Criminalising Farmers and Fields: Contesting Land Claims and Displacement in Zimbabwe’s Margins

Reconfigurer les frontières : économie politique et culturelle de la question foncière sur les marges agraires du Zimbabwe

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Abstract
In the late 1990s, in a remote corner of northwest Zimbabwe, complex struggles over land, livelihood resources, authority and belonging converged, precipitating the violent eviction of a group of migrant small-scale farmers by the rural district council. Key to the council’s legitimation of the eviction was its redefinition of part of the settled and farmed land as a wildlife buffer zone, and its concurrent criminalisation of migrant settlers by renaming them as squatters. This was largely linked to the potential for income (for the council) from community-managed wildlife activities in the so-called buffer zone, which far outweighed the value of even successful (but individual) local cotton farming in the same area. This was a moment of increasing economic pressure on the state and especially on local authorities to generate their own revenues, but was equally a critical juncture in the deepening of contestations over authority at local levels. The present paper explores how, in such a context – but with echoes in other times and places – discourses of criminality, security and development played into the council’s practices of violent exclusion and displacement of the ‘dangerous outsiders’ that the migrant farmers had retrospectively become. At the same time the paper examines the ways in which the farmer-evictees responded to their criminalisation and displacement. Through tracing the actions and narratives of one emblematic figure amongst the evictees, we gain insight into the complexity and messiness of local resistance and redefinition and learn that there is nothing automatically ‘pure’ about those victimised and displaced by the state.

Key words: Zimbabwe, agrarian margins, displacement, land claims

1 A more extended version of this paper is forthcoming as a chapter in From Inequality to Insecurity: Studies of the Security-Development Nexus in Southern Africa, Lars Buur, Steffen Jensen and Finn Stepputat (eds). Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute. Most of the empirical material here draws on doctoral fieldwork undertaken in Zimbabwe in 1998/9.
Résumé

Vers la fin des années 90, dans un coin reculé au nord-ouest du Zimbabwe, des luttes acharnées pour la terre, les moyens de subsistance, l’autorité et l’appartenance ont vu le jour, précipitant de violentes expulsions des petits fermiers migrants par le conseil rural du district. La raison promulguée par le conseil pour justifier ce fait, fut, d’une part, la toute nouvelle classification des terres habitées et cultivées en zone tampon pour la préservation de la faune sauvage et, d’autre part, la criminalisation des fermiers dorénavant qualifiés de « squatters ». Cette situation était étroitement associée aux revenus potentiel (pour le conseil) des activités de safari, gérées par la communauté dans la soi-disant zone tampon) et largement valorisés au regard des revenus, importants mais individuels, de la production locale de coton. Cette période correspondait à un moment de pression économique croissante sur l’Etat et, surtout, sur les autorités locales qui devaient voler de leurs propres ailes. Mais elle a représenté également une étape critique dans la lutte pour le pouvoir au niveau local. Le présent article analyse la façon dont les discours sur la criminalité, la sécurité et le développement ont été instrumentés dans un tel contexte pour légitimer les pratiques d’exclusion et de déplacement des «étrangers dangereux» – les fermiers migrants. Il s’intéresse aussi aux réponses que ces fermiers ont apportées aux tentatives de criminalisation et d’expulsion. En relatant les actions et les récits d'une figure emblématique parmi les expulsés, nous rendrons compte de la complexité et de la confusion qui règnent au sein de la résistance locale. Nous verrons également que les individus expulsés par l’Etat ne sont pas nécessairement sans défaut.
INTRODUCTION

In late 1997, in a remote corner of Zimbabwe’s northwest, the Gokwe North Rural District Council (GNRDC) violently evicted up to one hundred and forty migrant farmer households from a place called Vumba. Despite the migrants’ strong assertions that they had followed the correct land allocation procedures when they first arrived in the area in the late 1980s and early 90s, the council and its local allies subsequently accused them of being illegal, squatters, strangers, criminals. Increasingly they were portrayed as posing a threat to general security in the area (linked especially to their apparent defiance of both traditional and state local authorities), and as preventing local development by standing in the way (through their living and farming near the borders of a national park) of a community-based natural resources management programme that would, among other things, benefit the council itself. This merging of discourses of belonging, security and development has increasingly come to mark justifications of state-induced violent displacements, whether in rural or urban settings, or at larger or smaller scales.

