

Inside the Land Occupations in Bindura District, Zimbabwe

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Abstract: Zimbabwe witnessed nationwide occupations of white commercial farms and other agricultural landholdings from the early months of 2000. At the helm of these land occupations were ex-guerrilla fighters (or war veterans) who were aggrieved by the slow pace of land reform since independence in 1980. Based on numerous case studies, significant literature exists about the Zimbabwean state's fast track land reform which soon followed the occupations, including its effects on agrarian restructuring, agricultural production, and on-farm livelihoods. However, focused studies of the actual occupations are rare, with scholarly commentary on the character of the occupations often not based on solid empirical research. In this context, the dominant scholarly (and popular) view is that the land occupations were the brainchild of the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party. While political restructuring regularly has a top-down thrust to it, this prevailing view treats the occupations and occupiers instrumentally, as mere objects manipulated by powerful groups, a criticism raised by a small minority of Zimbabwean scholars. By way of an autonomist commoning perspective, we seek to restore the presence of occupiers, including ordinary men and women, onto the historical stage through a case study of occupations in Bindura District in Mashonaland Central Province. By looking inside these occupations, we conclude that everyday concerns, challenges, and agency, rooted in historical and contemporary experiences, intersected with a national project around land and gelled into diverse localised mobilisation in occupying farms. At the same time, we conclude that to consider the occupations as a commoning movement is problematic.

Introduction

From the early months of the year 2000, Zimbabwe witnessed nationwide occupations of white commercial farms and other agricultural landholdings. At the helm of these land occupations were ex-guerrilla fighters (or war veterans) who were aggrieved by the slow pace of land reform since independence in 1980. These land occupations led to the state's fast track land reform programme, implemented from the latter half of 2000. Based on numerous case and comparative studies, significant literature exists about the fast track programme including its effects on agrarian restructuring, forms and levels of agricultural production and on-farm and

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<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v18/v18i1a1.pdf>

off-farm livelihoods.¹ Empirical studies of the actual occupations though are rare, with scholarly commentary on the character of the occupations often not based on solid fieldwork-based research.

In this context, the dominant scholarly (and popular) view is that the land occupations were the brainchild of the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party, in a ploy to mobilise support for its waning legitimacy in the face of the rising opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC).² While political restructuring regularly has a top-down thrust to it, this prevailing view treats the occupations and occupiers instrumentally, as mere objects manipulated by powerful groups, a criticism which the late Sam Moyo made consistently in offering a more de-centralized understanding of the land occupations.³ From our perspective, Moyo’s account of the land occupations is more faithful to actual events than the top-down perspective when it comes to considering the form and content of the occupations, though we raise serious concerns about his analysis.

This article involves a case study of the fast track land occupations in Bindura District located in Mashonaland Central Province. In seeking to restore the agency of the land occupiers, we view the occupations in Bindura from the inside. In doing so, we offer an innovative examination by critically appraising the occupations from an autonomist commoning perspective informed by the work of John Holloway and Peter Linebaugh.⁴

Research Site and Fieldwork

This article is based on qualitative research carried out in Bindura District between May and June 2016. The capital of Bindura District, namely Bindura town, is situated 89 kilometres northeast of Harare in Mashonaland Central Province. The district currently has twenty-one wards including nine communal wards, with the rest consisting of old resettlement areas from the 1980s, fast track resettlement areas, and a few remaining (pre-fast track) commercial farms.

Bindura District shares boundaries with Mazowe, Mt. Darwin, and Shamva Districts. We conducted fieldwork on land occupations in Shamva in 2015 and, during this earlier research, consistent reference was made to farms in Bindura (for example, Matepatepa) by the Shamva occupiers. A number of people from Bushu communal lands and other areas in Shamva had occupied farms in Bindura, particularly those close to the boundary shared by the two districts. This realization of inter-district occupations informed the selection of Bindura District as a study site. In addition, Bindura is the administrative capital of Mashonaland Central Province and provincial leaders of the national war veterans’ association (who actively participated in district level occupations) were based there.

The fieldwork for the Bindura occupations took place in five wards. Ward 2 borders Madziwa communal area and Mt. Darwin District, Ward 5 is situated in Bindura North, Ward 7 runs along the Shamva District boundary, Ward 19 borders Mazowe District and Chiweshe communal lands, and Ward 21 is located in Bindura South and borders Mazowe District. For the exact location of the wards, see Figure 1. Access to the district was negotiated with the Provincial Administrator for Mashonaland Central in Bindura town and the Rural District Council at Manhenga.

