

Article

African views of the land: a research agenda

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Introduction

I want to situate this paper in two contexts. The first is the presentation I made four years ago at the House of World Cultures in Berlin during a conference on African Modernities. I had been invited to talk on 'Modernity and Landscape'. It was obvious what was expected of me. At that point the view was that Africans themselves, living *within* their environments, did not have notions of landscape. It was only when colonial outsiders came and hovered above the land that they could impose on it the idea of 'landscape', of the picturesque and the sublime. Europeans in Africa created landscapes by moving mountains, felling trees and diverting streams.² They painted landscapes and wrote poetry about them. In short, landscape was something that colonialism did to Africa. Despite all its reference back to nineteenth century European ideas, the making of landscape in Africa was part of the modernising process.³

Now, I did not want to challenge this particular *definition* of landscape – ie a perception of the aesthetic qualities of environment. And I had written myself about European making of African landscapes (Ranger 1977). But I did feel perverse. It seemed to me that enough had already been said about European appropriations and creations. In Berlin, by contrast, I sought to maintain that Africans themselves perceived landscape – that they possessed and expressed aesthetic appreciation and invested their environments with moral and symbolic qualities. I sought to show that modernisation in Africa was more a matter of clashing concepts of landscape and the attempted replacement of one by the other than it was a matter of introducing a totally new, alien and distancing concept.

When I gave the Berlin lecture I had not come across JM Coetzee's *White Writing* (1988). But reading Coetzee provides the second context for what I want to say here. Coetzee says he will not attempt the impossible – ie to

recover and express African notions of landscape. Even if an African were to do so, 'in order to convince the European that he appreciates Africa he must first give evidence of a degree of alienation from it: once he is thus alienated he can no longer claim to be by nature at one with it'. Going on to discuss European writing, he compares a school which sees South Africa as a land of farms and herds and another which sees it as a land of deserts and rocks. This second 'literature of the empty landscape is a literature of the failure of the historical imagination'. The poet 'speaks but the stones are silent ... refusing to emerge into meaningfulness as a landscape of signs'. After all, 'what relation is it possible for a man to have with rock and sun? What response do rocks and stones make to the poet who urges them to utter their true names? As we might expect, it is silence' (Coetzee 1988:7-9).

Reading Coetzee, I took this as a challenge. After all, I have recently published a book whose very title, *Voices From the Rocks*, implies that one can carry out the impossible; can hear the voices of the stones; and understand and convey African 'appreciation' of one particular very rocky and sunny part of Africa. But, of course, my book is the reverse of a history of an 'empty landscape'. Indeed, it argues passionately against the conservationist idea of the Matopos as 'wilderness'. The voices I record come out of an environment peopled for millenia; what UNESCO has come to call a 'Cultural Landscape' (Munjeri et al 1996). It is because African pilgrims and worshippers 'hear' the rocks that they 'speak'; it is because adepts 'see' the messages of the rocks as they walk round them – so that to walk entirely around Njelele mountain would be to come to possess all divine knowledge and hence is prohibited – that I can reconstruct this African landscape (Ranger 1999).

In the presentation I made in Berlin there was yet another context – a nicely ironic and moral tale. It starts with the mid-nineteenth century Swiss Protestant missionaries in Lesotho. They were men who had helped create the Romantic appreciation of the Swiss landscape, which *they* could appreciate even though Sotho peasants could not. Lesotho was a land of mountains and wooded slopes and waterfalls, preeminently picturesque. But every Swiss missionary bemoaned the fact that no Sotho appreciated this landscape; *from King to serf all Sotho were peasants*. Then one Swiss missionary, Francois Coillard, set out from Lesotho with some of his Sotho catechists and after much travail they reached the flood plain of Barotseland. Here was a landscape which Coillard thought repulsive: flat, wet, insect-infected. 'This place will never be picturesque: our immense bare plain ...

will never be a Swiss canton nor even Basutoland'. And yet the Lozi insisted on expressing aesthetic appreciation of their country. They sang songs about how beautiful it was – 'Barotsi, Land of Our Fathers, Of all Lands it is the Fairest'; they complimented Coillard for having chosen the plain rather than the forests or the hills. For Coillard the climax came when King Lewanika visited his first mission station, set on a little rise in the plain. Coillard had begun to plant seedling trees which he proudly tried to show to the Lozi king. Instead Lewanika turned his back on the seedlings and gazed with pride over the plain. 'How beautiful!', he said, 'Not a tree! Not a single one!' (Coillard 1897, Germond 1967).