The most recent example of this in Zimbabwe includes the brutal, government-initiated urban ‘clean up’ campaign called Operation Murambatsvina (translated as Operation Restore Order), started in May 2005. This was a militarised, nation-wide operation aimed at ‘driving out the filth’ and ‘restoring order’ in all urban areas, which, not by chance, were the strongholds of the broad-based political opposition that the present regime had been attempting to crush since 2000. Accusations were made repeatedly by President Mugabe and other state officials in various arenas against the ‘filth’ and ‘criminals’ occupying the now outlawed urban informal sector. Street vendors, tuck-shop owners and small-business operators, including many with licenses, were accused either of operating illegally, stealing foreign currency from the state, creating health hazards, or generating crime and violence. Similarly, own-built homes in high-density townships, some of which had been occupied for decades, were suddenly de-legalised in a conspicuous reversal of the de facto acceptance by the state since independence – and even its encouragement after the introduction of structural adjustment policies in 1990 – of self-assisting activities especially in trade and housing. In August 2005, a UN report claimed that up to 700 000 urban residents were deprived of either their homes or livelihoods or both and up to 2.4 million people overall were said to be affected by the operation. It induced (and sustained)

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unprecedented scales of poverty, homelessness and extreme vulnerability particularly in terms of food security and health, which the state was unable and/or unwilling to address adequately.\(^4\)

There are numerous other examples of such state ‘cleansing’ campaigns in both urban and rural areas since Zimbabwe’s independence in 1980.\(^5\) While the focus of this paper is on a local state eviction of migrant farmers in Zimbabwe’s agrarian margins in the late 1990s, I have made reference to this wider range of examples of state violence and displacement in order to demonstrate that such practices are far from unusual. Rather they constitute an ever-present possibility within continuous processes of state formation and constructions of citizenship in both colonial and contemporary African states, and not least in Zimbabwe. In many cases this has produced a form of highly uneven and perverse form of development.

Common to these practices of violent exclusion has been the identification of a dangerous other, and then cleansing (by fire, demolition or displacement) or containing (by imprisonment, intimidation, torture or even death) the said danger. Usually, these acts have been justified publicly through invoking the law or in terms of particular administrative, developmental or moral-political projects. This combination of discourses has attempted to portray an image of the responsible and/or caring state that nonetheless is able to assert its full sovereignty, and exclude from development or security or even from citizenship those it deems unworthy or defines as enemies of the state (Hammar, 2003; Worby, 2003). Yet while violent state practices have both increased and become increasingly visible in Zimbabwe’s worsening crisis since 2000,\(^6\) more needs to be known in general about how criminalised and securitised subjects themselves experience and respond to acts of state violence and exclusion. As such, this paper argues for closer (ethnographic) attention to the ways in which those violated and displaced by the state attempt to interrupt these practices so as to redefine the terms of their entitlement to land, livelihoods, security and belonging, and to re-legitimise their own citizenship.

The paper begins by outlining the political-economic context in which migrant farmers in one remote corner of the Zimbabwe’s northwest agrarian margins moved into the area from which they were subsequently brutally evicted in the late 1990s. It continues by discussing how discourses of violence, security and development played into trans-local contestations over land, legitimacy, authority and belonging. The core of the paper, however, examines the ways in which the farmer-


\(^5\) These include the arbitrary rounding up of and assaults on ‘single’ urban women in 1983, accused of prostitution; the ethno-politicalcd\(\text{Gukurahundi}\) campaign in Matabeleland and Midlands provinces in the mid-1980s (CCJP & LRF, 1997; Pohjolainen-Yap, 2001); and frequent cases of forced evictions of ‘squatters’ and other unwanted settlers within both communal and commercial farming areas (Alexander, 2003; Matondi, 2001; Moore, 1999; Moyo, 1995). The most dramatic example of the latter has been the sustained eviction since 2000 onwards of thousands of white commercial farmers and hundreds of thousands of black farm workers as part of the government’s ‘fast track’ land reform programme (Hammar et al., 2003; Sachikonye, 2003).

\(^6\) See for example Hammar et al., 2003; Raftopoulos and Savage (eds), 2005; Human Rights Watch, 2003; Solidarity Peace Trust, 2005b.
evictees responded to their criminalisation and displacement. This is traced primarily through the practices and narratives of Tendai Mabika (not his real name), one of the central figures in the process of resistance and redefinition: a key leader in the evictee community who, in the eyes of the local state, became the embodiment of the dangerous outsider – one of the ‘less desirable forms of life’ – needing to be removed. While deconstructing such labels, through Mabika we simultaneously gain insight into the complexity and messiness of local resistance and redefinition and learn that there is nothing automatically ‘pure’ about those victimised and displaced by the state.

