

A genealogy of conservation in Botswana

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Abstract

Understanding the roots of human-wildlife conflict in Botswana requires an examination of the historical processes through which such conflict emerged. In this article, I trace the genealogy of conservation policies in Botswana, beginning in the colonial period, and argue that current struggles over resources in the northern wildlife areas of Botswana were the product of specific historical decisions regarding policies over land use. Specifically, I show how concern with game preservation in the colonial era was subsumed by fear of land degradation in the newly independent nation state. The primary policy designed to mitigate land degradation, the Tribal Grazing Land Policy, was then appropriated by a new round of wildlife conservationists, who used its “reserve land” designation to further the expansion of wildlife management areas in the 1980s. The result has been the zoning of land for wildlife utilization in areas beyond those solely occupied by Remote Area Dwellers. This has led to a high degree of human-wildlife conflict in the country, because instead of zoning for wildlife utilization in areas occupied by non-cattle owning populations (i.e. the Basarwa), as was envisioned under the TGLP, wildlife management areas have been established in areas inhabited by those who rely on cattle for their livelihoods.

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Introduction

In Botswana, the phrase “human-wildlife conflict” is widely used by wildlife conservationists, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and safari operators alike to describe the ways in which cattle encroach into national parks, wildlife destroys livestock and crops, and rural farmers set snares for problem wild animals in and around the park. In their conversations, the existing spatial arrangements that distinguish park land from wildlife management areas from cattle ranches are taken as a given, assumed to be a pre-formed framework within which solutions to human-wildlife conflict must be found. Yet how these categories of land came to be mapped onto Botswana in the first place remains a critical question. To truly understand the roots of human-wildlife conflict in Botswana, and subsequently the challenges that conservation-and-development programmes attempting to ameliorate this conflict face, it is necessary to move beyond the face value of phrases such as “cattle versus wildlife.” Instead, we need to critically examine the historical processes through which these conflict situations came to be. In this paper, I trace the genealogy of conservation policies in Botswana beginning in the colonial period, and argue that current struggles over resources in the northern wildlife areas of Botswana were not inevitable, but rather are the product of specific historical decisions regarding policies over land use. Recognizing that any outcome in control over natural resources is crucially determined by the political economy of the agrarian society involved (Blaikie 1989), I explicitly situate these conservation decisions within Botswana’s broader political economy. Specifically, I address the following questions: What were the political and economic reasons for the development of wildlife conservation lands and the specific historical processes and conjunctures from which the current day land use and zoning patterns emerged? And, does delving into a study of these processes help to answer this question: in a land so vast, and with such a low human population density, how can there appear to not be enough room for both wildlife and cattle?

In the first section of the paper, I trace the way in which (and reasons why) state-led conservation underwent a shift from state concerns about overhunting of game to concerns about overgrazing by cattle and the implications of this shift from game to cattle prioritization for policy enactment. Second, I draw connections between conservation policies regarding land degradation (namely the 1975 Tribal Grazing Land Policy (TGLP)) and current struggles over natural resource use in the wildlife areas of northern Botswana. My main argument here is that

the expansion of Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) into land beyond that occupied by non-cattle owning rural dwellers (as envisioned under the TGLP) has meant conflict over what different groups imagine to be appropriate land use.

Conservation vis-à-vis game under British colonial rule (1880s to 1960s)

Like much of colonial Africa, the hunting rights of local populations in Botswana eroded significantly during the colonial period. Ramutsindela (2003) has argued that Africans' license to hunt was considered an obstacle to their much-needed labour. He suggests that Africans were prevented from hunting in order to force them to sell their labour under the pretext of protecting wildlife. Hunting regulations were also a result of the colonial powers' belief that the relationship of 'native' subjects with the environment was destructive, as well as keen colonial self-interest in botanical and biological resources (Basset et al. 2003). Game laws imposed in Europe served as a basis for similar laws in European colonies in Africa. In places like Tanzania, the acts of enclosure via game laws in Europe were then mirrored in the dislocations of Africans due to conservation in the colonial period (Neumann 1998). These laws and acts of territory making were legitimated by narratives about the preservation and scientific conservation of wildlife and natural resources (Kelly 2011).

Indeed, the first conservation policies to be enacted under British colonial rule in Botswana were game laws, ostensibly intended to stem the steep decline of wildlife due to hunting, and prevent the total destruction of game as had occurred in neighbouring South Africa. Before this era of exploitation—coinciding with the arrival of Europeans—customary law had regulated and restricted the taking of numbers of wild animals in a number of ways. The oldest form of customary law was totemic law, a rule which prohibited the killing of a given Tswana group's totem animal species (for example, crocodile, vervet monkey, buffalo and elephant). Tswana chiefs also exercised control over hunting through organized hunts—after which the chief was entitled to all animals killed (usually dried and taken home for his community) as well as their skins. Because the chief had the right to allocate the use of all things which belonged to the community (game included), individual hunters were often obliged to give the whole, or specified portions, of their game to the Chief or to the 'elders'. Hunters were expected to give the Chief the brisket of large game, the skins of

lions and leopards, one tusk of an elephant, ostrich feathers and the body of a bustard. In this manner, the rights of an individual in regards to hunting game were strictly limited (Schapera 1955).

