“LIKE LEAVES FALLEN BY WIND”: RESILIENCE, REMEMBRANCE AND THE RESTORATION OF LANDSCAPES IN CENTRAL MOZAMBIQUE

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ABSTRACT

This study demonstrates how peoples in Gorongosa District, central Mozambique, have restored livelihoods and landscapes after recurrent large-scale perturbances including drought, warfare, and population displacement. It is based on fourteen months of fieldwork conducted between October 2001 and November 2002. Methods included 1) participant observation, 2) interviews with villagers, government administrators, and environmental managers, 3) a household survey, and 4) archival research.

The study examines the reproduction and transformation of environmental management practices, focusing on the role of social memory. Particularly, it reveals that shared memories of past landscapes and livelihoods structure restoration efforts in non-equilibrious social-ecological systems. Since the arrival of the Portuguese more than 500 years ago, social organization in the Zambezi Valley has sometimes been described as widely dispersed and fragmented and, at other times, as part of highly integrated political economies. Historians and anthropologists have interpreted the historical fluctuation
between these two formations as a result of the recurring disintegration of centralized political economies in response to drought. I argue that household coping strategies ranged along a continuum from hierarchy to heterarchy and from diversification to specialization. They were structured at any given time and place, not by environmental crisis, but through collective memories that legitimized one coping strategy over others.

During the early colonial period, from the 1920s to the 1940s, colonial rulers attempted to centralize households in the aftermath of disaster by evoking social memories of past forms of political integration. The late colonial state continued forced centralization and specialization in the name of capitalist modernization and colonial conservation from the 1940s to 1975. After the 1975 revolution, the independent state did much the same in the name of socialist modernization and disaster management. At each stage, centralization has increased the vulnerability of households to environmental shock by restricting local coping strategies. In the decade following the end of the civil war in 1992, different local, regional, and global actors have produced a variety of competing visions of restoration of Gorongosa’s livelihoods and landscapes. I conclude that these struggles are structured by social memories embodied in ritual, emplaced on the landscape, and constructed in narrative.