RESHAPING PRODUCTION AND POWER IN THE AGRARIAN MARGINS

The Gokwe North Rural District Council had been trying for some years to remove the migrant farmers from where they were settled in communal lands bordering a state national park on one side and a safari area on the other. Decades earlier, in the late 1950s, the area had been used for dumping Tonga communities forcibly displaced by the colonial government from the Zambezi Valley when construction began on Kariba Dam, and had since then remained a neglected part of the country. Yet this started to change during the 1990s as the economic value of wildlife became more evident and the productive potential of such marginal spaces began to be redefined (Moyo, 2000). This contributed to the popularisation of a home-grown approach to community-managed natural resources, called CAMPFIRE, that both drew on and expanded global environmental discourses. Consequently, in places like Vumba new opportunities arose for substantial revenue generation from various kinds of safari-related activities both for private safari operators and rural district councils as well as for local communities (Murphree, 1990).

The 1990s was a decade in which public sector funds had steadily diminished (not least after the introduction of structural adjustment policies) and pressures had been mounting on Rural District Councils (RDCs) to generate their own revenues. Income sources for RDCs were especially limited in the poorest districts whose communal areas were typically located in the least productive agro-ecological zones, and where there was no substantial commercial farming that could generate unit taxes from privately-owned land. This was the case in Gokwe North. Even the very productive small-scale cotton farming in some parts of the district, because it was being undertaken on un-taxable communal land, brought no revenues directly to the council. In such circumstances, turning dry and seemingly ecologically fragile lands in the margins into joint-venture community-managed wildlife areas – in a sense ‘rewildernising’ the agrarian margins (Hammar, 2001a) – promised income (for example, from hunting licenses) not only to communities but also to councils by way of lucrative management fees.

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7 Communal Area Management Programme for Indigenous Resources
This was also a time in which RDCs had begun to assert their recently devolved political and developmental authority (in the early 1990s), facilitated by the promulgation of the 1988 Rural District Councils Act. It was at this juncture that the Gokwe North RDC found itself confronting what it viewed as a recalcitrant group of migrant farmers in Vumba. The council had been hoping to establish a safari lodge precisely where the Vumba farmers were settled, the ideas for which drew substantially on global conservationist discourses and their local versions. Consequently, through somewhat opaque practises, this led to a redefinition of the area as a wildlife ‘buffer zone’. This required the manufacture of what Sundar (2001) calls ‘new legal geographies’, in which “legal categories are used to construct and differentiate material spaces which, in turn, acquire a legal potency that has a direct bearing on those using and traversing such spaces”. It was primarily on the basis of the buffer zone that the council had applied to the courts in 1997 to issue summons for the eviction of the migrant farmers, now labelled squatters.

Questions of (plural) legality framed many of the migrants’ own arguments in favour of their claims to retain their land in Vumba. Subsequent to initial allocation of their plots by traditional leaders, many though not all of the newcomers had visited the council to obtain a ‘letter of removal’; a form of documentary evidence that acknowledged and on some level legalised their move from one district to another. These letters constitute part of what Das (2004:234) has called “the documentary practices of the state”, which together with “the utterances that embody it…acquire a life in the practices of the community”. The absence or loss of such letters (many during the eviction itself) – or denial by the council of having issued them at all – would later contribute to the criminalisation of selected households, and fuel accusations of their illegality. Yet even where such letters of removal could be proven to exist, in the moment of eviction they lost their illusory power of protection, revealing not only “the blurred lines between law and its violation”, but more generally the “illegibility of the state, the unreadability of its rules and regulations” (Das, ibid).

From the councils’ point of view, the forced removal was justified by the ‘fact’ that the migrant settlers in Vumba were illegal squatters, lawless, uncontrollable. In the council’s minutes over several years prior to the 1997 eviction, there were recurring references to the migrant settlers as hostile, uncooperative and belligerent. In addition, they were portrayed by the council (and a handful of their Tonga allies in Vumba), as ‘foreign’ and outsiders, clearly distinct from the ‘authentic’ Tonga firstcomers, now insiders. Furthermore, their public resistance and insistence on their rights to land and belonging subverted both the council’s and the local Tonga chief’s assertions of authority, and challenged the state’s sovereignty and project of political hegemony in the margins. Added to this, the ruling Zanu (PF) party – that at the time dominated all councils – had a record of crushing any form of emerging leadership independent of its own control (Alexander and McGregor, 2003). Much of this was reflected in the comments of the Chief Executive Office of the council when interviewed one year after the eviction:
We were saying these people illegally settled in the area, because if you had not been given permission by the council to settle in a given area you were actually classified as a squatter. So from our point of view those people were squatters. At the same time, what actually happens is that, you know, these people become lawless, like they wouldn’t even allow any civil servants, any workers from government I would say, to go there for their normal duties. And they had no respect for the chief...Because of this lack of respect, they were trying to actually establish themselves as a certain, sort-of separate entity, you know, with their own sort of leaders...They thought that they could actually represent themselves in whatever they were doing. Their own authority, they stamped their own authority.  

