the poor and other marginalised populations, including ethnic minorities, women and the youth often left out at best and impoverished at worst, as the rich become richer.

The state's facilitation of land acquisition for powerful corporates in the developing world often occurs within a context of weak governance and neoliberal-inspired state withdrawal, making it easy for foreign investors to usurp control over land markets (Barajas et al., 2024). The land is therefore parcelled on the pretext of development for urbanisation, mining, large-scale agriculture, dam construction and lately, carbon markets. The land is often acquired without the participation and prior informed consent of landholders who are often powerless, vulnerable and poor, making such acquisitions land grabs (Borras et al., 2011). This happened through colonial primitive accumulation and also through the late 2000s 'land rush' which ushered in a 'new wave of scramble for Africa' (NELGA, 2021).

Customary land is mainly targeted, resulting in landlessness, loss of livelihoods, cultural capital, water and natural resources for millions of indigenous people (Borras et al., 2011). Such land deals are justified on the pretext that the land is 'underutilised' and 'empty' and this narrative is popularised by global capital, including the World Bank (Hall, 2011). In reality, this land is important to the local people who claim it. Communal land is administered under customary land rights, which are barely recognised, considered public property and therefore weak and susceptible to state and powerful corporate land grabs (Barajas et al., 2024). Communal landholders are not passive and they engender various forms of resistance and contestations. In this article, focus is paid on how the political economy has shaped communal land grabs in three phases of Zimbabwe's history.

Methodology

This qualitative study is based on secondary data drawn from an integrative review of literature relevant to the political economy of communal land grabbing in Zimbabwe. The aim is to provide a holistic synthesis of this fragmented literature to enable an integrative understanding of state-society relations in relation to communal land. Primary keywords were used to search for relevant publications on electronic databases including Web of Science, Science Direct, Google Scholar and Scopus. Academic journals, books, book chapters, theses, working papers and newsletters were used to gather data. Keywords used to find literature for inclusion include *the political economy of land*, *communal land*, *customary tenure*, *communal land grabbing* and *communal land in Zimbabwe*. Articles with abstracts on speaking to those keywords were selected and relevant full articles were further selected. Literature covering other geographical areas beyond Africa was also useful in framing the study's Zimbabwean scope. However, most of the data used focused on Zimbabwe. The periodised and historical nature of the study implied that what may be regarded as old or mature literature was also pertinent since some of those texts remain useful seminal works. Hence, some texts from as far as the 1950s offered valuable information required by the study. Recent texts from as late as 2024 were also vital for the periodisation. Data gathered were used to generate periodised themes, which were also used to present and analyse findings. All of the texts were written in English.

Settler economy and the racial bifurcation of land: Colonial Native Reserves and Tribal Trust Lands (1890s–1980)

This section chronicles the colonial political and economic forces and strategies that led to the establishment and attempted consolidation of communal lands in what is present-day Zimbabwe.

Primitive accumulation through dispossession, racial segregation and the creation and demarcation of Native Reserves

The colonial land political economy involved the dual (yet inextricably linked) creation of arid (African) communal and fertile (white) commercial farmland, which led to complex processes of semi-proletarianisation and full proletarianisation of Africans while ensuring a viable and productive white-driven colonial economy (Rutherford, 2013). In doing so, the settler colonial administration forcefully displaced Africans from fertile lands into Native Reserves, institutionalising several legal instruments that effectively ceased land from Africans. First was the Lippert Concession of 1889, which preceded the actual 1890 colonial occupation of Rhodesia¹ (Chimhowu and Woodhouse, 2008). It effectively allowed white settlers, through primitive accumulation, to forcibly annex land from the indigenous people after the original colonial administrator (British South African Company, BSAC) bought concessions from the British Monarch.

At first, the Reserves emerged as a 'temporary makeshift' arrangement in anticipation that the African peasantry would be eventually absorbed into the European settler economy (Drinkwater, 1991:38). The first reserves created were the sandy, tsetse fly-infested Gwaai and Shangai Reserves following the 1894 Matabeleland Order in Council (Drinkwater, 1991). Subsequently, the Native Reserves Order in Council of 1898 formed the basis of the creation of all future Reserves – for autochthonous black Africans (Mujere, 2012). By 1914, with whites accounting for only 3% of the population, Africans occupied 24 million acres (Native Reserves), the BSAC (48 million acres), individual white settlers 13 million acres, and private companies 9 million acres (Government of Zimbabwe, 2002). Over time, a permanent, racially based land system would emerge.

