



Talking Claims: Discursive Strategies in Contesting Property

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Summary. — This article examines discursive strategies in the struggle over property rights in rural Zimbabwe. Stories told by villagers and the owners or former owners of nearby large commercial farms are analyzed in terms of their framing of the issue, the voice of the teller, time frame and audience. Villagers' stories are shown to legitimize present claims in terms of past recognition of their access rights. Farmers' stories are shown to attempt to shift part of the legitimacy of their property claims onto grounds of ecological stewardship.

...the power to make rhetoric is better than no power at all (Zagacki, 1992, p. 52).

Let me tell you a story. For all I have is a story (Trinh, 1989, p. 119).

1. INTRODUCTION: TWO STORIES OF A FENCE¹

This story about stories begins with a story of two stories. The action commences in the Communal Areas of Zimbabwe. Starting in the late 19th century, European settlers seized most of the best land, forcing African residents onto small patches of poor quality, poorly watered land which have been known by various names over time — they are currently known as Communal Areas (Moyo *et al.*, 1991; Ranger, 1967; Palmer, 1977). Cheek by jowl with the Communal Areas are large-scale commercial farms of thousands of acres owned by whites and, since Independence, to a lesser extent by wealthy black commercial farmers.² A flurry of fencing over the past 60 years has resulted in a communal area commons that is shrinking in two directions. First, the land area is shrinking. Second, the trees are literally shrinking — in some places there are few large trees left. So whether you look out or up, the resource base is reduced. This, not surprisingly, has led to contestations over property by many means.

Our first story was told by the white former owner of a large-scale commercial farm which in the 1960s was taken in hand for the first time and fenced with barbed wire. The fence ran along the bank of river which separated the Communal Area village from the commercial farm. While it was a give-and-take fence

(that is, every other pool in the river including all sacred pools was supposed to be given in the villagers) and was sited with the help of the chief, it was resented by local people, who had long used the farm for grazing and tree products. Even the commercial farmer acknowledged that it was hardly surprising that people who had used the area for so long thought of it as theirs. His tale:

"In 1966 we put up the fence. That's when the war started." He saw the obvious astonishment registered on my face — the war in 1966? Here? "No, not that war," he said, dismissing the liberation war, "the war of the fence!" So it transpired, he related, that every time he put the fence up, the people took action. They didn't just climb over the fence. They didn't just cut the wire. They took the fence down and carried it away. All in all, he estimated, they carried off 20 kilometers of fencing.

Across the river the old men of the village also tell a story. In their rendering, the white former owner "used to let us use the farm. We could go there with our cattle and collect firewood and fruit and *harati*."³

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Remembering my interview with the farmer, I asked, "But didn't he put up fences?" Oh yes, they answered, but he put in gates for us to use.

The colonial history of Zimbabwe and the character of the white farmer in question make it highly likely that the gates did not exist. I will argue here that the stories about these mythical gates opening through a real fence from a resource-poor area into a farm with much needed grazing, fruit, fuelwood, poles, edible insects and medicine were part of deliberate discursive strategies of both commercial farmers and villagers to articulate and assert the basis and legitimacy of their own claims to the commercial farm land and its resources. They illustrate the role of stories in property relations and claims.

This is not simply another example of the use of directed rhetoric and moral suasion as part of a overt struggle over property claims (Fortmann, 1990). Rather the work of the stories discussed here (which rarely, if ever, featured openly in Zimbabwean struggles over property) is to create and maintain an often localized discourse in the context of which other parts of the struggle proceed. It is commonplace to say that property rights are constantly being renegotiated. The argument here is that these stories constitute part of a discursive strategy that is a crucial component of the process of renegotiation. Stories are an important oral manifestation of a local discourse seeking to define and claim "local" resources (Peters, 1984). They serve to bolster people's confidence in their own claims (Rappaport, 1990).

This article proceeds in three parts. First, the role and construction of stories is explored both generally and specifically in regard to property. Second, stories from villagers and commercial farmers in Zimbabwe are presented and analyzed. Third, the implications for property research are briefly considered.

2. THE POWER AND WORK OF STORIES

Story telling is not just for the amusement of small children by night or visiting researchers by day. Rather it plays a strategic and serious role in the life of communities (Carr, 1986, p. 161). Invoking J. L. Austin, John B. Thompson (1984, pp. 6, 207) urges us to remember that "speaking is a way of acting and not simply a way of reporting or describing what is done," emphasizing that "...narrative should be seen...also as a medium through which...events are produced." This theme is picked up in arguments for the power of story and narrative found both in stories told about stories and in empirical evidence of the role of narratives. We shall see that stories have the power to frame and create understanding; to create and maintain moral communities; to validate current actions; and to empower, encourage and relieve their tellers. The understanding of past and current events shaped

by stories forms a discursive strategy through which struggles are waged.