Starting in the mid-nineteenth century however, visiting sportsmen - primarily white hunting parties from South Africa - began intensive hunting that resulted in the disappearance of the Rhinoceros throughout the entire country and the reduction of other species in certain areas to levels above which they could never rise naturally (Campbell 1973). Significant pressure was also placed on wildlife when the massive trade in game products, encouraged by European traders, began to develop in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Such products comprised the most important exports of the territory, as ivory, ostrich feathers and skins became valuable trade commodities (Schapera 1943). For example, Schapera has recorded that one firm in Shoshong exported 50,000 pounds worth of product annually at its peak. However, by 1885 the trade had already declined due to drought and over-exploitation, and the combined exports from six stores in Shoshong amounted to only roughly 15,000 pounds per year. In reaction to such widespread decimation of wildlife, the British colonial administration introduced legislation in 1891 in the form of the Game Law Amendment Act that was designed primarily to curb the trade¹.

This statutory law at first only applied to foreigners, a policy that reflected the mode of indirect rule that characterized British colonial presence in Botswana as well as other African colonies. A great deal has been written on indirect rule within post-colonial studies, but essentially indirect rule was the method through which a tiny and foreign minority (the British in this case) were able to rule over an indigenous majority. Indirect rule was a form of institutional segregation that sought to forge specifically “native” institutions through which to rule subjects. It was about incorporating natives into a state-enforced customary order in which tribal leadership was either selectively reconstituted or imposed by the British in order to fashion a legible local state. For the subject population of natives, indirect rule frequently meant an institutional context heavily skewed in favour of state-appointed customary authorities (Mamdani 1996).

In the case of Botswana in the late nineteenth century, statutory law was to be applied only to Europeans (“foreigners”) because the protectorate was an independent state and so, according to the British Government, the protecting power was not able to exercise jurisdiction over anyone but British subjects in the absence of consent in the relevant

treaty² (Pain 1978). The strategic logic behind such a set-up should be noted however—in building up a system of local rule on a foundation of indigenous institutions, the British believed that changes could slowly be made and the institution modified without “creating a resistance that could make it difficult to rule” (Hailey 1956). In this way, the British ruled through the *dikgosi* (chiefs), subjecting them to restrictions that were then transmitted down to the subjects when, in the eyes of the British, it was for the purposes of ‘good’ government.

For conservation policy, the dichotomous approach of one law for foreigners and another for the indigenous inhabitants meant that, technically, what were referred to as the Native areas or Native Reserves³ would be allowed to retain full hunting rights in their own tribal areas. According to customary law, this meant that Batswana could hunt wherever they pleased within the Native Reserve, even over the fields and grazing lands of others, without making any payment or giving any tribute (Schapera 1943). However in practice, this was not always exactly the case. Since the creation of the Protectorate, there was a progressive increase in the scope and complexity of the customary laws in imitation of the statutory laws. This pattern was a result of the fact that tribal chiefs, as individuals negotiating leverage points with the colonial authorities in multiple arenas, often introduced game laws at the request of the Administration. As Hailey (1956: 43) mildly stated, “It became the recognized official practice to encourage the Chiefs to make use of their traditional power to make laws, rather than to legislate by enactment, and a number of instances could be quoted in which the Chiefs were urged to use this procedure in order to effect purposes which the Administration was interested. Thus they were on several occasions urged to make their own laws for the protection of big game in their areas.”

However the courses through which the chiefs maneuvered their positions vis-à-vis the requests of the Administration and the wishes of their people were never clear-cut. For example, in a response to a request by the Assistant Commissioner at Gaborone, W.H. Surmon, to observe a closed season and protect various species, Chief Sebele of Bakwena wrote a letter in 1894 in which he stated:

It has been my wish for some years that a closed season should be observed regarding species of rare game...My people, the true Bakwena, do not agree with my ideas on the subject and have already said that my ideas are far too strict regarding game. But with your assistance I shall really

do my best in the matter (BNA S. 159/4).

It is unclear from these words whether Sebele truly hoped to receive colonial assistance in instituting a closed season, or whether he was calling their bluff. Either way, in this case the response on the part of the colonial authorities was one of retreat. Surmon then wrote to the Colonial Secretary at Vryburg that:

I think it would not be advisable to make any alterations in the game law at present and that it would be better to request the Chiefs to carry out His Honour's proposals amongst their own people as far as practicable in their own territories (BNA S. 159/4).