The Native Affairs Department (NAD) was then set up in the 1890s to oversee rural communities in the Reserves. Native Commissioners (NCs) were the local representatives of the department and they were authorised to allocate land in the Reserves (Drinkwater 1991). As per the overarching colonial project, NCs employed a system of ‘benevolent despotism’ embedded in a white ‘civilisation’ and ‘protection’ mission over blacks (Munro, 1998: 55). Traditional (chiefly) authorities were also responsible for everyday administration and management of subjects in the Reserves under the auspices of customary law and they could allocate land.

An open market for certain tracts of land existed outside Native Reserves. As well, Africans could rent European land under the provisions of the Private Locations Ordinance of 1908 during the early stages of colonialism (Rennie, 1978). However, land prices and rentals coupled with discriminatory practices meant that Africans could not access considerable portions of land in these ways. By 1920, Africans had only managed to purchase 49,996 acres compared to 31,000,000 118 acres for whites (Europeans) (Youé, 2002: 575). In the early 1930s, segregationist legislation reinforced the permanence of Native Reserves through the Land Apportionment Act of 1930, based on recommendations of the Morris Carter Commission appointed by the new Responsible Government (which took over control of the colony from the BSAC in 1923). This legislation subdivided African land into Native Reserves and Native Purchase areas under freehold title (21 million acres and 8 million acres respectively), while allocating the European population 49 million acres (Nyambara, 2005: 280). Cognisant of the segregationist thrust of the Land Apportionment Act, a Rhodesian politician (Humphrey Wightwick) was in the 1950s quoted as saying: ‘to the south of us we have a country that practices a thing called apartheid. Here, in Southern Rhodesia we do not speak Afrikaans, so we pronounce it “Land Apportionment Act”’. (quoted in Youé, 2002: 576).

The Land Apportionment act effected the forced eviction of Africans from newly demarcated fertile European land to tsetse fly-infested Reserve areas acting as buffers for white land and to forest areas where marauding wild animals existed (Marowa, 2015; Nyambara, 2005). In general, the reconfigured Native Reserves were deliberately located in arid areas under harsh climatic conditions, making it difficult for Africans to practice agriculture. This ensured poor agricultural yields, forcing Africans to provide labour (as proletarians) to white settlers in farms, mines and urban areas (Arrighi, 1967). Fear of growing competition (which was evident in the 1920s) between emerging white farmers and African farmers in terms of supplying agricultural markets added to the concerns of the colonial state (Cousins, 1993). The colonial state provided only minimal infrastructure and services in the Reserves (Marowa, 2015).

Consolidating the reserves and European crown land divide: forced modernisation inspired centralisation schemes and the rise of African discontentment and nationalism

Besides establishing and reconfiguring the areas designated as Reserves, the state sought to reorganise the Reserves internally through ‘modernisation’ or the ‘rising tide for development’ (Drinkwater, 1991: 39). This in large part entailed the introduction of ‘centralisation’ schemes on a coercive basis, including up until the 1950s. In 1927, the Native Affairs Act was passed and it enabled NCs to promulgate natural resource conservation and to improve grazing and cropping land in the reserves (Youé, 2002). In reorganising homestead, cropping and grazing areas through ‘technical’ land-use management, the centralisation schemes were supposed to increase the population-carrying capacity of the Reserves, thereby warding off Africans’ demand for more land.

Centralisation was 'the first state policy to intervene directly in the nature of the lineage tenure system', and it effectively introduced the rigid demarcation and separation of grazing, residential and agricultural plots in the Reserves (Drinkwater, 1991: 55). This involved a process of the forced relocation of people within the Reserves in line with the official demarcations, with homesteads centralised in villages and not dispersed and apart. This also meant that any shifting cultivation in the Reserves ground to a halt, with sons accessing land from their fathers' demarcated plots. The land reorganisation left 'rich' agricultural entrepreneurs with smaller plots, thereby effectively reducing their production capacity. This invited calls and demands for more land from the autochthonous villagers (Cousins, 1993).