After all these introductions it is time to come to the meat of this paper. Given that there were indeed African landscapes, are there ways less painful than Coillard's to discover them? In Berlin I turned away from places and histories I know well – like the Matopos and Barotseland – and tried to collect data from the books on my shelves on African perceptions of landscape. I hoped this would allow me to come to some generalisations about the circumstances in which it might be possible to record such perceptions. Unlike nineteenth century Barotseland, perhaps most of the time African ideas about landscape were implicit. Yet in some circumstances African ideas *were* made explicit.

I discerned four such conjunctures – making landscapes; immigrating from one landscape to another; conversion of both people and landscapes from one religion to another; and contestation over one environment between two or more groups. Obviously these four processes cannot be easily separated from each other but I said then, and would maintain now, that it is useful to separate them analytically. In the Berlin paper, which runs to some 33 pages, I gave several examples for each category. I cannot do that here and I hope one example will suffice for each.

For *making* I shall instance the Kiambu Kikuyu; for *immigrating* I shall take the Kenyan Meru; for *converting* I shall make use of the Holy Spirit Movement in Uganda; for *contesting* I shall take Gaerezi in eastern Zimbabwe.

Making landscapes

UNESCO's doctrine of Cultural Landscapes assumes that the making of African environments always dates back to remote antiquity:

If we accept that Africa was very probably the cradle of human civilization, then it is where human beings have had an effect the longest. Such a long period of relationships between human beings and

their natural environment has left its mark not just in the form of customs but also in a natural environment which does not satisfy ecological purists and which is better understood when human behaviour is taken into account. (UNESCO 1966:66)

In fact, many now famous African settings were made much more recently. One of these is the Kikuyu country of Kiambu. Greet Kershaw's (1997) long-awaited history of Kiambu describes the transformation of a heavily forested area into an agricultural-herding economy, in the second half of the nineteenth century. Kershaw emphasises that at this time ethnic identity was completely absent in Kiambu. 'People classed themselves and others in terms of subsistence patterns' (1997:19) – as hunters, or pastoralists or farmers. It was possible to change from one identity to another. Indeed for the migrants from Murang'a who eventually established a farming economy in Kiambu, it was at first necessary to live with the 'Ndorobo' hunters in the forest. Initially they almost became 'Ndorobo', inter-marrying, hunting together. The balance between hunting/foraging and farming only changed slowly within the forest economy. An immigrant who wanted to become a farmer had to buy land from the 'Ndorobo' with goats and to placate the 'Ndorobo' ancestors. He then 'faced years of clearing the forest' (1997:21), so that he and his associates still had to hunt. 'It would take the working life of the buying generation before a household could regard itself as settled on seven acres of cleared land' (1997:22).

Nevertheless, despite all this interaction, many of the immigrants carried with them a picture of an ideal 'Kikuyu' farming landscape such as they had known in Murang'a. Kikuyu-speaking women particularly 'disliked the forest [which] though potentially arable land was associated with the spirits of the dead; wild animals; and renegade landless' (1997:57). At first this meant that many male Kikuyu-speakers were obliged to marry 'Ndorobo' women; later, as the acreage of cleared arable began to push back the forest and the 'Ndorobo' hunters with it, the men too came to assert the moral primacy of agriculture. The forest was wild and dark: the cleared agrarian landscape was both beautiful and good. The beleaguered 'Ndorobo' cursed the destroyers of trees and game. Relentlessly a 'Kikuyu' landscape was emerging.

Kershaw describes how the spiritual control of 'Ndorobo' ancestors was replaced by the authority of Ngai of the high mountains and of the 'Kikuyu' dead. She goes on:

The inheritance of land was worthless without the willingness to work it: only those who worked their land properly had large harvests ... Authority flowed from one's achievements. (1997:15)

The 'Kikuyu' moral economy depended on virtuous labour and accumulation and was reflected directly and physically in the landscape.⁴

Immigrating

The Kiambu 'Kikuyu' were immigrants. But other Kenyan peoples made much longer migrations and retained deep memories of the landscapes through which they passed. The Meru of Mount Kenya eventually created a farming zone in cleared forest on the slopes of the mountain. They constructed a moral and scenic distinction between 'layers' of the mountain environment. There were 'honey-hunters in the ice-fogs of the upper rain forests'; coffee cultivators 'in the temperate midlands'; cattle herders 'on the arid, baking plains' (Fadiman 1993:7).