Whether such a recommendation came out of a recognition that it was in fact foreigners, and not locals who posed the greatest threat to wildlife, or a wariness towards potentially increasing resistance to colonial rule (or most likely elements of both) the colonial authorities at this early stage in the Administration clearly hoped to avoid entanglement with local inhabitants over the politics of wildlife management.

This, however, would change with time. By 1934 the administration had assumed the power to issue through the chiefs any order thought desirable for the protection and preservation of game. More broadly, they retained the right to intervene in the management of land when considered "desirable", which included regulating the movements of livestock, and preventing or controlling veld-burning. As Schapera (1943) sagely recognized, this of course meant "that the native ownership of the Reserves was not absolute." Furthermore, the Tribal lands and Crown (state) lands did not exist in isolation from one another, and so wildlife conservation measures taken by the British government on Crown lands necessarily affected the Tribal lands in various ways as well. For example, in response to the 1933 International Convention on the Preservation of Fauna and Flora in the Natural State (at which provisions were made for protection of species and creation of national parks by contracting colonial governments) the Protectorate began to prepare legislation enabling game reserves and sanctuaries to be established in order to preserve various game species. On the one hand, the first "protected areas" were on Crown land (not Tribal land) and because the no-hunting legislation was aimed at foreigners, Spinage (1991) has reported that some recognition of indigenous rights usually prevailed. On the other hand, various pieces of archival evidence illuminate an argument to the contrary—that the rights of the indigenous population were in fact frequently circumscribed in direct and indirect ways. In a

letter to the Commanding Officer in Kasane in 1932, Chief Konkwenwa of Munga voiced his objection to Resident Commissioner Charles Rey's plans to create the Chobe Game Reserve (on the Chobe Crown lands) and prohibit hunting in the area. Interestingly, his objection came on the grounds that a no-hunting rule threatened his people's personal safety rather than their means to a livelihood or food source. He wrote,

Morena, I your servant say that we have heard our law of guns and we are sad...We your people have been accustomed to carry guns wherever one wishes to go, we will not be able to walk with only hands...Lions this time in winter and we shall be finished, we shall be killed by lions... (BNA S. 238/15).

The establishment of the Chobe Game Reserve also faced opposition from the Director of Veterinary Services. In a debate foreshadowing current-day conflicts between wildlife and cattle interests, the Director stated in 1961 that "the cattle industry can never be put onto a proper footing if we are going to consider the game...this Territory, in its present financial position, cannot afford the luxury of a Game Department..." (BNA S. 584/3). While the Director may or may not have been looking out for the interests of the cattle "industry" on behalf of indigenous cattle owners, his comment nevertheless speaks to the way in which the protection of game, from the early period of colonial administration and onwards, has competed with and frequently limited cattle rearing, the primary livelihood of most Batswana.

Apart from these "spill-over effects" of conservation activities on Crown lands, wildlife laws increasingly came to affect natives as well as foreigners during the colonial period because tribal regulations concerning wildlife hunting continued to serve as essentially instruments of acceptance of the main points of the principal law (Spinage 1991). For example, the Proclamation of 1962, which created controlled hunting areas in which hunting quotas were set, stated that "except where the context requires otherwise, this Proclamation shall not apply to Africans in tribal territories". Yet each tribe developed a set of Regulations almost identical to the provisions of the main law within their own territories. Tribesmen now had to pay to hunt and the hunting of certain species was prohibited.⁴ In 1979 however, these customary laws were completely replaced by principal law of universal application. Batswana in the Tribal lands were no longer exempt from statutory wildlife law and hunting regulations, and principal law thus became both *de jure* and *de facto* law throughout Botswana (Spinage

1991). With this move, the legacy of indirect bifurcated rule was erased, and local Batswana found themselves subject to the exact same rules initially targeted towards foreign (European) hunting parties who had been responsible for the destruction of all big game in Botswana, for either sport or trade purposes. As Thompson has pointed out in the case of English hunting laws, changes in hunting regulations must thus be understood in relation to larger unfolding political processes—in the case of England, the formation of the nation state and shifting class relations, and in Botswana, the end of bifurcated colonial rule (Thompson 1975).