The so-called conservation dimension of the centralisation schemes involved regularising the use of land and natural resources through the introduction of scientific and technical planning and management in the Reserves. The technical management programmes of the 1940s, for instance, involved the compulsory construction of contour lines and rain drainage strips for containing soil erosion (Fontein, 2011; Munro, 1998). As well, Africans were forced to destock their livestock in a move that was supposedly designed to control overgrazing. These moves were loathed by Africans who found themselves looking for employment to complement their agricultural activities and meet the prevailing tax obligations and this helped boost the much-needed African labour for the settler economy.

Later, in terms of the Native Land Husbandry Act (NLHA) of 1951, the colonial government pursued land rezoning and centralisation even more vigorously, leading to further destocking and limitations on land plot sizes (Brown, 1959). By 1956, because of dwindling cattle stock, African farmers 'had no means to manure the land' (Drinkwater, 1991:71), while over 100,000 African households in Reserves were left landless (Chimhowu and Woodhouse, 2008) because, for various reasons, they were excluded from the land demarcation exercises. Meanwhile, with the increasing transition to wage-labour on white farms, squatters and sharecroppers were being forcibly removed to Reserve areas (Nyambara, 2005). The implementation of NLHA was unevenly applied across the countryside, and it fuelled African resentment, leading to organised political movements against the colonial government. Thus, 'the irony of the [N]LHA is that it began as a mechanism of social control and ended as a catalyst of liberation' (Munro 1998:98). In response, the settler government sought to make use of the chiefly authorities to counter and contain the resistance, albeit unsuccessfully, with implementation of the NHLA abandoned in 1961 and replaced by the more 'conciliatory' Tribal Trust Lands Act in 1967.

Under this legislation, the colonial state tried to reinforce the hold of chiefly authorities, as trustees of the land, in and over the now-called Tribal Trust Lands (TTLs), as a strategic move to ward off the growing tide of nationalism. These Tribal Land Authorities, known in the vernacular as *majengetavhu* (custodians of the soil) and comprising chiefs, area headmen and others nominated by the chief, were granted control over the use and occupation of land in TTLs (Nyambara, 2001). In supposedly recognising the supremacy of traditional authority over land, this legislation thus bestowed tribal authority with powers over the allocation of land for agricultural or residential purposes. Any land shortages in the TTLs became the responsibility of these local authorities. In some places, this led to some 'squatters' and 'aliens' taking advantage of the land allocation process by purchasing land from traditional authorities (Chimhowu and Woodhouse, 2008: 21).

Traditional jurisdiction in TTLs was further embedded by the African Law and Tribal Courts Act of 1969, which granted judicial powers over customary law to traditional authorities. The colonial state's 'traditionalism' formed the basis for the 1969 Land Tenure Act which replaced the 1930 Land Apportionment Act by further strengthening the segregatory approach to the racial land divide, and in the process, traditional authorities became an integral part of the cultural political economy. This act became the state's 'last-ditch constitutional stand on racial land apportionment'

(Munro, 1998: 162). Along this ‘traditionalism’ was a paradigm shift away from centralisation to an (officially) participatory, self-help approach to rural-based community development in the TTLs without any coercive undertones. This coincided with the emergence of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in 1962, as the successor to the Native Affairs Department, with development officers assigned to facilitate TTL socio-economic development.

Africans disgruntlement and the liberation war

All these initiatives were disrupted in the 1970s with the emergence and intensification of the guerrilla war, which prevailed across most of the countryside. In mobilising rural villagers as part of the guerrilla war strategy, the TTLs became the centre of guerrilla activity from which attacks were launched on white farms and rural infrastructural installations more broadly. Spirit mediums, through whom the ancestors communicated with the living, became involved in mediating the relationship between villagers and guerrillas and in offering legitimisation (on behalf of the ancestral chiefs of the past) for one key aim of the guerrilla war – namely, the return of land dispossessed under colonialism (Cheater, 1990).

While the colonial state sought to recognise and install chiefly authorities in Reserves/TTLs, spirit mediums never received such recognition. However, they became more significant than chiefs with the rise of nationalist fervour in the 1960s and into the 1970s, with colonially reconstructed chiefs often marginalised in the process (Lan, 1985). Overall, then, the living chiefs lost significant legitimacy in the eyes of TTL villagers. Though at times coerced by the guerrillas, TTL villagers supported the guerrillas throughout the war, supplying them with food, clothes, morale and intelligence (Lan, 1985). The protracted war brought to an end the white settler political domination.