Criminalising the settlers on multiple levels had a dual effect in undermining their legitimacy and inclusion within the realms of sovereignty. Firstly, it undermined them in ‘civic’ terms, as worthy citizens of a common nation with rights to development and equal protection under the law. Secondly, it undermined them in ‘customary’ terms, as ‘ethnic’ subjects entitled to rights, resources and protection within the more localised traditional framework governing the communal lands. Increasingly then they became the unworthy, the excludable.

LOCAL LOGICS OF ENTITLEMENT AND EXCLUSION

In the course of the evictions during September and October 1997, many of the evictees’ homes and food granaries were either burnt or demolished and much property – including furniture, clothing, kitchen utensils, farm implements and small livestock – was damaged or lost. The majority were forcibly removed from the area, although some managed to find temporary shelter with neighbours and friends nearby. Some alleged beatings and rough treatment during the eviction and there was mention of tear gas being used. Lorries were hired by the council to ferry people and their remaining possessions to the nearest business centre some forty kilometres away where they were dumped ‘on the tar’ and left to fend for themselves outdoors without adequate shelter or provisions just at the onset of the rainy season. They spent almost five months there under extremely poor conditions, during which time many claimed to have fallen ill from lack of clean drinking water and proper sanitation. Evictees’ narratives of the eviction were marked by a mixture of humiliation, betrayal, anger and loss.

Throughout this period, a small and active committee of evictees, led by Tendai Mabika, worked closely with local legal aid and human rights organisations to appeal against the eviction through the courts. What was finally achieved was not a formal rejection of the legitimacy or legality of the eviction itself, unlikely given that such evictions were normalised by state policies and practices. Instead, based somewhat ironically on a technicality – namely, the incorrect delivery of

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8 Interview with Alan Chinho, Nembudziya, 10 October 1998.
summons by the council to the evictees – the presiding magistrate in the case issued a ‘rescission of judgement’ on 25 February 1998, and ordered all the evictees to return to Vumba, albeit under temporary and uncertain terms.

When they returned to Vumba in late February 1998, houses and granaries had to be rebuilt, neglected fields cleared, and new crops planted where possible before the advent of the next rains in October 1998. In the course of their eviction, much of their livestock had been lost, and having been evicted at the start of the rains in 1997, they had been unable to cultivate their crops during the 1997/98 growing season. This meant losing not only that year’s harvest, but without receipts for the sale of cotton to the cotton companies for that season, they were also unable to receive credit for essential inputs for the next season’s crop. Denied access to the means to generate livelihoods from their fields for such an extended period had inevitably undermined household food security. Issues of hunger and a continued sense of insecurity were constant preoccupations. There were also allegations made by several evictees that the council had denied them access to food grain under the national grain loan scheme after their return to Vumba. Thus despite the ‘victory’ of their return to Vumba, overlapping material, emotional, legal and other needs amongst the now-returnee community required urgent attention. As Jackson (2004:37) writes, “what destroys us is not loss in itself, but the lack of what we need to go on”.

It was at this point that Tendai Mabika re-emerged as a critical figure in the evolving struggles over entitlement to land, authority and belonging in Vumba. Mabika was both a charismatic and, by local standards, relatively well-educated man who travelled comfortably between worlds – rural and urban, political and religious, pragmatic and intellectual – imbuing him with great skills of articulation and translation. With ‘town knowledge’, political experience, and the airs and ambitions of a modernizing pioneer, he was easily portrayed by his critics as the embodiment of arrogance and, as the owner of a gun, as potentially dangerous. Being politically active and outspoken against both the council and various local Tonga leaders made him a ready target for these and other accusations, some undoubtedly justified. His complex character – combining immense energy, commitment and tactical ability in defending the rights of his fellow evictees, with a shrewd manoeuvring of relationships and resources to strengthen his own authority – evoked mixed responses to him even within the evictee community itself.

One focus of animosity towards Mabika and his coterie of close associates, was linked to a small development project that he initiated outside the framework of either the council or the traditional leaders in Vumba. This was a project aimed (at the most obvious level) at regenerating livelihoods and food security amongst the now-returnees in Vumba. Precarious as their status and hold on their land continued to be, there had been an out-of-court settlement arrived at with the council in October 1998 allowing the returnees to remain in Vumba at least through the next growing season and

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9 In present-day Zimbabwe, the politicisation of food aid and denial of essential food to impoverished opposition supporters, has been widely documented. See for example Human Rights Watch, 2003.
until after the harvest in August 1999. After this, they would have to move to land elsewhere, due to
be provided by the council.