But they remembered their migration from the north Kenyan coast in a series of sharply visual images. It was scenery rather than use which defined their memory. Their mythic place of origin, Mbwaa, 'lay on the edge of the sea, at a place where the waters would go to eat grass'. Forced to leave Mbawaa by conquest and enslavement, they headed 'westwards' into the interior. They had to climb a mountain and on descending came to a flowing, red-coloured river. Then they went into a 'desert', Maliankanga, 'holes of the guinea-fowl'. 'Tradition records that after having left the safety of the their river for the uncertainty of what they perceived as desert, the migrants first drew water from "the elephants" footsteps, an ancient Meru euphemism for areas of shallow papyrus swamps'. Pausing for several seasons at each place, the migrants nevertheless continued their trek. 'At some time in this period of the march [they] passed an area remembered as Kiiru, raised place, where "four white peaks" could be seen'. Crossing a final river, they could see the ice-capped peak of Mount Kenya clearly in the distance (1993:19,45-65).

When they reached the mountain, 'what they saw must have awed and frightened them, for the landscape was completely outside their collective experience. Then, as now, Mount Kenya rears up out the flat surrounding plain like a lion crouching silently in the dust' (1993:66). Nevertheless, the migrants pressed forward into the mountain forest: 'We approached the Kirimaara [Mount Kenya] like a line of spears, with each clan marching upward toward the forest. It was a time of ax and firestick and fear' (1993:66).⁵

Conversion

Immigrants can also produce strong visual images of a landscape into which they are moving, or being moved. Jocelyn Alexander, JoAnn McGregor and I, in our *Violence and Memory: one hundred years in the 'dark forests' of Matabeleland* (2000) describe the forced evictions during the 1950s of Ndebele-speakers from the central Zimbabwean plateau into the forested bush of the Shangani Reserve. To this day, the immigrants retain a picture of *amagusini*, the dark forest, in which they were compelled to settle. It was an environment of backwardness, disease and death. Dokotela Ncube in an interview in 1996 said:

Disease has always been in this place ... because it is infested with wild animals. It was the 'air' from the animals which caused the problem ... It infects the air, the soil and the water and it comes out with the grass. (McGregor and Ranger 2000:27)

This was not only a hostile environment. It was a polluted and evil landscape.

Evil landscapes exist to be converted and redeemed. This was, of course, a major theme in mission Christianity. There were plenty of Christian redemptions of landscape attempted in Lesotho and Barotseland, in Northern Matabeleland and in the Matopos.

There have also been 'conversions' of landscape in a purely African religious setting (see Mawere and Wilson 1995). But the example I choose comes from a syncretic movement of 'traditional' and Christian beliefs: Alice Lakwena's Holy Spirit Movement (HSM) in northern Uganda. Its chronicler, Heike Behrend (2000), describes the HSM rebellion as 'a cosmic uprising in which human forces, spiritual forces and the forces of nature actively took part together'. In one version of the founding myth of the HSM, the Holy Spirit sent Saverino Lukoya and his daughter Alice in May 1985 into the wilderness, to judge nature and the animals for their violence against men. Significantly enough, they went to an artificially preserved 'wild' landscape in one of Uganda's National Parks:

Under the command of the same spirit, on 28 May judgement was passed on all the animals at Paraa Park. The next day judgement was passed on the water and the creatures under it ... The waterfall and the air around them remained still, obeying the command. (Behrend 1995:61-62)

The animals and the water disclaimed guilt for violence and blamed unredeemed man. Saverino and Alice decided to take up arms to stamp out sin and witchcraft with the aid of converted nature.

Thereafter, as their forces rampaged through northern Uganda, 'bees, snakes, rivers, rocks and mountains also fought in the HSM'. When the HSM soldiers came to a river they said: 'I am a soldier of the water. I am holy. Give me respect'. When they came to a mountain on their march, they had to appease it by prayer and sacrifice in return for which the mountain provided them with stone grenades (Behrend 1995:65-66).

Behrend concludes her study by emphasising the Christian millennial influences on the Holy Spirit Movement:

Alice announced that the Last Judgement was at hand. In the new world, which already existed, all creatures had equal rights. And, like St Paul, she promised that all creatures would be redeemed, even the stones. (1995:70)

Contestation

I have narrated many contestations already. But it is worthwhile examining explicit propositions about landscape generated by anti-colonial conflicts of land ownership and exploitation.

In several articles Donald Moore has spelt out the consequences for landscape history of settler conflicts with the African inhabitants of Kaerezi in eastern Zimbabwe. He holds that Kaerezi peasants see the surrounding landscape as saturated with power, meanings and historical struggles for land rights (Moore 1993).