Conservation vis-à-vis land degradation in the newly independent nation (1960s to 1980s)

Concerns about over-hunting and the decline of wildlife were the driving force behind Botswana's conservation laws from the end of the nineteenth century through the mid twentieth, but by the 1960's land degradation had replaced over-hunting as the conservation issue of greatest concern. Conservation and environmental management were no longer solely focused on the prevention of over-hunting and species decline; now at the forefront of policy-makers' minds was the question of how to prevent over-grazing by cattle on the range. The issue of land degradation was relevant to cattle and wildlife interests alike. Cattle ranchers worried about the decreased quality of fodder for their cows while wildlife conservationists were concerned about the expansion of agricultural land into the "little-known and delicate areas" of the Kalahari (which supported huge herds of wildlife) as the fertile agricultural areas became downgraded and ranchers moved outwards (Campbell 1973). As early as 1967, expatriate conservationists began to consider land zoning and "management areas" as a response to this expansion. In 1974, for example, a specific proposal for a category of land termed "Wildlife Management Area" stated,

Certain areas...should...be classified and gazetted and defined as those areas which are to be used for the maintenance of wildlife...to the exclusion of other forms of land use, particularly agriculture or grazing...The main intent in establishing Wildlife Management Areas is to ensure that until long-range planning is carried out, these lands are not ruined by other land use activities... (Sherburne et al. 1974: 65).

The implications of such new categories of land for rural livelihoods

and agrarian land politics cannot be overemphasized, and are discussed below.

But first, why had land degradation so quickly become of such great concern, and what were the reasons for the increased pressure by cattle on the land in the first place? To understand the shift in conservation priorities that resulted from material alterations in the landscape requires an examination of the changes in Botswana's political economy in relation to cattle, the primary mode of livelihood for most Batswana. What follows is a review of the way in which, starting in the 1930s, the political economy of cattle underwent a series of transformations that had major ramifications for social relations among ranchers, herd management practices and, as a result, the condition of the land itself. Specifically, I will rely on the work of Pauline Peters, who in her book *Diving the Commons: Politics, Policy and Culture in Botswana* traces the increasing individualization of communal range in Botswana and its effects on changing property relations and resource management of water and pastures in the second half of the twentieth century.

The pressure that came to be exerted on available supplies of water and pasture in Botswana can be attributed to the significant growth of the Tswana national cattle herds since the late nineteenth century. Early on in the colonial period, ivory, ostrich feathers and skins of fur-bearing animals were the principal trade commodities, but by the end of the nineteenth century this trade had essentially collapsed, and cattle began to constitute by far the most important source of income from trade (Schapera 1943). Markets for livestock products in Southern Africa expanded consistently since independence and the Tswana herds followed suit. Despite a number of economic and natural disasters in the first thirty years of the last century, the national herd increased almost six-fold in this time and then doubled between 1939 and 1957 (Campbell 1978)⁵. Peters attributes this increase in herd size in part to factors such as the infusion of money from soldiers demobilized after the Second World War, the resources directed to disease control and veterinary services, and the reinvestment of earnings from the expanded livestock market and from those who went to South Africa (Peters 1994). Most importantly, Peters details what is now widely recognized as the most significant cause of herd growth and dispersal of the herds throughout the country's rangeland—the development of boreholes and stock dams which facilitated the opening up of previously unused pastures.

Boreholes were developed as part of a new administrative emphasis on water and water development in the 1930s. Although Tswana

cattle owners had been pressing throughout the 1920s for better water supplies like those of their borehole-reliant South African neighbours, it was not until the 1930s that their interests aligned with those of the colonial administration as the protectorate underwent a shift in policy from order to development. Encouraged both by resident commissioner Charles Rey and tribal elites, the central place of water development in the overall economic progress of the protectorate quickly became an accepted position. Boreholes were a means to create a permanent source of water in a drought prone range, and they facilitated permanent use of pastures that up to then could be used only seasonally. On the ground, they also meant significant changes in rights to land and resources. To operate the new boreholes, borehole syndicates were formed which introduced private ownership into the communal range. These privately owned boreholes guaranteed privileged access to valuable resources to a select few, and were distinguished from free water at rivers and pans, which remained common property. Unsurprisingly, these syndicates were comprised of the chiefly elite and leading men of a given ward—the only ones who were able to afford to undertake borehole development in the first place and the ones who pushed, and succeeded, in establishing a type of organization that gave them leeway in providing exclusive rights to water resources and in separating them from the rest of the community. In this way, land formally under communal tenure was in practice disproportionately appropriated by a minority of users (borehole owners) at the expense of other users (both cattle keepers and those who did not own stock) (Peters 1994).

The use of permanent water sources led not only to a greater degree of socio-economic differentiation, but also ecologically resulted in localized over-grazing due to a reduction in mobility and regular herding and increased settlement of herders around water points. Furthermore, the grazing of the cattle in new areas increased productivity of certain privileged ranchers and gave additional momentum to the growth of herds belonging to those who were wealthy enough to bear the costs of establishing their own boreholes (Gulbrandsen 1996). In large numbers, cattle—because they are selective grazers and concentrate mainly on grasslands (unlike wild animals which graze on drought resistant plants)—reduced range and shrub land to near-desert conditions and, in some places initiated the onset of desertification (Mordi 1991). Thus the development of boreholes stood as a contradiction in itself—designed to increase productivity and spread out grazing pressure, they in fact led to massive, albeit localized, overgrazing throughout all the areas in

which boreholes were introduced.