Having lost access to the credit facility previously provided by the cotton companies during
the year of their displacement, when they could not cultivate their fields, Mabika’s aim was to find
alternative sources of credit support for essential farm inputs such as fertiliser, herbicides and
pesticides. Using his contacts and skills of persuasion and enrolment to great effect, he was indeed
able to secure donor funds to purchase basic inputs for all the evicted households. Importantly, and
deliberately, the project did not include any investment in fixed infrastructure or long-term services,
and hence in no way seemed to contradict or undermine the existing out-of-court agreement that the
evictees would later relocate.\(^{10}\) Yet despite the formalities of working through a credible non-
governmental organisation in the district (though notably not the council), and promises to establish a
more widely representative project committee in Vumba, Mabika and his evictee committee
unilaterally took full charge of the project. They diligently undertook all the arduous work of loading
and transporting thousands of heavy bags of fertiliser and other goods from the business centre forty
kilometres away to Vumba, using cattle-drawn scotch carts and one tractor to traverse almost non-
existent roads and semi-flooded rivers. Yet things began to get very messy once the goods arrived in
Vumba. Complex processes of discipline and punishment, accumulation and denial, inclusion and
exclusion, came into play. In the end, the project not only alienated the council further (not having
been institutionalised through their offices), but precipitated and deepened divisions in Vumba and
within the evictee/returnee community itself.

Notwithstanding a project design that included technical mechanisms and local committees to
ensure transparent, fair and accountable distribution of the various inputs – in the manner of ‘the good
development project’ – most of these procedures were either ignored, distorted or co-opted by Mabika
and his committee. The basis of the distribution had been a carefully compiled – and, until the project
was initiated, previously unattainable – list of names of evicted households, together with their plot
sizes and acreage under cotton cultivation in Vumba, verified by individual signatures. The list of
apparently all one hundred and forty evicted households had been prepared by Mabika and his
committee. However, it appeared to be seriously flawed if not partly fraudulent. Allegations were
made that some of the names on it were of people no longer living in Vumba, or in some case no
longer even alive. Other names, it was reported, were either of spouses or dependent children of
individuals already named on the list. There were some evictees resident in Vumba whose names had
been placed on the list without their knowledge, and others whose names had been left out altogether.
Besides this, once the actual distribution began, the well-planned calculations of who was entitled to
what according to indicated plot size and cultivation requirements, appeared to have been entirely
dismissed. There were evictees, it was claimed, who received far more than they were entitled to

\(^{10}\) An additional component of the project was provision for supplementary child feeding for all children in the
area, including both evicted and non-evicted households.
According to the distribution criteria, and others who received less than stated in the distribution schedule, or indeed nothing at all. In addition, there were migrant settlers from non-evicted households who allegedly received inputs, some of these apparently substantial.

Following these widespread accusations, the NGO responsible for the project was compelled to initiate a local evaluation of what had happened, which confirmed a number of the allegations. What was perhaps most striking about the comments made by different members of the evictee community was their deep sense of betrayal by Mabika, described by one evictee as “a rough man [that] distorted the gift for all the evicted households”. Another commented on how Mabika and his committee had “distorted distribution and they did not handle us with care”. Many claimed to have been specifically excluded for not paying ‘subscriptions’ to Mabika in the previous period when he had travelled extensively to mobilise legal support for their case. According to several accounts, on the supposed day of distribution of the farm inputs at Mabika’s own homestead (rather than in the neutral grounds of the local school, as had been stated in the project document), he had met people there with a gun in hand. This was allegedly used to intimidate those who had not supported him, those not of his ‘faction’.11 It was evident that most of the evictees were surprised by what Mabika was doing. Many seemed to have viewed him as a “genuine leader” concerned for their well-being, which made their sense of betrayal that much deeper. Yet it seemed there was an autocratic and even threatening dimension to his leadership style, to his mode of politics if you will, that the debacle of the project exposed somewhat dramatically, revealing an image of him more closely aligned with that portrayed by the council.

