Violence, appropriation and resistance: Eastern and southern Africa

From time to time the WRM bulletin highlights stories, struggles and reflections from a specific part of the world. This issue is focused on the southern and eastern regions of Africa.

In order to better understand peoples' struggles across this vast region, reflecting on its history is crucial. This includes a prevalent economic system, based on a violent and racist modus operandi, which has its roots in many other forms of violence towards people's lives and livelihoods. This editorial highlights some parts of this history. And this, of course, is just the tip of the iceberg.

Colonial rule in southern and eastern Africa, going back to the 19th century, was not easily established. It needed punitive and oppressive expeditions as well as strategies and tactics aimed at destroying what was not useful to the colonizers. It also required territorial wars in order to establish a colonial "order". Agricultural systems were disrupted, with parallel impacts on forests and forest-dependant populations. Most colonial rulers adopted land-alienation policies that reserved much of the land, especially the most fertile, for concession companies, European settlers, and as 'Crown Land'. Indigenous peoples were largely forced onto less fertile lands. For example, The Land Ordinance of 1923 in Tanzania passed by the British declared all its land area –occupied or unoccupied- to be public lands and a title deed system with prominence over customary tenure. In eastern Zambia, some 900 thousand hectares of land were set aside for more than 150 thousand indigenous people. Meanwhile, about one million 700 thousand hectares were allotted to 80 European settlers. In Zimbabwe, large tracts of fertile land were grabbed from the local population and allocated to the British South Africa Company, which profited from large-scale mining activities in the region. (1)

These imposed and violent re-configurations of access and control over land and forests also imposed a change in local practices, economies and cultures because through colonial appropriation, land available to the indigenous population had been drastically reduced and communities relocated. Fallow periods were reduced, traditions and local organization were damaged, sacred places and medicinal plants were destroyed, patterns of trade were changed and the few hectares of land left for local livelihoods were mostly over-cultivated.

These violent appropriations of land also led to massive deforestation that directly affected indigenous populations. As a researcher from Washington State University states: "The large amount of deforestation in South and East Africa was a direct result of British companies logging forests to make room for gold and diamond mines." (2)

The researcher further explains how the British South Africa Company (BSAC) invested heavily in gold mines, mainly located in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). The British mine supervisors would control from around 5 thousand hectares to well over 40 thousand hectares of land. They operated gold mines on heavy machinery, cheap labour, and wood: Mine tunnels needed to be confined with wood, machinery needed wood fuel, workers needed shelter built from wood, and wooden storage rooms had to be built. When the mines would run out of timber, they would have to order it from elsewhere and this could become "quite costly". One order was a contract for 45 thousand square meters of

timber to construct railways to allow the export of minerals. It is important to highlight, though, that while the company was freely stealing land, gold and diamonds from local populations, with all the social and environmental impacts that this entailed, buying wood was still consider “costly” for their business. Nonetheless, thousands of hectares of forests were cleared to support mining. The gold mines in Rhodesia were just the start of heavy logging and deforestation in this region.

One of the most damaging gold mines was that of the Witwatersrand Gold Mining Company in South Africa. The gold deposits were first discovered in July 1886, a time where the currencies in Europe and the United States were backed up with gold held by national banks. Seven thousand Europeans settled at the mine by the end of that same year. By 1899, 100 thousand African mineworkers toiled at the mine, mainly because they were forced to earn money to pay the taxes imposed by colonizers. They were being exploited as cheap and harsh labour. (3) It is estimated that, annually, an amount of about 2 million 300 thousand US dollars was spent on buying timber, just to keep the mine functioning. They used over 16 thousand gallons of water a day, mainly from an underground aquifer. The water has become unusable for the local population, however, because of the pollution caused by the mine, in particular the poisonous acid mine drainage. (4)

Despite these violent seizures of land, livelihoods, economies and cultures, people have never ceased to resist, even in the face of severe repression. At times, their struggles were silenced, either by colonial or post-independence regimes and governments in the region, which continue at the service of an economic system that has not lost its colonial character.

This bulletin includes two articles on the severe impacts that result from monoculture tree plantations invading a region. In this case, the plantations are controlled by the Norwegian company Green Resources. One article looks at the impact of Green Resources plantations in Mozambique and the other at their operations in Uganda. Another article assesses the consequences of plantations established by the pulp and paper company Portucel in Mozambique. A contribution from Zambia outlines the many pressures on forests and peasant land from mining and agribusiness expansion to forest carbon (REDD+) projects. Another article highlights the differentiated and heavy impacts that women and girls suffer due to mineral extraction in Zimbabwe and Mozambique, as examples of the many cases from the region. An article from Zimbabwe explores the tight and crucial relationship between certain trees and animals and the livelihood of local populations. And finally, another contribution reflects on the push for building more mega-dams in the region under the discourse of generating “clean” energy; but who will benefit from this energy and who will be affected by this infrastructure?

(1) Campbell B. (1996) The Miombo in Transition: Woodlands and Welfare in Africa, page 83, http://www.cifor.org/publications/pdf_files/Books/Miombo.pdf
(2) http://history.libraries.wsu.edu/history105-06-stratton-fall2017/2017/09/01/deforestation-in-south-africa/
(3) Potenza, E. (1946) All that glitters, South African History Online – towards a people’s history, http://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/all-glitters-glitter-gold-emilia-potenza
(4) Idem 2