Eventually, the problems of overuse produced by these expansionary programmes of water development were recognized by the government, and led to intense fears about overgrazing in a fragile environment. The fear of uncontrolled overgrazing and degradation of the range that emerged in the 1930s mounted steadily in succeeding decades, and by the 1970s, the expansionary view had lost strength in the face of anxiety about finite resources (Peters 1994). This anxiety emerged in part from the specificities of Botswana's particular situation, but also went along with a growing concern for conservation in other parts of colonial Africa. The centrality of policies devised to halt land degradation can be traced to several key influences, including the broader international alarm provoked by the American Dust Bowl, the experience of vegetation changes in dry areas in southern Africa, the perceived deficiencies of settler farming practices, and developments in natural sciences in Europe (Anderson 1984; Beinart 1984; Grove 1987). For example, colonial governments throughout Africa seized upon stories of degradation in the Sahel to blame African farmers and pastoralists for advancing desertification and to argue for increased centralized rule and planning (McCann 1999).⁶ These kinds of transnational practices and scientific discourses, whether they concern biodiversity or degradation, have been shown to take on distinct shape and specificity at different localities and at different times (Lowe 2006). Botswana in this case has been no exception. Picking up on contemporary discourse instigated by Garrett Hardin's (1960) thesis on the "tragedy of the commons," which purported that common property would lead to individual maximization and eventually collapse of a resource base, government officials in Botswana blamed the problem of overgrazing on the customary form of communal land holding. Roe has pointed out that the Tragedy thesis was directly invoked by an advisor to the government of Botswana in the early stages of formulating a grazing land policy (Roe 1993). Accordingly, the president of Botswana, Seretse Khama, in 1970 stated that "We cannot permit the traditional methods to continue because under the pressure of an expanding human and animal population, they are ruining the land and the pasture which represents the only livelihood for most of our people" (Khama 1970). The application of the "tragedy of the commons" thesis in Botswana illustrates clearly how discourses and scientific narratives travel, frequently from Europe or America to the developing world, and are subsequently taken up and used by different actors in different situations (Fairhead and Leach 2003). In this case,

we see how conservation policy in the newly independent Botswana reflected both reality on the ground—overgrazing and the threat of land degradation—as well as the discursive power of contemporary Western-derived theories of resource management.

The response to the critique of communal tenure, then, was the promotion of more formal and exclusive rights to land—essentially the conversion of the commons to privately held land. While wholesale enclosure was out of the question both politically and practically, the government was able to justify a policy which reorganized the tribal system of land holding in the grazing areas by emphasizing the need to control grazing and thus prevent further range degradation on the one hand and also increase livestock production on the other (Peters 1994). The 1975 National Policy on Tribal Grazing Land rezoned the tribal grazing lands into three types: commercial, where groups would be given exclusive rights to specific areas and ranch development would be encouraged; communal, in which the traditional existing tenure system would continue to be used with a few modifications; and reserved areas, which would be unallocated land “reserved for the future” as “safety nets for the poorer members of the population” (Government of Botswana (hereafter GOB) 1975).

While academics and policy-makers have extensively documented the largely negative socio-economic and ecological impacts of the rezoning of commercial and communal land (Hjort and Ostberg 1978; Arntzen, Ngcongco et al. 1986; Schapera and Comaroff 1991), the category of “reserved land” has in some ways been largely forgotten. After briefly recounting in broad strokes the effects of commercial/communal re-zoning, I argue that there is a need to re-examine this third land category, and that in fact current-day conservation politics in wildlife areas can only be understood in relation to the evolution of this category of “reserved” land under the TGLP.

The largest problem that emerged after initial implementation of the TGLP resulted from the fact that the assumption that there were vast areas of open unused land in Botswana to allocate to commercial ranching was incorrect. The alleged emptiness of the land resulted in the displacement of poorer rural groups, and by the 1980s, substantial numbers of ranches had been de-zoned to give room to communal rights upon which they had encroached (Machacha 1986). Second, the policy sought to relieve pressure on the communal grazing areas by removing large herds to commercial areas, but in practice the large owners both gained exclusive use of commercial areas and continued to

use the communal areas. Furthermore, the small-scale livestock owners who lacked water rights and the non-stockholders who were forced to move out of newly zoned commercial areas moved into the communal areas. Thus, the policy accomplished the exact opposite of what it set out to do: the stocking rate of livestock dropped in commercial areas and in fact rose in the communal areas (Hitchcock and Nkwe 1986). As a state-sponsored livestock management policy, the TGLP clearly intensified struggles over access to resources and sharpened patterns of socio-economic inequality (Berry 1994). Employing Hardin's "tragedy of the commons" thesis as simultaneously an explanation and solution to the problem of land degradation, the government of Botswana instigated a shift in the rhetoric of rights and claims to land and resources, which worked to encode a new world of social relations (Schapera and Comaroff 1991).