Emblematic of stories about the power of stories are two folk tales recounted by Ramanujan (1991, pp. 42–45). In the first, the telling by a poor widow of the story of her ill-treatment by her family demolishes the building around her. Here the power of stories is physically manifested. In the second, a story left untold causes great mischief until the person who knows the story tells it. Here the lesson is that there are stories that must be told — discourses which require maintenance. It underscores that we must work at remembering who we are and what we are entitled to and why. Says Ramanujan (1991, p. 46):

Like chain letters, traditions have to be kept in good repair, transmitted, or beware, such tales seem to say, things will happen to you. You cannot hoard them.

...Daughters, wealth, knowledge and food must circulate, these are *danas*, or gifts, that, in their nature, must be given. Communities and generations depend on such exchanges and transfers. Stories are no different.

Stories have at least three kinds of work: to create meaning and validate action, to mobilize action, and to define alternatives. First, in their telling, stories develop meaning out of a set of events or experiences. Carr (1986, p. 4) terms narrative "our primary (though not our only) way of organizing our experience." He stresses the activist aspects of narrative, especially the role of leaders' speech that unites a group (or validates present action) by "express[ing] what it is about, where it has come from, and where it is going" (p. 156). A second part of the work of old and new stories is to mobilize action. While stories may be told by the elite to justify their use of power, they are also told by those who do not possess power in order to try to swing the balance and to remind themselves of the worthiness of their cause (Adas, 1992, p. 117; Rappaport, 1994). Foley (1990, p. 484), arguing for the importance of moral appeals in the mobilization of communities, states that "...an interpretation and evaluation of a situation of events..." is one way "...of creating space for action, of reconstructing reality in such a way that people can be moved to act." Stories are a vehicle for transmitting and making accessible a framework of meanings, that is, a discourse. A story and the discourse it bears reminds people of what they deserve and of their ability to act.

This does not necessarily mean that people will act. Feierman (1990, p. 32) reports Tanzanian peasant intellectuals who spoke against the authority and injustice of chiefs but who nonetheless accepted their authority in practice. Thus stories and action may not be consistent. Nonetheless, stories may be laying down a discursive base for later action, a point raised by Rose (1990).

The third work of stories is to present alternative ways of looking at things. "Genders" says Ramanujan (1991, p. 53), "are genres." So too, we shall see, are races and classes.

(a) *Audiences*

Audiences are important for spoken stories in a way that they are not for the printed word.⁴ Spoken stories demand a hearer, if only the speaker herself. Ong (1982, p. 74) suggests that the very act of listening to a speaker transforms the audience and speaker into a sort of unity. If Ong is right, then the community itself is a very important audience, the act of listening to its own stories being an enactment of cohesion. Carr (1986, p. 168) tells us:

we (the communal we, again for any given community) live an ongoing communal life projecting a future before us and retaining a past behind us which is being organized prospectively and retrospectively in a narrative fashion.

Thus, a story told (by whatever means) to outsiders, is likely also to be for home consumption. A familiar example is Geertz's (1973, p. 448) analysis of cock fights as "a Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell themselves about themselves."⁵ Telling stories to the home audience has to accomplish the important work of, as Carr puts it, self-maintenance. The plight of the widow in Ramanujan's (1991) tale told in an empty house is not one whit alleviated, but she relieves herself of her suffering. Telling the story can be, as we know, cathartic for the teller who is its only audience. So too, telling a story over and over again can confirm people's common memory that at one time they had access to land and resources or that their right to land and resources was acknowledged. Thus the story of the past serves as a marker for the present.

(b) *Reconstruction of the past*

Appadurai (1991, p. 470) reminds us, "that social life is constantly being rethought, rephrased, repositioned from the point of view of the teller." Hence, Davis and Starns (1989, p. 2) assert "the working principle that whenever memory is invoked we should be asking ourselves: by whom, where, in which context, against what?"

The validity of the Davis/Starns admonition is borne out when analysis of the stories told by communities reveals that details and emphases have been changed to meet contemporary needs. Examples come from all times and all places: the tales of Mycenaean minstrels during the Greek Dark Ages (Havelock,

1963, pp. 118–125); the retelling and assertion of ancient legal privilege in the English peasant uprising of 1381 (Justice, forthcoming, p. 63); similar appeals by protesting peasants in 19th century India (Ghura, 1989, p. 68); the reframing of the role of William the Conqueror in English history and of the nature of the US Civil War (Anderson, 1991, p. 201); and contemporary reworking of Luo history (Cohen and Odhiambo, 1989, pp. 28–29).