Figure 1: Case Study Sites in Bindura District

Source:<https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/zimbabwe/informographic/bindura-district-map>

Regarding sampling, the research adopted a purposive sampling technique. Using this technique, we selected wards bordering communal areas and wards with people who had moved from Shamva District to occupy land in Bindura. We also sought to ensure that research sites were selected in diverse parts (or wards) of the district. The availability of the Councilor also determined the particular research sites that were selected. The research was qualitative in character in line with the importance of hearing the voices and collective experiences of those who participated in the occupations. The fieldwork was based on extended—in some cases, life history—interviews (including with key informants) and focus group discussions with war veterans, farm occupiers, and former farm workers (who lived through the occupations).

To select the research participants, the fieldwork relied on referrals and snowballing. Participants for focus group discussions were selected with the assistance of ward councilors who knew communal farmers, war veterans, and farm workers who had participated in the occupations. Because women's voices are often muted in patriarchal settings, focus group discussions for men and women were conducted separately. The focus group discussions were facilitated by a female Zimbabwean researcher (with women) and a male Zimbabwean researcher (with men).

More specifically, the study involved key informant interviews with two ward councilors and life history interviews with five war veterans and four (former) farm workers. As well, six focus group discussions which varied in size from seven to fifteen were conducted, with mostly

farm occupiers. The focus group discussions consisted of people of various ages, occupational backgrounds, marital statuses, and origins (such as ethnicity, clan and pre-fast track place of residence). Most of the occupiers originated from communal lands. At Saimoona Estates in Ward 21, a number of farm occupiers in the focus group discussions were based in Bindura town before the occupations. Some occupiers were also former members of the civil service such as soldiers, teachers, and police officers based in towns. They were thus not full-time occupiers as they would come to the farms during weekends to ensure that their names were maintained on the registers kept at the occupied farms.

At Chenenga farm in Ward 2, the wife of a former farm manager, the wife of a former soldier, and former farmers from Bushu communal area participated in the female focus group discussion. At Katanya farm in Matepatepa, the male focus group discussion comprised the ward councilor, war veterans, a former member of the ZANU-PF Central Committee, a former police officer, and former farm workers (such as a mechanic and driver). At Chipadze farm, the female focus group discussion was composed of the female ward councilor, married women, divorcees, unmarried women (with children), and widows.

To ensure data validity, we used a methodology (qualitative) that was in line with the objective of the study and its research questions. As well, data validity was enhanced by triangulating qualitative methods for data collection. To also maximize validity, follow-up life history interviews were conducted with some respondents (for example, war veterans) who had also participated in focus group discussions. Some of the war veterans enthusiastically provided their war autobiographies and this was critical in validating some of the data collected and in understanding their motives and strategies during the land occupations.

An Autonomist Commoning Perspective

We analyze the land occupations in Bindura from what we call an “autonomist commoning” perspective. This perspective offers a fundamental criticism of the modern state form and argues that significant social transformation is not possible in-and-through the state, as the state (along with ruling parties) seeks typically to demobilize, co-opt, and institutionalize forces for radical change and thereby stabilize—or at best reform—the existing social order.⁵ It thus questions the possibilities of state-centric change and stresses the importance of building alternative communities from the ground-up in a way which is not subordinate to the logics and rationalities of the state (and capital).⁶ From this perspective, commoning invariably involves reasserting and reinvigorating locally-based autonomous processes and normally in an emergent rather than designed manner.

A politics of commoning is “not mediated by the State or capital.”⁷ For instance, the public space, which is not to be confused with the (autonomous) commons, is a space “given from a certain [state] authority to the public under specific conditions that ultimately affirm the authority’s legitimacy.”⁸ Because of this, radically different forms of authority and sociality would be associated with the commons, including “self-established rules, self-determination, self-organization and self-regulating practices.”⁹

This does not mean that the commons-as-process exists outside the presence and clutches of state and capital as “it” may simultaneously entail practices within, against and beyond the logic and hierarchies of state and capital. For example, “the realm of the common emerges in a

constant confrontation with state-controlled ‘authorized’ public space.”¹⁰ Indeed, “the commons” is often domesticated, institutionalized, incorporated, and subdued by hegemonic regimes of authority, and repressed if the necessity arises. Further, many tensions exist within a commoning movement and this leads regularly to practices of exclusion and subordination.¹¹ Certain groups within a commoning movement may be incorporated into “it” in a subordinate fashion (including women) while others (even marginalized groups in society) may simply be excluded because they are seen as a threat.¹²

We use these thoughts on autonomist commoning in examining, critically, the land occupations in Bindura. First though we consider the existing literature on the fast track land occupations in Zimbabwe so as to position our perspective more clearly.