Yet the changes in commercial and communal land rezoning were largely confined to the eastern regions of Botswana where cattle ranching was most extensive. How can the TGLP, as a conservation strategy to prevent land degradation, be understood in relation to current wildlife conservation policies, which primarily affect people living in the northern region of Botswana near the Okavango Delta and surrounding national parks? One might imagine that when small farmers near the Delta complain about limited grazing land, they are responding to pressures from both the increasing privatization of grazing land (and ensuing deterioration of communal land) under TLGP on the one hand, and the restrictions placed on land use under more recent wildlife conservation policies on the other. However, these processes take place in geographically disparate regions, and so a "squeezed from both sides" thesis is not an adequate explanation of why human-wildlife conflicts are so intense near the northern protected areas. To understand the roots of current day conservation politics around the Delta, I argue that we need to look at the way in which the oft-forgotten component of TGLP—the "reserved lands"—articulated the policy aims of wildlife conservationists and ultimately led to the creation, and more importantly expansion, of what are now referred to as Wildlife Management Areas.

Conservation vis-à-vis wildlife (late 1970s through 1980s)

Peters has written that reserved land, intended by TGLP to safeguard the interests of the poor, was never designated (Peters 1994). However this is not entirely true. Under the TGLP, the reserved areas were defined in two categories: those for future use by people with only a

few cattle, and those reserved for alternative uses, such as wildlife, mining and cultivation. In both cases, these targeted poorer members of the population were understood to mean the Remote Area Dwellers (commonly referred to as Bushmen or Basarwa in local nomenclature). While officially no reserve areas were demarcated under the Tribal Grazing Lands Policy planning process, it is critical to recall that during the same time period, wildlife conservationists were developing proposals for wildlife management areas that would exclude forms of land use such as agriculture or grazing in order to maintain viable wildlife populations. Given the overlap on paper between “reserve land” and “wildlife management area”, it is unsurprising that in 1986, the Botswana Government put forth a wildlife conservation policy that stated that “The WMAs would be considered as a form of zoning of land for wildlife in the Reserved Areas category as differentiated by the TGLP” (GOB 1986).

Distinguishing WMAs from national parks and game reserves which were seen as primarily preservation areas, the policy stated that “In WMA’s, on the other hand, sustained wildlife utilization will be actively encouraged. Some WMA’s adjacent to National Parks/Game Reserves will act as buffer zones to prevent conflict between the latter and areas of more intensive agricultural uses. Others will provide protection to migrating wildlife by safeguarding migratory corridors.” The intentions for reserve land and WMAs thus seem almost perfectly aligned. In practice, however, the co-opting of the concept of reserve lands by conservationists promoting WMAs has meant that certain areas never initially imagined to be zoned a wildlife area have in fact become swept up in the zoning of WMAs. Specifically, land that is not solely occupied by Basarwa who own few cattle and rely on wildlife for subsistence—in other words land occupied by farmers and herders who do not want their use rights circumscribed by wildlife interests—has been included in plans for wildlife management areas. These have increased in size over time. Spinage (1991) argues that they increased in size when one of the main objectives of wildlife management areas explicitly became the safe-guarding of animal migration routes. A 1978 plan for wildlife management areas in which the areas were relatively isolated from one another thus became unsatisfactory, and by 1987 the WMAs had been extended to cover some 22.5% of the country, occupying some of the previously unzoned land and also some State land (Spinage 1991). While the Wildlife Conservation Policy of 1986 stated that WMAs should only be established in areas marginal for

livestock, they undeniably were zoned in regions in which rural people were actively practicing agriculture, including cattle rearing. These areas may indeed have been marginal for livestock rearing relative to the eastern hardveld regions of Botswana (certainly in the tsetse fly infested region of the Okavango Delta itself livestock rearing was not an option), yet the fact remains that the wildlife management areas now extend significantly beyond the Remote Area Dweller settlements that the TGLP policy-makers initially envisioned developing for wildlife utilization.

Competing imaginaries for land-use

A close look at the processes through which wildlife management areas were formed in Botswana helps immensely in understanding how, in a country as vast and as sparsely populated as Botswana, there arose such intense conflict between human and wildlife interests. While government officials and NGOs may consider WMA land to be marginal for livestock and wildlife tourism to be a more ecologically appropriate form of land use, the farmers who live in these areas do not necessarily share the same vision of appropriate land use—what Peet and Watts (1996) term an “environmental imaginary”—for those regions. The zoning of WMAs grew out of a larger top-down technocratic process of land allocation initiated by the TGLP that assumed a blank slate upon which prescriptions for ecologically and economically suitable types of land use practices could be made, and corresponding land use zones carved out. This process completely overlooked the everyday practices of the people who survived on the land and the alternative environment imaginaries that they in turn held.