Communal areas in post-colonial Zimbabwe (1980s–2000)

Post-independence and the war promises expectations

The new post-colonial government which came to power in 1980 was expected to prioritise the reclamation of land dispossessed over a period of a century. Land redistribution to autochthones in particular would address the major grievance of land, which sparked the liberation war in the first place, therefore fulfilling the promises made during the war to TTL villagers (Cheater, 1990). Part of the land redistribution strategy was also to decongest the (now) communal areas (Moyo, 2001). The communal land population surged from 1.1 million in 1930 to 6.5 million by the year 2000, thereby creating a significant need for land redistribution (Moyo et al., 2000). The 1982 census also revealed that 75% of Zimbabwe’s population resided in the rural areas (Munro, 1998: 228).

In pursuing its mandate, the new Zimbabwean state sought as well to bring about local government reforms that would incorporate the communal areas into the post-colonial dispensation. This would entail introducing liberal-democratic civil forms of governance which, simultaneously, involved doing away with the colonially reconstructed chieftainship system (Moyo 2000a, Murisa 2018).

Competing administrative authorities

The Communal Land Act of 1981 (amended in 2002) was enacted to formally change the colonially constructed TTLs into ‘communal’ areas. Together with the District Councils Act of 1982, the Communal Land Act entrusted communal land and all unimproved resources on it to local

democratic government (District Councils), marginalising traditional leadership in the process (O'Flaherty, 1998). Effectively, the District Councils Act formally transferred authority to allocate rural land from 242 African Councils (customary chiefs) to 55 elected Rural District Councils (RDCs), weakening at least institutionally, traditional authority (Munro, 1998: 245). The move was politically convenient and significant for the new black government since it enabled the end of what the ruling party deemed as the white settler government's traditional chiefs, many of whom were blamed for supporting the white Rhodesian Front government and its security forces during the 1970s (Drinkwater, 1991; Murisa 2018; Nyambara 2001).

However, in practice, chiefs remained of some significance in the everyday lives of communal area villagers, though not recognised officially. The uneven and sometimes incomplete implementation of the new system of local government provided a degree of leeway for unsanctioned traditional authorities to continue exercising jurisdiction over communal land, even reducing the District Council's office in many instances to a mere rubber-stamper of locally made decisions at the village level (Munro, 1998). Chiefs thus continued to wield considerable power and authority over 'their subjects', if only in a clandestine manner. Further, communal villagers often chose to approach traditional courts on land-related matters, ignoring the District Councils.

Likewise, communal land seekers continued to approach traditional authorities when it came to trying to access land in communal areas. As Marowa (2015:133) argues, 'In the traditional setup, authority over the land is claimed to be shared between *mambo* (chief) and the *mhondoro* (lion spirit) . . . Policy [around local government reforms] cannot give them a spiritual and emotional attachment to the land, it cannot make the landscape symbolic but cultural beliefs do'. The ongoing spiritual connections between land and chiefs had vibrant cultural embeddedness amongst communal villagers, which tended to trump any local government arrangements emanating from the central state.

Despite this, the District Councils Act did give some (partial) recognition to chiefs and customary law (Nyambara, 2001). The legislation was also meant to consolidate communal land in the hands of indigenous Zimbabweans only as it directed local authorities to 'have regard to customary law and grant land only to those people who have a customary right to it' (Cousins, 1993:11). In a bid to bring about government decentralisation, the Prime Minister's Directive (of 1984–1985) provided for the formation of hierarchically-arranged elected representative bodies at different community levels, including at village level (comprising 100 families and an estimated 1,000 people), ward levels (comprising of six villages) and district level (Drinkwater, 1991). These led to the establishment of Village Development Committees (VIDCOs), Ward Development Committees (WADCOs) and District Development Committees (DDCs). The development committees were composed of elected members who were responsible for defining local development needs (Alexander, 2006). The formation of these elected committees (under the guise of 'modernisation' and 'development') reinforced the replacement of traditional chiefs, who were now viewed as being equivalent to traditional 'feudal' lords who had no place in a 'post-colonial modern' nation-state (Andersson, 1999; Nkomo, 2015). The new government claimed that tribal authorities were incapacitated when it came to handling complex technical issues pertaining to land allocation, therefore opting for 'educated' technocrats in line with its modernisation drive (Alexander, 2006).