Besides the distortions of distribution produced by and through the list that Mabika and his committee had compiled, the list in itself was also significant for the wider struggles over land, authority and belonging in Vumba. No matter how partial or inaccurate, it represented a concrete assertion by Mabika of the continued presence of the evictees in Vumba, and their intention to stay. The list constituted not only a set of names, but a set of names of farmers attached to particular plots of land they intended to go on cultivating. In this sense, it was an overt and powerfully subversive act of ‘naming and claiming’. At the same time, it was a symbolic tool through which Mabika could envisage expanding his authority beyond just the sphere of the evictees. By bringing the list into being, he could assert control over previously hidden information about the evictees. By offering it as a gift of ‘truth’ both to the donors supporting the project and to myself as a researcher, it became his currency for generating material resources, but also for extending the scope and legitimacy of his authority in Vumba.

11 There were a number of different groupings amongst the evictees, some of whom allied themselves with Mabika, but others who felt at different points in time more secure in being loyal to the local Tonga leadership, and who in some cases were indeed offered a degree of protection.
NARRATIONS OF LOSS AND RETRIEVAL

At the time of our first meeting in Harare in September 1998 in the offices of a local NGO working in Vumba, Mabika was seventy. His life-story paralleled that of many of the other newcomers in Vumba – and in the agrarian margins more generally – in that it was a tale of multiple migrations, both voluntary and forced, stretching from his childhood in Mberengwa District in the 1930s until his move to Vumba in 1991. This latter he had hoped would be his last. Mabika’s dreams of studying beyond three years of secondary school education had been dashed by the realities of poverty, but it had allowed him to do temporary teaching in the rural areas during the 1950s. In the 1960s he had mainly worked for construction companies in Harare and smaller towns but jobs became scarce in the 1970s forcing him to return to Mberengwa where he survived mainly by piecework, building huts and houses for others. The area had been too dry and depleted to allow for cash crop production.

After independence and through much of the 1980s he managed to work again as a rural teacher. But like many others without formal teaching qualifications, he was eventually dismissed from his post in favour of those who were trained. After this he returned home ‘to plough’, having by then found land in a resettlement area in Kadoma District. But the land there was poor too and the prospects for the future dismal, prompting him to search for new land, and eventually in 1991 to move again, this time to Vumba.

Some people from this area were telling us there was good land and then I had to seek for a place. Then I had to cross-examine to see if it was suitable for cultivation, and I saw that it was. I had to seek the kraalheads and ask for land, and they allocated me some. We went through those procedures. The land allocated to me is the land I’m on today.

Like many of his fellow migrants, here Mabika establishes the basis for his legitimacy in Vumba, reiterated many times over in different interviews. It is an assertion that combines his authenticity as a farmer, a man of the soil, together with his authenticity as a citizen of a specific place – albeit an ethnic citizen in Mamdani’s (1996) terms – observing and protected by its (customary) laws. In other moments, both in relation to his organising for legal defence against further eviction and demanding compensation from the council for destroyed property, he asserts his civic citizenship in relation to statutory laws, national politics, and international standards of justice and human rights.

These latter discourses became more explicit in his narratives about the eviction itself, and the way in which the newcomers’ land was redefined as a buffer zone and they themselves were labelled squatters by the council:

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12 All the quotes and material for this section draw on transcripts of numerous interviews conducted with Mabika in both Vumba and Harare in the period between October 1998 and July 1999.
People were shown land only to be shown it belongs to the animals. Then they had to call us squatters. How can a man be a squatter if he followed the right procedures to get land? If they wanted a project that would benefit us all, they could’ve explained it to us. The problem is that they came telling a lie that we were squatters.

The eviction itself was described by him during one interview at his own home in Vumba through a physical demonstration of those parts of his homestead burnt or destroyed by the council, and ‘measured’ through a specification of items lost in the process.

That was my fowl run. Fifty broilers, fifty others, twenty-five layers, there where those pots are. This was maize stock. I had fifteen tonnes or more of maize. There, my wife had to put some bundles of thatching grass. Here was the granary where I stocked about fifteen tonnes of grain. There were tyres in the roof that was burnt down. I had about twenty-four pigeons. My herbicides, pesticides, tyres and tubes for my scotch carts, all destroyed.

This act of naming of “objects on which violence leaves its mark” (Mehta and Chatterji, 2001:210) seemed to be a way to apprehend in the present that which might otherwise remain invisible but which for the narrator must be witnessed and remembered. At the same such quantification of suffering and injustice reinforced Mabika’s persistent battle with the council over what he referred to as ‘reparations’.

Mabika’s sense of injustice and betrayal was geared not only towards the council but was also directed at the Tonga leadership with whom there had been a growing animosity especially since the eviction and his subsequent return. However, he described the tensions as having started some years earlier when the kraalhead of his village had attempted to take back some of his land, revealing too the impending issue of land shortage even in this area:

The first sign of harassment was by my kraalhead himself. The land he allocated himself, he said ‘you have jumped the demarcation line’. He came with other neighbours to my land. They wanted to cut a piece of 3 acres. He wanted to give it to his son.