Peasants in Kaerezi have been in conflict with the Nyanga National Park and with white farmers:

The National Park and state legislation stresses the 'conservation' of 'natural resources' – rivers and streams, valleys and mountains, forests, wildlife and fish; in short, the scenic terrain that attracts tourists to Nyanga National Park. Most Kaerezi [peasant] farmers use the term 'zvisikwa', literally 'things created', to refer to these features of the local landscape. The term has a radically different valency than the deceptive 'natural resources' ... 'Zvisikwa' do not necessarily posit some a-historical 'natural' essence eclipsing human's symbolic and material interactions with a particular landscape. 'Zvisikwa' are imbued with use-values and take on meanings through people's daily livelihood struggles. As features of the landscape, 'zvisikwa' are seen as 'things utilised' as well as 'things created'. As one elder told me: 'People must use zvisikwa ... When we see an animal, we say we have seen meat, and when we see trees we now have firewood'. (Moore 1993:391)

Moore is not reinstating the old idea that Africans *use* environments rather than *imagine* landscapes. Rather he is bringing the two ideas together.

Struggles over resources must be situated 'within the cultural production of landscape'; Kairezi's landscape is 'a surface of both soil and semiotics' (1993:396). When Kairezi's peasants *see* their landscape they see contestation – overlapping and competitive claims, boundaries and usages. Landscape is, in fact, constituted by history and struggle.

Conclusion

In the Berlin presentation I said that all these conjunctures could be brought together so that a total history of an African landscape might be written (see, for example, Maxwell 2000). Examined in this way even the Sotho turn out to have a landscape history after all and quite an explicit one at that.

This discussion, I hope suggests a research agenda. I am glad to say that in Zimbabwe today there is a great deal of work on African perceptions of landscape: on the Matopos, on the 'dark forests', on urban landscapes, on holy wildernesses, on the archeology of landscape, on perceptions of landscape in the south-western and south-eastern lowveld and the northern Dande valley, on cultural landscapes at Great Zimbabwe.⁶

All this work might be regarded as self-indulgent and as responding merely to fashion rather than to need. Zimbabweans, it might be said, cannot eat landscape. But of course landscape is good to think. To my surprise, it is my work on contestations over landscape which has proved to have the most immediate practical relevance out of all the topics treated in *Voices From the Rocks*. I have been commissioned to write a guide to the Matopos; to advise on a new museum at Rhodes's Grave, that focus of controversy; to help in preparing a submission on cultural landscape to UNESCO.

But in any case no-one should focus on landscape to the exclusion of other factors. *Voices From the Rocks* sets out to be a holistic study, incorporating religious, social, political and economic history. William Wolmers' doctoral research on 'Lowveld Landscapes: contrasting perceptions of environment in south-eastern Zimbabwe' is to be presented to the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex. Tamara Giles-Vernick, who described 'an African environmental history of loss in the Sangha River Basin of Equatorial Africa' in a paper to the July 1999 Oxford conference, ended it by urging not that one ought to give landscape precedence but that it should be taken into account. Just as I have argued elsewhere that by allowing Africans 'narrative' one can understand agency and appropriation (Lonsdale 2000), so I conclude here that by allowing

Africans 'landscape' one can penetrate into crucial struggles for resources, memories and rights.

Notes

1. Terence Ranger, 'New Approaches to African Landscape', House of Culture, Berlin, 1996.
2. Lyn Shumaker offers a particularly striking example of instant creation of a landscape. She narrates a trek through Northern Rhodesia by a Scottish ecologist, Frank Fraser Darling, and a colonial administrator, Eustace Poles. As they rested on the top of Muchinga escarpment, Poles set out to create a view which they could look at before they moved on. Fifty African axemen were set to work felling trees and 'after about two hours our felling revealed a very fine view indeed' (Shumaker 1997:1-2).
3. In the Berlin lecture I cited Gary Paul Nabhan's emphasis on the difference of views between those who are actively participatory in the dynamics of the habitat within their home range and those who view those habitats as 'landscapes' from outside (Nabhan 1995:87,91,96).
4. For another study of the making of a mountain farming landscape, together with its aesthetic and moral values, see Thomas Spear (2000).
5. Other migrating peoples carry with them not so much a memory of their routes but of their original landscapes. Wendy James in *The Listening Ebony*, remarks that despite the modern settlement in open arable land, 'the Uduk often speak and behave as though they were surrounded by thick woodland tempting them with rich rewards for the skilful hunter or gatherer ... their imagination still conjures up the rich prizes of the wild. They still draw on the forest world to inform their representations of humanity and the moral life' (1988:27-30).
6. Much of this work was presented at the Bulawayo International Conference, 'A View of the Land', in July 2000.

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