The Development committees also allowed the ruling ZANU-PF party to control the rural places as the leaders were often appointed on partisan grounds (Nkomo, 2015). However, VIDCOs and WADCOs never became fully functional and effective as decentralised development agencies. As well, like in the case of District Councils, their responsibilities were sometimes practically usurped by traditional authorities, thereby creating two parallel governance structures (Alexander, 2006). Even in the original demarcation of VIDCO and WADC) boundaries, communal villagers

claimed that the government was 'trying to press them into artificial social and political units' with minimal local meaning, as they disregarded kinship ties as developed over time (Munro, 1998: 246).

Overall, chiefs regularly blocked or resisted the government's attempt to withdraw their power over communal land, expressing their discontent about the government in effect hijacking their authority (Nkomo, 2015). This in part explains the fact that chiefs, headmen and village heads became notorious for engaging in illegal land markets, including allocating land to 'outsiders' in exchange for money (Munro, 1998). In seeking to defend their authority over land matters, chiefs received significant support from communal villagers and even during colonial times, some chiefs defied and resisted colonial authority (Cousins, 1993; Moyana, 1984). Even for communal villagers, the post-colonial government's decision to alienate traditional authorities in land administration became controversial.

Worsening communal land pressure

The advent of independence in 1980 also saw the new nationalist government allowing freer movement in both rural and urban areas and, in the process, reversing colonial restrictions. In the context of the confusing mix of governance structures emerging in communal areas, waves of internal migration took place as indigenes migrated to communal areas they deemed more fertile and less congested. This entailed migrating to districts or villages which were not considered their place of 'origin'. Marowa (2015) reports, for instance, that Mavhitori or Karangas from Masvingo Province migrated as far as Rengwe communal areas in Mashonaland West Province soon after 1980. In addition, Ndebeles, Karangas and other indigene groups migrated to Gokwe after 1980 (Nyambara, 2001). The movements resulted in significant land clearance for agricultural and residential purposes on grazing land, thereby creating even more pressure on communal land. In other instances, a squatter problem arose in communal areas, with the in-migration squatters claiming that they were occupying land because their ancestors were buried there.

Even within particular communal areas, some landless or land-short autochthones took advantage of the new-found 'freedom' to move onto grazing lands (designated as such by the 1951 NLHA). More land seekers moved into the communal areas and some resettled on grazing lands, a move which sparked controversies and local land disputes (Drinkwater, 1991). Overall, this resulted in ethnically mixed and even polarised communal areas as the politics of belonging amongst autochthonous newcomers led to a series of contestations (Marowa, 2015). By 1985, government reports were inundated with discussions about communal land shortages due to 'population pressure, increased land degradation, the reduction in commons, growing numbers of livestock and continuing subdivision of land through inheritance' (Drinkwater, 1991: 91).

Increased alarm about communal land scarcity, squatter problems and environmental degradation emerging from unplanned and chaotic land management resulted in land-use reform internal to communal areas. In response, colonial-style reorganisation took place, specifically the villagisation programme whereby agriculture extension officers demarcated residential, grazing and arable land (almost in the same NLHA fashion albeit with less use of coercion) (Munro, 1998). This villagisation programme might have momentarily eased pressure on the need to acquire and redistribute white commercial farms, but the squeeze on communal land continued unabated (Drinkwater, 1991).

Though at first seeking to undercut the authority of chiefs, by the late 1980s the government had started to rethink its treatment of 'traditional' centres of power in communal areas. Nkomo (2015) refers to the late 1980s to late 1990s period as a time of 'courtship' between the government and traditional chiefs. Realising the political capital of chiefs, the ZANU-PF government went on a

charm offensive, referring to chiefs as ‘guardians of our culture’, ‘pillars of social cohesion and stability’, ‘partners in development’ and more importantly, ‘custodians of the land’ (Nkomo, 2015: 47). Government even apologised for withdrawing chiefly power over land administration, and it gradually restored traditional authority over the land. Thereafter, whenever new chiefs were installed, the soil was poured on their hands and the new chief would hold the soil in his hands to signify that the ‘chief was now in control of the land which he held in trust of his people’ (Nkomo, 2015: 56). In an effort to formalise and institutionalise traditional authorities, and their role in land allocation, the government passed the Traditional Leaders Act of 1998 which recognised the role of traditional leaders in land allocation. Traditional chiefs’ land allocations were, however, subject to approval by the District Council, implying that the Council still officially transcended the chief’s authority. Lists of people in need of communal land, as formulated by chiefs, were often ignored by District Councils (Munro, 1998). In the end, then, this reassertion of chiefly power did not end challenges of cooperation as well as conflicts between chiefs and elected councillors (and District Councils). Once again, traditional authorities became agents of the cultural political economy, this time in an independent state.