These examples are completely predictable. For not only is tradition clearly selective in its content (Williams, 1977, p. 115), but if stories are to serve the needs of the story teller's present circumstances, then they also must, in Williams's (1977, p. 116) words, "...connect with and ratify the present." Not necessarily, I should emphasize, the present only as it is, but also the present as the story-teller feels it ought to be (Fortmann, 1990). As Carr (1986, p. 114) observed "the social past may be called up explicitly as part of a larger picture in which present concerns and activities can be placed and in terms of which they are understood."

3. NARRATIVE AND PROPERTY

The importance of stories in the realm of property has been increasingly recognized during the last decade. Feminist legal scholars West (1988) and Rose (1990) have shown the importance of stories in shaping legal theory and action. Rose (1990) points out the reliance of the Grand Old Men of Property Theory on stories to hold the awkward bits of their theories together. Echoing other scholars, she imagines the possible role of stories in the emergence of common property regimes (1990, p. 55):

Thus the storyteller, by structuring the audience's experience and imagination, helps to turn her audience into a moral community. Moreover, by structuring our experience of events, the storyteller in effect constructs our memories and consciousness, so that we can draw on this new stock to act in the future.

Rose (1990, p. 56) concludes with the role of property-focused storytelling which begins in weakness, "telling tales to power." Peters (1987, p. 193) highlights the importance of the "power to define, to attribute meaning, and to assign labels" in struggles over property rights, power that can be exercised through storytelling. Roe (1991) stresses their importance in stabilizing the assumptions of decision making.

The state, elites and local residents have all been found to construct, reconstruct and selectively use history and custom in struggles over property. Perhaps the most exotic is Rappaport's (1990, p. 191) tale of the use of orally preserved memory from pre-Incaic

times as evidence in a colonial Peruvian court case involving disputed cocoa fields. Guha (1987) portrays the appeal of a wide variety of peasantries to "custom" — variously told — in their defense of usufructuary and common property rights against an enclosing state/elite. Berry (1992) recounts how official commitments to "native law and custom" in four British African colonies evoked deliberately selective retelling of custom and history in land disputes. Goheen (1992) reports conflicting histories recalled by two small groups locked in a struggle over access to land in Cameroon. Peel (1984, pp. 113, 115, 128) describes the role of stories of the past in Ijesha society including in land disputes as a means of "justifying interested claims," noting the tendency to "rework the past so as to make it appear that past practice has governed present practice."⁶ In Zimbabwe Cheater (1990) traces the construction and reconstruction of varying myths of communal landholding to buttress changing government policy and objectives over time.

In sum, in the telling of property claims, we would expect — indeed, predict — different versions of the same event told by different claimants and even altogether different stories, depending on the repertoire of preexisting stories to which claimants have access. Moreover, we would expect not only the telling of claims by the poor and dispossessed, but also by the powerful to preempt the discourse of the powerless (Scott, 1990, pp. 18, 45–47).

4. STRUGGLES OVER NATURAL RESOURCES IN ZIMBABWE

The Communal Areas which include 41.8% of the land are home to some 57% of the population, serving as a labor reserve for the urban areas and commercial farms (Moyo *et al.*, 1991, pp. 50, 58). The day-to-day residents of many Communal Areas are mostly women, children and old men, while most able-bodied men, some women and most of the educated work in town. Small farmers in the Communal Areas contributed significantly to the increase in the nation's maize production which prior to the 1992 drought had reached self-sufficiency (Rohrback *et al.*, 1990). The present discussion of natural resources focuses on trees. Individual trees and indigenous woodlands play a critical role in the rural livelihood system providing fuelwood, poles, wood for carving, medicine, browse and grazing, mulch, edible insects, fruit, nitrogen fixation, shade and religious sites. Some villagers sell fruit, medicine, poles and fuelwood commercially both within the communal areas and in nearby towns.

While all land in the Communal Areas of Zimbabwe is officially owned by the state, in practice a variety of property relations govern places in the Communal Areas where villagers obtain natural resources. There are two types of common property:

utilized common property, that is, communal woodlands, grazing areas and rivers, and protected common property, that is, sacred groves, sacred trees and sacred pools and springs. In theory (although not always in practice) protected common property is used only under strictly controlled circumstances if at all. In some parts of Zimbabwe individuals can establish (sometimes temporary) private rights to the products of specific trees in the commons (Nhira and Fortmann, 1991). In the two research sites, tree resources in the commons were available on a first-come first-served basis subject to certain restrictions such as the prohibition against cutting wild fruit trees and trees with religious or ceremonial importance (Fortmann and Nhira, 1992). There are also two kinds of individually-held property: homesteads and arable fields, and individually annexed common property. Homesteads and arable fields are generally allocated by the chief or *sabhuku*⁷ and are inheritable but not alienable. There is a growing practice of private individuals annexing parts of communal woodlands or grazing lands by enclosing them with a fence. Annexers may extend existing fences to enclose more and more land or simply fence in a whole new area. These annexations are not considered legitimate and often cause considerable local tension because they reduce the stock of natural resources available for common use.

