

MZ05

## Spirits and Natural Resources

### Key Points:

- 1** CBNRM projects are intended to incorporate local ideas in the management of natural resources.
- 2** In Mozambique, natural resources are perceived as connected with spiritual life.
- 3** Spiritual beliefs, while genuinely held, are often intertwined with local power dynamics.
- 4** Spiritual justifications have been used by locals to influence the course of CBNRM projects.

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In the current wave of CBNRM projects in Africa, local ideas are intended to be centre stage. The incorporation of local ideas requires an understanding of local paradigms of resource use and management, which are often very different from the Western paradigm. One aspect of this difference is the way in which most rural agricultural communities in Africa see natural resources, and land in particular, as connected with the spiritual life of the community. Accommodating these ideas in CBNRM projects is an important challenge. Spiritual beliefs vary from place to place. This *Briefing* considers the relationship between spirits and natural resources in an area of Ndau peoples, part of the Shona ethnic group.

### Spirits and the land in Shona beliefs

According to Shona tradition, land 'belongs' in an important sense to the spirit guardians of a chiefdom. These spirits not only own land, but also the wild natural resources that are on the land. An important role played by the spiritual guardians is to control rainfall and fertility within the Chiefdom.

The current Chiefs and other descendants of the original founders are responsible for organizing ceremonies for the spirit guardians that will ensure that the rains fall when required. Chiefs do not perform rituals themselves, however. This responsibility falls to spirit mediums, variously known as *muwiya*, *nyakwá*, *siquero*, or other names according to particular local traditions.

The ancestors are believed to have handed down a set of rules according to which people in their area must live, including rules regarding use of natural resources. If these rules are broken, both the individual transgressor and the entire community may suffer as a result. Punishment for breaking the rules of the ancestors is generally organized and overseen by the Chief.

### Rules of resource use

Each Chiefdom has a set of rules about resource use, which range from the general to the specific. When questioned about these rules, most Chiefs reply that these are rules of the ancestors, and do not require any further explanation or justification. Despite the fact that local people do not identify conservation motives for these rules, at least some of the sites designated as sacred are clearly important for their value in the ecosystem as much as in spiritual mythology. For example, watersheds and rivers often have rules forbidding cutting of trees, disposal of waste or other human disturbances.

But there are other motives behind the spiritual rules, particularly related to local power dynamics. As guardians of the spiritual realm, Chiefs and other elders assert control over the social life of the community, and exercise significant power over others. In recent attempts by outsiders to implement CBNRM projects, spiritual justifications have also been used to exercise power over the agents of CBNRM.



## Spirits and CBNRM

In the course of implementing CBNRM projects in the Chimanimani Transfrontier Conservation Area (TFCA), the issue of spiritual connections with natural resources has often arisen. The external implementers of the TFCA have been careful to respect local dictates on spiritual rules and regulations. This has played an important role in local people's capacity to control the projects.

In Mahate, the Chief initially used spiritual grounds to refuse to allow the TFCA project to enter his Chiefdom. He argued that the spirits did not like petrol, and therefore no cars could come into the area. Eventually, he changed his mind and allowed the TFCA to open a road. But his spiritual advisor directed that it should take a long detour in order to avoid passing by a sacred mountain. Underlying this reaction was a local reluctance to allow outsiders into the area. In Moribane, spiritual grounds were also invoked to prevent or delay a CBNRM project. For example, Chief M'punga rejected many proposed sites for a project camp on spiritual grounds (see *Briefing MZ02*). During the construction of the camp, the builders - who were not local to the area - were scared off by nocturnal disturbances accredited to spirit leopards. The people also invoked the spirits to reject the planting of experimental tree plots in their fields and forests; they said that *'the spirits don't want sticks in M'punga area'*.

Spiritual reasons were also used in disputes internal to the M'punga chiefdom. The Chief invoked the spirits when he refused to allow elephants to be killed, despite complaints

by residents that the elephants were destroying their crops (see *Briefing MZ03*).

Ancestral traditions have also played a role in respect to income-generation projects. When asked whether they could sell a tree from their land, inhabitants of Mahate, Tsetserra and Moribane all responded that they could not, 'because it is something our ancestors never did'. Probing further, people said that trees they found growing on the land did not 'belong' to them, but to the Chiefdom and so to the spiritual guardians of the Chiefdom. A tree they had planted themselves was a different matter; if they added value to the land in this way, they could realize profits from it, with the knowledge and permission of the Chief.

In Tsetserra the Chief stated that if any such projects were to make profits from natural resources on his land, he would have to give some of the money to the spirits in a sacrificial ceremony to say *'I have made this money from the land'*. If people were to come to his area to see animals in eco-tourism projects, he felt it would be wrong to ask them to pay money, since *'I didn't put the animals there, and if they see animals it is because of their own luck with the spirits.'*

Many CBNRM projects attempt to transform the livelihoods of residents in project areas, to replace subsistence farming which damages flora and fauna with sustainable harvesting of resources. But this assumes that people only consider material costs and benefits when they make livelihood decisions. Residents of the TFCA area expressed resistance to the idea of

substituting eco-tourism for agriculture, even if it could provide them with more cash, because of difficulties this would pose for spiritual ceremonies. Ceremonies to honour the spirits involve the preparation of beer with grains produced on the land belonging to the spirits. *'How could we carry out our ceremonies using millet produced in another Chiefdom'?*

## Concluding comments

Although rhetoric on spiritual rules usually implies a fixed set of beliefs, in practice the spiritual aspect of natural resources is fluid and can change according to other, non-spiritual influences. The challenge for CBNRM projects is to respect locally articulated spiritual beliefs, at the same time recognizing that these beliefs are by no means immutable, and may be used to express underlying attitudes towards the projects themselves. However, recognizing the instrumental use to which spiritual justifications can be put should not result in the assumption that there are no genuinely spiritual or non-material beliefs that motivate people's actions with respect to natural resources.

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