During the 1980s, under a strong developmental thrust, the government sought to reconstruct the war-torn communal areas and to modernise these areas and rural infrastructure was prioritised through the District Development Fund (DDF). Developmentalism was in large part abandoned under the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme of the 1990s (ESAP). Because ESAP increased levels of unemployment and poverty in urban areas and urban-to-rural remittances declined (Mudege, 2007). The devastating effects of ESAP resulted in urban migrants returning to their communal areas, placing further pressure on communal land (Makura-Paradza, 2010). This also caused the further transformation of grazing land into cropping land. Over twenty years, from 1980 to 2000, cultivated communal land area expanded from just below 1 million hectares to 1.5 million hectares (Moyo, 2000a: 33). By the year 2000 communal land covered 16 million hectares of land, occupied by more than 6.5 million people (over half of Zimbabwe’s population) (Moyo et al. 2000: 182). All this was taking place without the Zimbabwean state undertaking a meaningful land redistribution programme.

Communal land post Fast-Track Land Reform programme (2000–2024)

Communal areas as political capital

By the year 2000, communal areas (now with the support of chiefly rulers) had become a critical support base for the ruling ZANU-PF party, despite the negative implications of ESAP (Sithole et al., 2003). The significance of this strategic political constituency was brought to the fore with the emergence of a new, competitive opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in late 1999, and the possible threat it posed to ZANU-PF rule. It soon became clear that the MDC was gaining a stronghold foothold in urban areas as well as in large swathes of rural Matabeleland. As the MDC arose on the political front, the ongoing challenge of land shortages in communal areas was being expressed throughout much of the second half of the 1990s, with a diverse array of isolated occupations by communal area villagers of white farms and other land-holdings (Rutherford, 2013).

With the emergence of the nationwide land occupations in early 2000 and the subsequent fast-track programme from mid-2000, alongside the strong performance of the MDC in the June 2000 elections, ZANU-PF sought to consolidate its power within the communal areas. Because the vast majority of new fast-track farmers were ZANU-PF supporters, the ruling party considered it

necessary to focus on retaining its hold over communal areas, including by inhibiting the penetration of MDC into these spaces, and in the process, land became politics (Moore, 2001) in its form as a resource for political power and control. This entailed a fluctuating combination of intimidation and violence as well as patronage (Makura-Paradza, 2010) through the manipulation and politicisation of state resources (including even drought relief and humanitarian assistance more broadly). In the worst scenarios, clashes between opposition and ruling party supporters resulted in beatings, torture, destruction of property and acts of arson (Steen, 2011).

In the meantime, the state arranged to consolidate its hold over chiefs via political patronage. For instance, in January 2000, chiefs' allowances were increased from \$2000 to \$10,000 Zimbabwean dollars, per chief, an unprecedented 400% increment (Nkomo, 2015). As has become broader tendency, chiefs are provided with luxuries, including being given brand-new vehicles and prioritisation in the rural electrification programme Murisa (2018). This partially accounts for chiefs' support of the state in instances involving communal land displacements (Matanzima, 2024). Seats in the Zimbabwean Senate are also reserved for chiefs.

In terms of the power struggles between District Councils and chiefly authorities, it would appear that (in many communal areas) the balance of power has swung heavily towards chiefs in terms of control over land. For instance, in Svosve communal lands, 'in late 2005 the VIDCOs had disappeared and each "village," or more precisely "kraal" of 20–25 households, was governed in land matters by an appointed "kraalhead"' (Chimhowu and Woodhouse. 2008: 9). Chiefs though are not the only patriarchs governing in rural areas, as war veterans and ZANU-PF youth have also asserted their quest for recognition including in communal areas (Nkomo. 2015). At times, war veterans have taken it upon themselves to interfere in land allocation in communal areas (Makura-Paradza, 2010; Sithole et al. 2003). Zimbabwe's present-day communal lands are administered through a panoply of legislation which includes the Communal Lands Act (CLA) of 2002, the Traditional Leaders Act (TLA) of 2001 and the Rural District Council Act (RDCA) of 2002.