Villagers also obtain natural resources outside the Communal Areas on privately owned commercial farms. As access to resources located on commercial farmland has diminished over time, natural resources in the Communal Areas have come under increasing pressure. The trees on which certain edible insects are found are most plentiful on the commercial farms. Loss of access reduces one source of protein in village diets. Likewise, straight poles of a sufficient diameter for building are harder to find as more and more people must turn to the Communal Areas to find them.

In theory, Communal Area residents have reasonably secure individual tenure to residential and arable plots and villages have fairly secure tenure over communal woodlands, grazing and riverline areas. In reality, security of individual tenure varies by gender, with women's tenure depending almost entirely on their relations with men (Fortmann and Nabane, 1992a). While a marriage is intact, some women have their own fields and control over the usufruct of trees they have planted. Nonetheless a widow does not inherit real property (including trees even if she has planted them) or family herds, although the heir is required to support her. Recent court enforcement of the support requirement has led to a change in practice regarding the rights of widows. Widows are now more likely to remain in the matrimonial homestead, even controlling the means of agricultural production, although they still depend on their ability to negotiate social shoals and the law. Any rejoicing in newfound security for widows would be premature.

Divorced women have no rights in any matrimonial property including land and trees (even the trees they have planted) in the matrimonial homestead regardless of the length of marriage or who is at fault in the divorce. Many a divorced woman spoke bitterly of watching her husband's latest wife harvest the fruit of trees she herself had planted and tended. If a divorced woman remains in the matrimonial village, she may retain rights in trees she planted in community woodlots. If she returns to her natal village, however, she loses rights to these as well. Women's rights to resources in the commons are not constrained by their marital status but are based on residence.

Villages may also take actions that interfere with individual tenure. One village in this study decided to establish rotational paddocks, pastures which are fenced and grazed according to a predetermined system. When this was done, individual farmers lost their arable plots and were allocated others.

Security of village tenure also varies. With the official state emphasis on a unified Zimbabwean national identity ("we are all Zimbabweans," as opposed to the divisive tribal identities fostered by the colonial regime), villagers have been less able to defend their territory and resources against incursions by Zimbabweans from the outside (Wilson, 1987). Villages have also lost land or been moved (sometimes burned to the ground) as the result of new government policies or long standing disputes with the state over boundaries. The case of Bende Gap (Cahi, 1992; Nhira and Fortmann, 1991) illustrates the state as story teller justifying why the people had to be moved. Government officials tell a story of careful professional boundary surveys, while villagers tell a story of sloppy surveys which strayed into their grazing areas and usurped their land. The state tells stories of villagers whose agricultural and grazing practices have led to deforestation and land degradation. The villagers tell stories of broken promises and government terror tactics. The role of the state in narratives is returned to below.

Research was conducted in two villages (as defined by the local people, not the government) approximately 30 kilometers apart lying in two different agro-ecological zones.⁸ Chamitimirefu, the ecologically better endowed site, is separated by a large river from a block of large- and small-scale commercial farms. For most of its length this boundary is marked by barbed wire fences along the river bank. On the boundaries of the large-scale farms, the fences are generally constructed of metal poles with four strands of wire and tend to be on the village side of the river. The fences bounding the small-scale farms tend to have wooden poles, fewer strands of wire and to be located on the farm side of the river. Although its soil is better, its rainfall more reliable and its trees taller, the rolling area around Chamitimirefu is dotted with large outcrops of rocks which constrain agricultural

possibilities. Chamitimirefu was settled more recently than Mombe by people displaced by the alienation of land for commercial farms for whites including both the land across the river and land several hundred kilometers to the south.

Mombe, on a triangle of gently sloping land between the confluence of two small rivers, lies about five kilometers as the crow flies from a block of commercial farms. The banks of the northern river are unfenced, but the grounds of the secondary school on the northern side of the river are surrounded with a three-strand barbed wire fence with metal poles. A newly erected barbed wire fence with metal poles on the southern side of a stretch of the southern river marks the grazing lands of an adjacent village. The members of the dominant lineage of Mombe have a clear foundation story. The area was settled by the grandfather of the five current *sabhukus* in 1918, the present lines⁹ being established in 1936.

In both sites most able-bodied men work in town, while women and old men practice rain-fed agriculture, raising maize, peanuts, vegetables, mangos, lemons, guava and cattle both for domestic use and for sale. Land is plowed with teams of oxen. Drinking water in both sites is obtained from shallow wells, while cattle are watered in the rivers and in seasonal catchments. The surrounding countryside in both places is a savannah woodland, dominated by two tree species, *Brachystegia spiciformis* and *Terminalia sericea*.

