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Managing common pool resources: local environmental knowledge and power dynamics in mopane worms and mopane woodlands management: the case of Bulilima District, South-Western Matabeleland, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This study examines the dynamics of power and the significance of local environmental knowledge in natural resource management in Zimbabwe's communal areas. It uses a case study of Bulilima District, broken down into into 3 components (Wards) for manageability of the study, to analyse the power configurations and the role played by local environmental knowledge in influencing decision-making processes among actors in the district with regard to mopane worms (*Imbrasis beilina* is the scientific name while *icimbi* is the vernacular name) and mopane woodlands (Colophospermum mopane is the scientific name while *iphane* is the vernacular name). It examines the significance of local environmental knowledge, i.e. indigenous knowledge and knowledge that developed as a result of a combination of knowledges from different ethnic groups and modern science. The study further examines the dynamics of the gendered nature of mopane worms and woodlands tenure regimes by putting under the spotlight the spaces and places where men and women interact, use and exert control over mopane worms and woodlands. It places history at the centre of our understanding of contemporary power dynamics and helps us to appreciate the importance of how local environmental knowledge has changed over time. To this end, the study argues that some of the contemporary conflicts over resources have their roots in the colonial era when the colonial government appropriated land from the locals and introduced discourses and practices such as conservation. Furthermore, it argues and demonstrates that the state is a critical player in determining access, use and control of natural resources. Based on rich ethnographic data collected by means of critical observations, in-depth interviews, narratives, and archival data, as well as aided by a brief survey, the study concluded that natural resource governance is a complex phenomenon in developing states. Power and knowledge play significant roles in influencing access, use and control of mopane worms and woodlands. Furthermore, while some locals still possess indigenous knowledge, practices and belief systems related to natural resource management, these are now less significant in influencing decisions on natural resource management. Indeed, the interplay of knowledge and power in resource management sees scientific culture and outside knowledge taking precedence over local forms of knowledge in the management of natural resources in the district.

Key words: power, local environmental knowledge, indigenous knowledge, ZANU PF, natural resource management, access, mopane worms and woodlands, Bulilima, Zimbabwe