Mabika refused to budge. At this point, he was still on good terms both with the then chief, and even with the District Administrator who had written a letter in support of his claim, ensuring he could hold on to his land.

However, his own sense of betrayal was increasingly portrayed in ethnic terms. Ethnicity in itself was not a key source or site of conflict when the migrants first began arriving in Vumba in the late 1980s and early 90s. Yet as time passed and the council began pushing to control the ‘buffer zone’ in order to establish a safari lodge, the category of newcomer began to be reframed first as squatter,
then dangerous outsider, then unwanted evictee, then belligerent returnee. With encouragement from the council, some of the Tonga leadership and households began to view and portray Mabika’s group as ‘blocking development’ in the area.

Mabika was sharply attuned to this growing politics of difference. In a large public meeting in Vumba in October 1998, he appealed to his fellow evictees: “Can you see there is no-one in the Tonga land who likes us, only Siachalema”, naming an older Tonga resident also evicted by the council. On another occasion, he claimed that Tonga village development committees and the local councillor were saying openly that “no authority should be given to a Shona person. Segregation is there, just like that.” Even though Mabika commended the openness of the younger incumbent chief, whom he viewed as treating all his subjects ‘as one’, he frequently blamed the local leadership for ethnic tensions in the area. This conveniently masked some of the patronising ways in which both he and some of his fellow migrants constructed themselves as modern and progressive relative to ‘the Tonga’. This was a sentiment not lost on some of the Tonga leadership who were openly scathing of Mabika and the newcomers, accusing them of being arrogant, disrespectful and at times even dangerous. In this context, the trope of Shona-ness (incorporating any or all outsiders, whether Shona or not) became for some a singular marker of unwelcome otherness, of unworthiness.

With regard to the question of party-political leadership in the area, Mabika had been very active in establishing ruling party (Zanu (PF)) structures in Vumba after his arrival, which had been largely absent until then. Yet as with many of Mabika’s ‘good intentions’, they had had contradictory effects. Aware of potential conflicts in Vumba soon after his arrival in the early 1990s, he had imagined for himself a role in ‘unifying Tongas and Shonas’:

We wanted our own party committee, trying to unite everyone through politics. Those who were councillors or kraalheads thought I was after their rule. They thought I wanted to grab the chieftainship.

Inevitably tensions arose. Reports were made to the council. Mabika was accused of trying to start his own political party in Vumba. He defused the situation by assuring the soldiers and police sent to his home that he was involved in building up Zanu (PF). In fact, Mabika did successfully build up the ruling party in the Vumba area. However, at a later date, as the council grew wary of his growing political influence and his central role in organising resistance to its efforts to evict settlers, it sabotaged his ascension to various party positions, for example by getting the provincial party committee to nullify his election as district party chairman and later ward councillor.

Mabika professed not to bear a grudge about being politically sidelined, emphasising instead that what he opposed was corruption and dishonesty:
I don’t care if they don’t include me. I’m not a man that can revenge in any way. We should cooperate, that’s what I always tell them. Some are alright [in Vumba]. But the leaders – VIDCO chairmen, kraalheads – they oppose. If the council itself had dissolved, starting with new leaders we would have better thinking. There are corrupt leaders today in the council. They influence our leaders here.

Such accusations need to be set against the extensive list of allegations and even evidence against Mabika in his own dealings with the Vumba project and the list. And yet over and over, in different contexts, he emphasised the need for honesty, at times using Christian idioms to strengthen his truth claims. He often represented himself as ‘one who tells the truth’, as his own version of his role in the tainted Vumba project attests:

I’m a father of children. I can’t be so disastrous. I must be very aware. I am responsible; better than other men, not a thief. What did I steal? I’m trying to help the community, to discuss and shake hands together as fellow Zimbabweans. They can tell any lie about me. But the truth will ever conquer, I tell you this. I’m not crooked. I walk straight.

Mabika’s paradoxes were numerous. Even while accusations of intimidation and exclusion were made against him in relation to the Vumba project, he continuously saw and portrayed himself as a man committed to peace and unity as compared with others’ attempts to ‘divide’.