One of the first things that strikes the visitor to these two sites is the amount of fencing going on — much of it post-independence fencing.¹⁰ First, black and white commercial farmers are putting up stout fences and hauling trespassers off to the police. Second, the communal farmers are fencing in paddocks and residential areas, sometimes at a massive scale. Third, villages are fencing. The village next to Mombe fenced along the river to demarcate its grazing scheme and to keep the neighboring cattle out.

This post-Independence fencing continues an intermittent process that began in the 1980s. Three recent periods particularly concern us. Whatever its legal status, a good deal of the land around Chamitimirefu, and to a lesser extent around Mombe, was in fact available for use, if only by poaching¹¹ for a long time. Beginning in the 1930s, the small-scale commercial farms were established adjacent to Chamitimirefu and were fenced. Poaching was still possible and continues to this day, but the terms of access for local villagers has become more difficult. In the 1940s farms near Mombe were given for the settlement of white soldiers from Britain and its colonies. Again the terms of access for local villagers were made more difficult. Finally, as described in the introduction, the major white landowner adjacent to Chamitimirefu fenced his land in 1966.

There is no easy way to restore access to the commons. Power relations in the two villages often seem to preclude confronting the individuals who have seized common property for their own exclusive use, although there is private grumbling and undoubtedly private poaching. The matter appears too trivial for state action. In some cases adjacent villages have chosen to divide up the commons rather than manage it jointly. Poaching goes on there too — indeed I have joined village women in poaching wood from the grazing land of the village on the other side of the southern river in Mombe. So that leaves the commercial farms. Historically, natural resources on the farms served to supplement the common property resources of the Communal Areas. Once they were withdrawn, common property resources were less easy to manage because of increased demand. Clearly it would benefit local people if they could regain legal access to the resources that have been withdrawn. In the meantime people continue to poach on the commercial farms. There is a well-worn path which goes right up to, through and beyond the stout post-Independence fence on one of the farms. Nine percent of the tree locations where people in the two villages said they got edible insects in 1990 were on the commercial farms. Moreover, small entrepreneurs persist whose sole supply of wood is on the farms.

The greatest land struggles in Zimbabwe center on the commercial farms. The following section shows the use of stories to assert claims and the legitimacy of claims to commercial farmland both by villagers and by the white commercial farmers. The story tellers variously lay down a record, create a discourse which favors their claim, render invisible inconvenient bits of history, and try to deceive the listener about what is at issue.

5. TWO STORIES

(a) *Mythical gates: claiming land with stories of the past*

Villages in the research sites tell two kinds of resource-claiming stories. For example the first type began this article. There are many versions of this story, reflecting the circumstances of different farms, farmers and villagers. They all have a storyline that goes something like this: We villagers have a right to use this land now because even the previous owner (subtext: whom we all know to have been in opposition to our best interests because he was white) recognized our rights and let us use the land (provided a gate, gave us unprocessed tobacco, let us gather firewood). If someone who was an "enemy" understood and did that, how can one of "us" (i.e. the new black owners) fail to do likewise?

It is interesting that the villagers in Chamitimirefu do not recount their victorious seizure of the fences, perhaps because in the end the fences stood against them. Rather, they recount a different kind of victory, the recognition of their rights in the form of a gate.¹²

The second type of story told by villagers has to do with the promises made by the liberation fighters (the "comrades") during the liberation war:

They told us we would get the farms after Independence. They told us all the whites would go north of the river and we would get all the land south of it.

People in the research area, like people across the countryside, suffered greatly during the liberation war (see Staunton, 1990) — and they have not received the resources they were promised by the liberation forces in return for their suffering. Villagers tell these stories to remind others (and themselves) that they have a legitimate ongoing claim to the land denied them.

(b) *Parables of good stewards: claiming land with stories of good deeds*

The white commercial farmers also tell a story to legitimate their claim to the land, a story of ecological stewardship. Their stories have two themes — proclaiming their own natural resource stewardship and portraying villagers as lacking in that stewardship. These stories feed directly into and on the "ecological crisis" discourse so in favor among international donors.

The shift from the use of wood to coal for curing tobacco and tree planting are important indicators of stewardship in these stories.¹³ One white commercial farmer, who took pride in the 10,000 eucalyptus trees he was in the process of planting, explained it was not more economical to use coal, but that he was doing it to conserve the trees. "It's a lot cheaper to burn timber than coal. But I'm not going to make my farm go derelict to save money." Another farmer who also cured tobacco with coal proudly recounted that two rotations of eucalyptus he had planted had already been cut (instead of indigenous woodland) to build improved housing for farm workers and for use as firewood. In addition he had been quite successful in growing indigenous trees.

