Review


John Blessing Karumbidza

In a very timely book, *Strangers, Spirits and Land Reform: conflicts about Land in Dande, Northern Zimbabwe*, Spierenburg suggests that the post-colonial Zimbabwean state was in complicity with other forces that slowed down land redistribution through an emphasis on ‘internal resettlement’. Although largely neglected by commentators on the land issue in Zimbabwe, the Mugabe government on the whole pursued ‘internal resettlement’ – the improvement of ‘efficiency and intensification of land use in existing communal areas’ – in the hope that ‘they could alleviate pressure and reduce the demand for land in the former European areas’ (2004: 3). This approach to addressing rural land and development needs is reminiscent to that approach advised by the Native Land Husbandry Act of 1951 which sought to improve land management in African areas as a solution to the Rhodesian ‘Native’ agrarian crisis. Spierenburg’s evidence for this argument is based on the case study of the Mid-Zambezi Project in Dande where the government hoped to create space through ‘development planning and rural reorganisation’ to settle 3000 families awaiting land in former European farms (2004:1). The Mid-Zambezi Project was also conceived as a pilot project upon whose experiences and lessons all Communal Areas in the countries would be transformed.

The book examines the contest between notions of progress and modernity as understood by the establishment, against the often assumed static nature of tradition – largely blamed for hindering ‘development’. In this moving analysis, Spierenburg teases out the compatibility of development with tradition in an environment dominated by the rejection of tradition as a basis for the legitimation of control and status. Spierenburg demonstrates how
these assumptions inform the conflicts between development officers and local residents, which should be understood as representing the clashes between modernity and tradition. According to Spierenburg, the people in Dande area using their traditional institutions of spirit mediums (\textit{Mhondoro}) resisted projects designed and controlled from above and outside (2004:104-38). Unfortunately the development officials, blinded by the folly of their own superiority complex over rural communities, failed to understand why a project they had construed to bring benefits to the people, would be resisted and rejected. Thus they blamed their failure on what they assumed to be retrogressive anti-developmental traditional practices.

A key theme resonating in Spierenburg is that of the continuity in post-independence Zimbabwe with rural and agrarian policies of the colonial (Rhodesian) planning regimes, albeit for different reasons. However, the overwhelming evidence is that the discourse on land reform and land degradation still hides suspicions about the potential of small-holder farming as a major pillar of the rural economy and, more importantly, this sector’s considered lack of conservation consciousness. While the ‘persistence of the land degradation narrative in Zimbabwe’s land use policy’ owes something to the specific complex agro-ecological nature of the country, part of it is the persistence of the discourse as an instrument of political control.

Conservation discourse in colonial Africa was highly connected with the political economy of access to, and control of, resources. Instead of addressing the problem of overcrowding in designated African ‘reserves’, Africans were often accused of causing environmental degradation through their supposed ‘traditional and wasteful methods’ for which top-down conservation measures were pursued. Spierenburg shows how development in the Dande area was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the colonial state conceived African settlement as a weapon in the ‘anti-tsetse war’, while on the other, the post-colonial state continued with the expectation of releasing pressure on land atop the fertile plateau that had been designated for European agriculture (2004:29). A neat story connecting wildlife management, pest eradication, dealing with pressure in African areas without increasing the land available to them, the protection of European security of tenure, and conservation in general, is woven here.

Those arguing against massive land transfer to Africans suggest that Africans’ conservative and traditional agriculture is inadequate for an increasing Zimbabwean food market and also alleges incapacity of Africans
to respond to market and price incentives. On the contrary, Spierenburg suggests that the settlement of Africans in the Dande valley was motivated by the attraction of higher yields and the need for bigger pieces of land through which to practise more than subsistence farming, as opposed to the conventional portrait of lazy Africans wanting land only for mystical or religious reasons with a serendipitous affinity to subsistence production. In the 1960s, successful cotton, sorghum and maize growers in Dande had begun to buy their own tractors for tillage (2004:30). Spierenburg gives a detailed account of the colonial and post-colonial state’s dealing with communal tenure and African control as a tool of political control and social engineering, raising the ideological debates underpinning the use of terms such as communal lands, Tribal Trust Lands, and Purchase Areas. The back and forth shifts in administering African communal and other areas between indirect rule (control through traditional authority albeit in the employ of the state) and direct control through state officials, was as much a colonial as a post-colonial phenomenon.

On the whole, Spierenburg has written a timely book for anyone thinking about rural stagnation and lack of development in Africa, particularly southern Africa. In *Strangers, Spirits and Land Reforms*, Spierenburg is accessible to intellectuals and non-intellectuals alike. This is a book for anyone trying to understand the challenges and prospects for rural advancement in post-colonial Africa in general and South Africa and Zimbabwe in particular where the legacies of colonialism (read apartheid for South Africa) are still enduring. For South African readers, this book is a timely contribution to the debate on land reform and agrarian transformation. The Lands and Agriculture Ministry is debating issues of black empowerment in agriculture, having proposed an Agri-BEE Charter. *Strangers, Spirits, and Land Reforms* suggests an empathetic approach to working with rural communities and rural traditional authorities rather than rooting out this institution and blaming it for the lack of transformation in rural areas. Perhaps the most important lesson coming from this book is that if rural people are not given space to participate in projects that are meant to benefit them from the planning phase right through, they will feel alienated from them.

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