Increased communal land pressure and land grabs

Though fast-track reform was expected to decongest the communal areas, this has not taken place on a significant scale if at all, with ongoing communal land population pressure (Steen, 2011). Other disruptive events such as the 2005 Operation *Murambatsvina* (Clean Up Campaign), which involved the destruction of illegal housing and business structures in urban centres, also undercut the lives of low-income working people. These events led to internal displacement and, in seeking some form of refuge, migration from urban to communal areas occurred on an unprecedented scale (Ingwani, 2015; Steen 2011). More generally, the government has used communal areas as a 'dumping ground for squatters, vagrants, informal sector workers and prostitutes rounded up in urban areas' (Makura-Paradza, 2010: 74). Ongoing decline of the national economy, including record-breaking inflation in 2008, has compelled indigenes movement back to their communal homes (Steen, 2011).

It is also the case that many of those who benefited from FTLRP did not abandon entirely and permanently their communal homes. They have established split families with some members still residing in communal areas and others on fast-track farms (Sithole et al., 2003). Insecure fast-track land tenure regimes (particularly on A1 farms) made communal homesteads a reliable safety net to fall back on in the event of evictions from fast-track farms or failure to farm productively. Thus, some A1 beneficiaries left either children or relatives to mind their homesteads, including some of their livestock (Matondi and Dekker, 2011). Indeed, some of these fast-track beneficiaries have since returned to their communal areas for a variety of reasons (Makura-Paradza, 2010). As well,

some beneficiaries (albeit in small numbers) have permanently abandoned their communal stands, paving the way for new land seekers but mostly from the same family or village (Matondi and Dekker, 2011). Rapid urbanisation of peri-urban communal land spaces through vernacular land markets as well as formal commodification and privatisation by RDCs is also exerting pressure on communal land and sparking various forms of conflicts (Chadambuka et al 2024b; Ingwani, 2015). Emerging literature also show how mining in general (Chadambuka et al., 2024a) and Energy Transition Minerals (ETMs) extractivism in particular (Matanzima, 2024) is also threatening communal land tenure. Overall, these processes contribute to increasing land pressure in communal areas countrywide. Further, they show that communal areas remain important sites for lives and livelihoods and communal land grabbing only increases rural precarity.

Discussion

The study shows that communal land was intentionally created as a preserve for autochthonous Africans, allowing for subsistence farming. Traditional authorities and customary law also served as critical agents of the cultural political economy. They were also meant to serve as reserve labour for settler mining, farming and manufacturing industries, and that resonates with similar motives across Southern Africa (Hall, 2004). For almost a century, white settlers enjoyed the vast fertile land through constantly demarcating and institutionalising land-grabbing Africans. Colonialism also thrived through weakening African agricultural production capacities. The continuous land grabs finally drove Africans to the fringes, forcing them to wage a war of liberation.

The post-colonial administration also inherited a colonial political economy that considered communal land as an arena for political domination and control, through amongst other strategies, using traditional authority. Contemporary communal areas are deliberately left without secure tenure to allow for the state's arbitrariness appropriation of land whenever it deems necessary, thus communal landholders are not very different from squatters. The weak governance system coupled with corruption has rendered communal land susceptible to both foreign and domestic land grabs through mining, large-scale agriculture, carbon markets and urbanisation. The market economy is therefore exacerbating the already precarious lives of communal landholders who depend on land for so many reasons. There is therefore a need to rethink and ensure a political economy that seriously considers the plight and lives of communal land holders including the role of rights and social justice.

Conclusion

The political economy helps to understand the rationale behind communal land tenure and it also allows for the adoption of policies that help preserve the interests of precarious communal land holders. Throughout Zimbabwe's defining historical periods, communal land has been used as a land and labour reserve for the state and capital. Traditional authorities have also acted as agents of cultural political economy, propagating state control for both colonial and post-colonial governments. Land pressure also increased throughout the three periods, starting with the colonial era. The post-colonial government eased movements in the communal areas, allowing people to access land in districts that were not of their origin, resulting in land pressure in some areas. Weak governance and corruption are also allowing land grabbing to thrive. Thus, there is a need for more empirical studies that delve into contemporary communal land grabs, and possibly show how these resonate with global, glocal and historical trajectories. Such studies should also be policy-oriented and intentional in protecting communal landholders from arbitrary land grabs.

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Note

1. Rhodesia is the colonial name for Zimbabwe

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