Some white commercial farmers tell stories that portray themselves as the defenders of trees and avengers of their destruction. A young farmer showed me the stumps of two large trees, recounting how he had fired the worker who had cut them down. Other narratives simply portrayed villagers as environmentally unconcerned. One farmer characterized the profligacy of villagers' cutting practices. "When people took trees, they took everything...they don't worry about selective felling." Another farmer

remarked, "I don't understand why [the communal area people] don't do more to help themselves by planting gum [eucalyptus]." And yet another, "It's hard to get people to plant gum trees [in the communal area]."¹⁴

The double duty of the farmers' ecological discourse was illustrated in a public lecture to a well-attended meeting of a local environmental society in the capital city. Delivered to an all-white audience whose members were almost all well over 50 years old, the lecture consisted of slides of rare, large or old trees. Eleven of the 34 trees shown were associated with the victories, heroes or formative events of the colonial regime or with white farmers who had preserved a particular tree. White-owned farms were identified as the sites of some trees. The lecture thus managed simultaneously to celebrate the colonial regime and the stewardship of trees by white farmers.

The white commercial farmers, in other words, tell a story of an encroaching desert¹⁵ in which their farms are the only islands of resource stewardship. Like the villagers' mythical gates, this desert does not actually exist in the research area where the majority of villagers plant trees, sometimes in large numbers (Fortmann and Nabane, 1992a and 1992b).¹⁶ But this image of desolation serves the farmers' discursive strategy of claiming land through stewardship.

The power and persistence of this discursive strategy is indicated by prevalence of the observation that "you know that you are in the Communal Areas when the tarmac and trees stop," even though there is evidence that some commercial farms are as badly cut over as the Communal Areas. One commercial farmer observed that along the road in the commercial farms, "The trees look good but when you get inside, there's nothing." Similarly, when I flew over my field sites, one of my flying companions remarked that the farms for the most part looked no better than the Communal Areas. Some (although by no means systematic) evidence suggests that the biodiversity of tree species on commercial farms and Communal Areas is very similar. Thus the discourse persists despite evidence to the contrary.

(c) *The complex role of the state*

The state has entered these stories in various ways — as teller, listener and backdrop. As Rappaport (1990, p. 16) has noted, the character of the state affects the nature of the narrative used against it. The state, of course, is multi-faceted and multi-voiced, telling and generating multiple stories. Thus the role of the state, the stories it tells and the stories it elicits depend on which "state" is the actor. In addition to being a constant background presence, the state appears actively in three faces in the stories recounted

here. When confronted by the state in the form of land-owning high government and military officials, villagers' story is one of how white farmers recognized their entitlement to use resources, rather than a story of defiance. The state in the form of the liberation fighters and resettlement officials has told a story of entitlement to white-owned commercial farm land that resonates with villagers' own aspirations. The state in the form of the Forestry Commission has told stories of ecologically endangered land and ecologically dangerous villagers that resonate with the stories of commercial farmers. Thus even when the state is not a direct actor, it may influence the discursive strategies of others.

(d) *The stories of the farmers and the villagers compared*

We have seen that people who reside just across a river from each other tell different stories about the same place, the same time, even the same event. While these differences stand out in especially clear relief in a society strongly stratified both racially and economically such as Zimbabwe, they are a common phenomenon (Davis and Starns, 1989; Ramanujan, 1991). In addition to their content, the stories told by villagers and farmers differ in three other ways: the voice of the teller, the time frame, and the audience.

(i) *The voice of the teller*

The farmers' stories differ from the villagers' in that "we" is a forbidden voice for farmers. Farmers told their stories in a personal voice — "I" planted 10,000 eucalyptus trees. Farmers may well think "we," but they cannot say it publicly. The white colonial community to which most farmers belonged can no longer be imagined publicly (see Anderson, 1991). The farmers' voice must thus be one of personal ecological virtue. Here the story-line is both a recounting of personal ecological action (such as tree planting) and the implied necessity of defense against ecologically dangerous villagers.¹⁷

In sharp contrast, the villagers tell their story in a collective voice — "we" used the land. This is not to suggest for a moment that the villagers' "we" is not riven by lines of class, gender, age and religion. It does mean that many village collective identities can be spoken aloud.

(ii) *Time frame*

Villagers are able to draw on a longer past than farmers. The story told by villagers begins in the unspecified past (although we know that the farm in the first story was alienated around the turn of the century and the fence was built in 1966) and ends with the departure of the former white farm owner. The stories told by the farmers (with a single exception) begin in

the near present, neatly avoiding decades of tree cutting for tobacco clearing and the years of colonial oppression. The villagers' story, in other words, has ended long before the farmers' has begun. Villagers may connect to the collective past, indeed to a resurrected past, long denied them under the twisted histories perpetrated by the colonial regime. Commercial farmers no longer may make a connection to the colonial past because their narrative of their past is now discredited. Farmers can only construct a highly circumscribed personal past in which they were purportedly stewards of the land.