Like many of his fellow evictees, Mabika had spent a lifetime of migrations in search of a secure future, restarting his life over and over again. His resilience, inventiveness and optimism were admirable, but given his age, the toll that these endless searches for security for himself and his family had taken on him were beginning to show. What Vumba represented then was more than a battleground of opposing wills involving himself and his committee against the council, or against the Tonga leadership. Clearly he was a man driven by his own notion of ‘justice’, and his skills and force of character fitted him to be a leader. But he was equally a man battered by multiple disappointments, displacements and marginalities, and one in need of ‘the means to go on’, and to provide for his family. It seemed like an understatement when, late one afternoon sitting beside his home, he said quite simply: “The land is what we really want. It’s very productive. Getting out of the area is a great loss.” There is no doubt that Mabika, like many others, was desperate to find a (productive) place of belonging, not only for himself but as a legacy for his large family. But this was not to be.

EPILOGUE

In December 1999, two years after the original Vumba eviction, The Standard newspaper in Zimbabwe carried a report with the headline ‘Gokwe boots out villagers to make way for wildlife
project'. Over one hundred villagers in Vumba (an estimated 13% of the original evictees) were said to have been affected by a new eviction that once again involved the destruction of their property. The executive director for Zimbabwe Human Rights described the eviction, carried out by the Gokwe North Rural District Council, as a “blatant disregard for human dignity and a disgrace”. In addition, he noted that it was unlawful with respect to the out-of-court settlement reached in October 1998, as well as a later stay of execution granted by the courts in mid-November 1999 to stop the council from carrying out further evictions. The report noted that a series of procedural irregularities, miscommunications and incompetence within the court system had contributed to the ‘illegal action’ by the council. At the same time, the Governor for Midlands and the District Administrator were both alleged to be “very much aware of what was going on”.

It would be hard to refute the evidence that Tendai Mabika was vindictively targeted in the whole exercise. The report further noted:

In one particular case, a villager, [Tendai Mabika], had his entire homestead razed to the ground, including his granary which had been reduced to ashes. [Mabika], who vocally opposed the council, suffered the most losses with nearly everything he owned being destroyed or taken away. His 24 (90kg) bags of maize were taken away by the council, and out of 26 cattle in his kraal, only one remained. Worse still, four of [Mabika’s] children, aged between four and 13, were inexplicably taken away by the raiding party without their parents, and dumped at an abandoned minesite in Buchwa Mine.

In the correspondence I received from Mabika in the years that followed, he continued against all the odds to try and return to Vumba and to fight for ‘reparations’ for everything he had lost on account of the council. In neither sense was he ultimately successful. He was eventually forced out again, but this time by a different politics that had begun to consume the countryside after 2000. As Robert Mugabe’s ‘radical’ land reform was underway in commercial farming areas, displacing thousands of white farmers and hundreds of thousands of black farm workers, in the communal lands the focus was on ‘weeding out’ all opposition to the ruling party. Always on the frontier of conflict, Mabika had by this time joined the opposition Movement for Democratic Change and hoped to stand as a local MDC candidate in council if not parliamentary elections. In this sense he attempted to shift the terms of his local claims to an alternative national discourse of justice and rights. But once again he was on the wrong side of history. Gokwe North was a Zanu (PF) stronghold. Eventually, threats against his life by loyalist war veterans and youth militia accomplished what the council had tried for almost a decade to achieve, to get rid of him. He moved finally to Binga District, tired and dispirited,

14 His real name was given.
but still trying to rebuild in some way. His last letter spoke of his wanting to start a small chicken project. He died there in April 2004 from malaria.

IN CONCLUSION

Through the lens of a local state eviction in Zimbabwe’s agrarian margins in the late 1990s, this paper has traced the relationship between state discourses of criminality, security and development on the one hand, and practices of exclusion and displacement on the other, and the implications of this relationship for competing claims over land and livelihood resources. Through asserting its own sovereign authority over territory, resources and bodies, and attributing qualities of violence, disruption and danger directly to excludable others, the state (whether in its national or local manifestations, and together with its allies) defines who is worthy of development and who shall be excluded as unworthy; who is deserving of protection by the sovereign/state and who falls outside the realms of security; whose claims to land and belonging are legitimate, and whose are not. While the arguments presented here draw largely on research conducted prior to the start of Zimbabwe’s current, ongoing crisis, I would suggest that they pertain equally to the present moment, in both rural and urban spaces.

At the same time, this paper has been interested to examine the ways in which those criminalised and excluded by the state – those deemed unworthy of either security or development (or land) in the name of security and development – refuse, or in some cases mirror, the terms of sovereign power. Drawing in particular on the narratives of one emblematic figure in the agrarian margins, the paper has argued for a closer reading of the experiences and practices of subjects of exclusion. This is partly to move away from abstractions or simplifications of processes of violent state displacement, and partly to disrupt idealised notions of displaced ‘communities’, while simultaneously underlining the multiple violences – structural, social, psychological, emotional – that forced displacements build on and deepen.
REFERENCES