As James Ferguson has documented, development projects that seek to “rationalize” livestock production in Southern African rarely take into account the cultural rules that make livestock a special domain of property and are reinforced through a range of social forces and interests (Ferguson 1994). These projects assume that farmers are backwards and adhere to “traditional” livestock customs only because of lack of knowledge and an absence of necessary technical inputs. The rationale underlying conservation-and-development projects that take place on WMA land in Botswana is much the same, in that livestock production is understood by technocrats to be inefficient relative to wildlife utilization, and thus replaceable as a type of livelihood (Arntzen 2003; Arntzen, Setlhogile et al. 2007; Schuster and Steenkamp 2007).

Like farmers in Lesotho however, people in Botswana keep cattle

for a multitude of reasons that are woven into the fabric of Tswana social, economic and political life in complex ways. To understand why technocratic plans for WMA lands have often “failed” in their own terms (that is, inhabitants of these areas do not now suddenly value wildlife as a source of livelihood over cattle), a critical examination of what we might call the Tswana “agrarian imaginary”—their vision of materially appropriate environmental practice, particularly in relation to cattle-rearing—is in order.

In Botswana, cattle, unlike wildlife which is owned by the state, are aspects of a household’s property. Cattle affirm and reinforce a household’ self-worth and self-esteem, and still today herd size serves as an estimator of a man’s wealth. A man with many cattle can lend his cattle to others to herd for him (called the *mafisa* system) and obtain their services for other purposes and their support in public life. Furthermore, a wealthy man with many cattle is generally respected and able to exercise much influence in tribal affairs. Schapera has documented that for these reasons, and because historically cattle were the most important medium of exchange, cattle in Tswana society pre-European contact were sought after more eagerly than any other commodity. He adds that since the arrival of the Europeans, cattle became even more necessary as they acquired additional value as mediums of exchange (that is, their sale was the principal local source of cash revenue) and began to be used extensively as draught animals with ploughs and wagons (Schapera 1955).

More recently, Peters has described the way in which cattle continue to be connected to Botswana’s identity as much as it is a store of wealth, and a means of production for many in Botswana (Peters 1994). Cattle are both a source of cash income from sales and also a store of wealth for income earned from wage and self-employment. Cattle are still used as draft animals and they produce milk, meat and other products. They provide the animals needed for bridewealth, ritual slaughter, loans and others transfers upon which Tswana social relations rest. For example, in many families, family members take turns going to town or other countries to work, leaving the others to care for the cattle which then become the product and supporter of the family. Livestock are thus the symbolic and practical means for ensuring the social reproduction of the family and society. Notably, the building of a family is understood to entail not only marriage, birth and child-raising, but also the parallel activity of building a herd. Cattle are treated as family property in that each member of a family is recognized as having a right to support from

family property, especially cattle. Splitting a family herd can threaten certain strategies of social reproduction that depend on cattle as well as materially diminish the overall growth of the herd by reducing its reproductive and recuperative capacity. Also, the maintenance of the family herd is important for certain economies of scale involved in the construction and maintenance of cattle posts and kraals, in labour for herding and in fees for water. In this way, cattle bind individuals within and across generations and families.⁷

In a book on man and cattle in Africa, Mtetwa says that, “It is not infrequent that a communication barrier may arise between a technical expert because of the single purpose rationality on which his advice is based and the pastoralist, because of the multi-purpose rationality of which cattle ownerships occupies” (Mtetwa 1982). Similarly, land-use planners and wildlife conservationists attempting to implement conservation-and development programmes on WMA land in Botswana often fail to recognize that what they see as an ecologically unsuitable, economically irrational and easily convertible land use practice is in fact a deeply rooted agrarian activity that makes a great deal of “sense” when evaluated on its own, quite different, terms. As Swatuk has noted, “Of primary interest to all Batswana is the ability to cope with drought; of secondary interest is the ability to effectively deal with livestock disease... Wildlife and conservation, in contrast, are very much tertiary or specialist interests” (Swatuk 2005: 108).

The zoning of WMAs in livestock areas not initially designated as reserve areas is of course not the only cause of conflict between human and wildlife interests. In the 1960s and 1970s, people were forcibly removed out of certain rural areas to create national parks and reserves, inciting localized resentment towards Botswana’s system of national parks and reserves. In other places, such as the Chobe Enclave, communities found themselves hemmed in on all sides by protected land, resulting in high levels of crop raiding, livestock attacks and decreased access to markets (Gupta 2013). However, the WMAs are unique in that they represent an opening up to outside interests of what originally were self-governed tribal reserves. As Hughes has documented in Zimbabwe, tribal reserves which were once “off-limits” to external colonizing forces are now becoming subject to ongoing colonization under the banner of “conservation” (Hughes 2006). In Botswana as well, inhabitants of tribal lands who once exercised a relatively high degree of freedom in natural resource use are finding their rights pertaining to land use increasingly circumscribed. In the past, Tswana had no fixed limits to the size or