(iii) *The audience*

The audience to whom these stories are told is important. First, some audiences are connected to policy levers. Second, the audience determines the likelihood that a particular story will be "heard," since a story that fits the stories the audience already knows is more easily received (Hall, 1984). Moreover, who tells a story may determine the audience, and therefore determine whether a story can be heard. Third, the audience may have the power to frame the story.¹⁸

In the case at hand, both the villagers and the farmers were telling stories primarily to themselves and, of course, to the passing researcher. But telling stories does not indicate passivity on anyone's part. In clear everyday acts of resistance (Scott, 1985) the villagers continue to use commercial farm resources and they keep alive the stories of the historical recognition of their claims. The farmers (and now the villagers) maintain their fences. No one has surrendered.

The villagers' stories strategically assert obligation on the part of farm owners. In striking contrast to the Tangwena people's emphatic grounding of their claims in ancestral ownership (Moore, 1994), villagers in the study area hold up a narrative of the concessions of white former commercial farm owners as the standard against which present claims should be judged. This tactic parallels that of the residents of California forest communities who imply that customary rights ought to be the standard by which their claims to forest resources should be judged (Fortmann, 1990). The villagers in Chamitimirefu do not assert that this land was always theirs — perhaps in part because some of them had come from elsewhere some 40 years earlier. But it may also be that such an argument would not give them any purchase on the obligations of the present [black] owner of the land, who could say that the obligation to the greater African community has been discharged through his ownership.

While the villagers in the study sites had only a researcher as an outside audience, villagers elsewhere have been able to try to initiate a process of renegotiation through the local and national press. Although the government-owned media are rarely outlets for angry peasant voices, the nongovernmental press has,

since Independence, been remarkably unfettered.¹⁹ Thus the people of Bende Gap have told their story in the nongovernmental press as part of their struggle over land with the Forestry Commission (see Mutambara, 1990; *Parade*, 1990; Cahi, 1992).

Villagers lack access to the international press, who are generally too taken with national politics and natural disaster to pay much attention to struggles at the local level. This is probably of little moment, for the local press is a more logical venue for launching a renegotiation attempt and is probably more likely to pay sustained attention to its outcome. In addition, as the experiences of Amazonian Indians have shown, international exposure is not an unmitigated blessing.

While commercial farmers, who are more likely to be linked with access to a wider print media, try to tell their story of ecological virtue more widely ostensibly to ecological audiences. In the case of the lecture mentioned above, the audience was both the forbidden "we" (white Rhodesians) and a broader ecological community. Farmers' stories of tree planting and protecting (and other acts of ecological virtue such as the Save the Rhino Campaign) are framed to resonate with globalized images of Africa and international environmental concerns. It is no accident that the white farmers' story fits into the colonial narrative of the European "gift of civilization" to Africa. The counternarrative of African environmental awareness and technical competence to act on that awareness does not fit the hegemonic colonial and now postcolonial narrative of African environmental degradation²⁰. Nonetheless, the preoccupations of international journalists and the history of the white colonial regime leave few if any audiences for the farmers' carefully constructed story in the international press. While white farmers can and do publish their stories in the local "white" press, this is just another form of telling stories to themselves.

In the end, perhaps we come round to Bourdieu's understanding that the power of discourse lies in the "legitimacy or authority with which it is backed" (Bourdieu and Eagleton, 1992, p. 111). White farmers' discursive strategy tries to shift part of the legitimacy of their property claims onto ecological grounds. Part of villagers' strategy is to tell stories asserting historical recognition of the legitimacy of their claims. When they tell these stories to themselves, they keep alive a sense of the right to and need for renegotiation of property rights. When they succeed in telling them to others (as through the local press), they may ignite the process of renegotiation.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Stories turn out to be important in understanding struggles over property in three ways. First, stories lay

down a record of claims and a justification of those claims which are useful data for the outside analyst. Second, stories serve the claimants by strengthening them in their resolve as to the legitimacy of their claims. Third, if the story tellers are strategically placed, their stories will diffuse into a wider societal discourse which will strengthen their hand in waging their struggle. Thus telling stories is part of the process of renegotiating property rights, a strategy that for some story tellers may have only long-term payoff. Stories, then, are part of what Peters (1992, p. 431) calls the "how" of social and cultural transformation."

This article has focused on stories told by white commercial farmers and black villagers, only one segment of insider/outsider relations in struggles over

land and natural resources in Zimbabwe. It has touched briefly on the stories told by villagers and government officials against each other. It has not told the stories of black commercial farmers (who in the study sites were high-ranking government officials and military officers), nor the stories that are told within villages between rich and poor, men and women, or youth and elders. Nor, with the exception of the brief reference to Bende Gap, has it given much attention to the mechanisms by which stories might move beyond everyday resistance and the maintenance of claims to active renegotiation. It has not traced how these stories may have changed over time nor how changing conditions might be mapped in these stories. In the words of the endless story of scholars, that is another story.

NOTES

1. The Zimbabwe case material was collected during a year of research (1991-92) in two villages. All place names are pseudonyms. The two sites in which the research was conducted are described below.

2. Race remains an issue in Zimbabwe as will be seen in this paper in which the commercial farmers are almost all white and the villagers are all black. I have focused on white commercial farmers in this paper because unlike most black commercial farmers they perceive themselves as vulnerable to having their land confiscated. This was particularly true during the time of the research when the government had announced a policy of mandatory land sales at government-set prices.

3. *Harati* are edible caterpillars found on the *mukarati* tree (*Burkea africana*).

4. Ong (1982, p. 74) makes the telling observation that "There is no collective noun or concept for readers corresponding to "audience."

5. More accurately it is a story that certain Balinese tell themselves about themselves.

6. Peel (1984) makes the point that this reworking is by no means limited to oral cultures.

7. Literally the holder of the [tax] book, *sabhukus* are local level officials established by the British but now generally considered to be "traditional" leaders.

8. Land in Zimbabwe has been classified into four "natural regions" or agro-ecological zones based primarily on soil type and rainfall. The lower the number in this classification, the better the land. Chamitimirefu falls on the boundary of Natural Regions II and III; Mombe in NR III.

9. British colonial policy insisted on villages organized in straight lines. "Malines" remain a topic of deep discontent.

10. Peters (1992) points out the symbolic importance of

fences as a "manifest display of permanent division." It should be noted, however, that it is possible even for matronly researchers to climb over, under or through the fences in both sites.

11. The term poaching is used widely in Zimbabwe to describe communal area residents' illegal use of natural resources on commercial farms or state land. While commercial farmers and government officials consider poaching in a negative light, villagers generally consider it a legitimate albeit illegal form of counter-appropriation of resources wrested forcibly from their forebears. Villagers quite cheerfully use the word "stealing" when describing these activities in English.

12. Interestingly, one white former commercial farmer told a parallel story of recognition. A village elder, he said, told him to paint his fence wire so it could be recognized and returned to him if it was stolen. Subsequently it was stolen and the painted wire returned to him, the legitimacy of his fence affirmed. Not surprisingly, no current white farmers told such stories.

13. The thought of burning coal as environmentally sound may come as a surprise to many readers. The use of fossil fuels and the creation of air pollution obviously does not enter into the commercial farmers' equation. Rather their stewardship narrative pivots on the symbolic importance of trees.

14. As will be discussed below, the statements on gum planting are demonstrably wrong. Indeed in Mombe I frequently got my bearings from an enormous gum tree which dominated the landscape around it for a long distance. Farmers' narratives about the Communal Areas are particularly interesting because many farmers never set foot in them.

15. Others tell this story also. For example, the full color photo in an advertisement by the Forestry Commission in the government-owned newspaper portrayed the Communal Areas as a barren desert (Forestry Commission, 1991).

16. Tree planting by rural residents is found nationwide (Nhira and Fortmann, 1991).

17. Only one farmer departed from the second story line. He quite simply attributed the bulk of deforestation in Zimbabwe to white tobacco farmers. His view was consistent with villagers who attribute deforestation to the actions of the colonial regime which harvested trees for mine timbers and railway sleepers, gave commercial timber concessions to whites, and forced villagers to clear natural forest for exotic plantations and to rebuild their houses in straight lines, necessitating both clearing land and cutting roof poles (McGregor, 1991). Some early colonial observers also decried the ecological devastation caused by tree cutting by mining interests (Jennings, 1931).

18. This insight is from Jim Scott (personal communication 1994) who relates how the discovery of the "winning story" by Cambodian refugees to Thailand resulted in a short time in nearly uniform stories being told to refugee camp officials.

19. This is in sharp contrast to the era of white minority rule when the press faced draconian restrictions (Brian Murphy, pers. comm. 1993).

20. This statement might seem contrary to the recent enthusiasm for community-based natural resource management. This does not mean, however, an equal enthusiasm for local voices. For example, in a recent book entitled *Voices from Africa: Local Perspectives on Conservation* (Lewis and Carter, 1993), nearly half of the 17 chapters had white authors.

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