number of fields a man could hold, and a man⁸ could not be deprived of his right to cultivate land by anybody but the Chief, and even then only under special circumstances. Every man was entitled to free grazing and water for his cattle, and members of a given ward could move their cattle about their district (an extensive tract of country) as freely as they pleased, without asking permission from others (Schapera 1955). As described above, hunting activities became restricted when statutory law came to apply to all inhabitants, foreign and native alike, yet even so, it was not until the establishment of WMAs that local residents were strongly pushed to give up their personal hunting rights and sell their quotas to foreign tourist companies. In this way, the creation of wildlife management areas represents a new conjunctural moment in the genealogy of conservation in Botswana.

Conclusion

As Pamela McElwee has noted, conservation with a capital “C” is not a monolith or a given entity—it assumes different forms at different points in time (McElwee 2008). Likewise, the field of critical geography recognizes that places are actively produced, both materially and discursively, and in often contested and changing ways (Kosek 2006; Bobrow-Strain 2007; Hollander 2008). The identity of a place may be conceived of differently by different people, based on varying “ways of seeing” the landscape, and it is not uncommon that through violence, and highly unequal relations of power, one envisioned identity is pursued at the expense of others (Brown 2004). In Botswana, the practices of and discourses about conservation have shifted their trajectory over time. A concern with game preservation in the colonial era was subsumed by fear of land degradation in the newly independent nation state. The primary policy designed to mitigate land degradation, the Tribal Grazing Land Policy, was then appropriated by a new round of wildlife conservationists, who used its “reserve land” designation to further the expansion of wildlife management areas in the 1980s. The result has been the zoning of land for wildlife utilization in areas beyond those occupied by solely Remote Area Dwellers. This has led to a high degree of human-wildlife conflict in the country, because instead of zoning for wildlife utilization in areas occupied by non-cattle owning populations (i.e. the Basarwa), as was envisioned under the TGLP, wildlife management areas have been established in areas inhabited by those who rely on cattle for their livelihoods. Inevitably, cattle rearing is at odds with the conservation of wildlife, and farmers often clash with wildlife, especially predators.

Looking forward, the fate of wildlife management areas in Botswana is by no means certain. Yet as of now they appear to be part of an unfolding process in which the environmental imaginary of wildlife conservation technocrat planners has gained traction amongst government bureaucrats, NGOs and donors alike, and is guiding policy-making decisions pertaining to land zoning and use. Whether or not alternate imaginings of materially and ethically appropriate environmental practices for these contested places will be erased, or perhaps re-asserted, remains to be seen.

Notes

1. Similar legislation was simultaneously introduced in other African colonies as well in order to control “indiscriminate hunting” (Kock 1995). For example in Kenya a wildlife regulation was promulgated in 1898 followed by the establishment of a Game Department as well as hunting blocks and concessions in 1907 (Kock 1995).
2. However in 1910, a Court interpretation of the Foreign Jurisdiction Act of 1890 declared that the Crown had a right to legislate for and subject to its administration all of the inhabitants of a protected country (Spinage 1991).
3. During the Protectorate Administration era, the chiefdoms were established in eight “Native Reserves.” These were the Reserves of Bangwato, Bakwena, Bangwaketse, Batawana, Bakgatla, Balete, Barolong and Batlokwa (later called eight main tribes in the constitution). After these tribal boundaries had been defined, the remaining land within the Protectorate which had not been claimed (excluding freehold land) was declared Crown land to be under the jurisdiction of the colonial administration. The tribal territories became known as “native reserves.” Within the native reserves the chiefs, theoretically, retained autonomous rule and controlled all aspects of tribal life (Machacha 1986).
4. Though it should be recognized that prohibition of hunting of various species under *melao* (Chief’s decrees) had begun much earlier, starting in 1892 with a ban on giraffe hunting without permission from the chief (Spinage 1991).
5. There was a high rate of growth of the herd following crashes in the cattle population due to rapid re-stocking. Between 1904 (just after the 1895-96 rinderpest epidemic) and 1934, the herd grew from 140,608 to 1,301,608, with an annual growth rate of 7.7%, while from 1936 (just after drought and food and mouth disease outbreak in 1933-35) to 1959, the herd grew from 550,050 to 1,326,050, with an annual growth rate of 3.9% (Isakson 1984).
6. Theories linking African farming practices to land degradation remain pervasive, despite current evidence that highlights overall global warming as a cause of desertification (McCann 1999).
7. See West 2006 for a detailed example of the way in which conservation-as-development program intervention relating to natural resource use can severely disrupt the social relations that knit together a given community.
8. The limitations of women’s rights within Tswana society itself is of course another question of great substance, but beyond the scope of this paper.

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