Land Occupations in Zimbabwe

There are two broad views on the land occupations in Zimbabwe. The dominant perspective, noted earlier, argues that the occupiers acted at the behest of the ruling party. In February 2000, a national referendum was held around revisions to the constitution, including strengthening the powers of the executive president and more radical forms of land redistribution. The ruling party called on its supporters to vote “yes” while the opposition party (the MDC) campaigned for a “no” vote. In the end, the constitutional revision was rejected. This marked the first major defeat for the ruling party since independence and, with parliamentary elections taking place in June 2000, the dominant view claims that ZANU-PF sought to bolster its support amongst the rural electorate by ensuring the immediate invasion and takeover of white commercial farmlands.¹³ Besides mobilizing rural support for ZANU-PF among communal farmers, the land occupations also became a violent means to demobilize commercial farmers and their workers from supporting the rising MDC.¹⁴ Through this lens, the post-referendum land “invasions” are understood as an authoritarian state-led political campaign designed to crush opposition and bolster the ruling party’s diminishing support.¹⁵

The other view claims that the land occupations took place in large part independently of ZANU-PF, and that the occupations were not centrally coordinated but subject to significant forms of decentralized mobilization and organization, particularly by war veterans whose relationship to the ruling party was characterized by overt tensions during the latter half of the 1990s.¹⁶ The land occupiers did not only include war veterans but incorporated diverse groupings with a range of motivations which are irreducible to the machinations of the ruling party.¹⁷ For Sadomba, the ruling party and state had in effect negated the aspirations of the liberation struggle, as expressed symbolically and concretely in terms of failing to reverse a century-old grievance over unequal colonial land ownership structures.¹⁸ Hence, for Moyo, the occupations meant to address the unresolved land question and were a form of protest against the ZANU-PF government.¹⁹ The land occupations were thus the culmination of a process that had been brewing and unfolding beneath the surface since 1980 to address a nagging political question.²⁰

For Moyo in particular, the situation in the year 2000 was marked by a near revolutionary situation, with war veterans establishing embryonic power centers on occupied farms.²¹ These local centers of authority took the form of what became known as base camps established on

each farm and led by war veterans.²² In certain cases, occupiers vigorously defended their occupations not only against white commercial farmers but also against state and ruling party intrusion. However, the state became increasingly involved in supporting the occupations (and in eventually expropriating land) from mid-2000, and a “radicalized state” pursuing radical agrarian reform—according to Moyo—formed temporarily.²³ Thus, through the fast track programme, the Zimbabwean state legitimized and protected the occupiers and their farm-based centers of power. But, crucially, it also effectively subdued the occupations, dampened the revolutionary fervour, and stabilised the situation. In the end, Moyo argues for the potential of state-centric radical change: “[T]he war veterans did not go far enough, either within the state, to guarantee the momentum and working class character of the revolutionary situation, or outside it, to prepare the ground for a sustained struggle against the reassertion of the black bourgeoisie [under fast track].”²⁴ Moyo does not wholly romanticize the occupations but he does tend to overplay implicitly the existence of commoning impulses in the occupations, such that any regressive character embedded in the land events of the year 2000 is reduced primarily to the state’s institutionalization of the occupations.

The occupations entailed a rejection of market-led land reform (which prevailed until the year 2000) and an undermining of the racially-based private property regime dominating the agrarian landscape in Zimbabwe. This undermining of colonial land enclosures signifies a commoning tendency in the occupations. As a self-provisioning land redistribution programme, the occupations restructured agrarian spaces on a strictly racial basis (but eventually with wide-ranging implications for the agrarian class structure). The occupations did not entail an overtly anti-patriarchal movement. Male war veterans were particularly prominent during the occupation process and women, broadly speaking, played subordinate roles including social reproduction activities such as cooking.²⁵

Farm labourers (and their families) were in large part absent (or even explicitly excluded) from the occupations. By the year 2000, labourers were still structurally located in a highly subservient and dependent relationship vis-à-vis white farmers.²⁶ Added to this was the close relationship established between white farmers and the MDC, such that defending the occupations against white farmers and the machinations of the MDC implied suspicion by occupiers about the loyalties of farm workers. Farm occupiers felt compelled to hold all-night vigils (*pungwes*) with farm labourers in seeking to propagate and justify the reasoning behind the occupations, with these rallies regularly entailing tactics of intimidation.²⁷

In examining the land occupations in Bindura District, we make no sweeping claims to the effect that the character of these occupations is typical of all other fast track occupations nationally. There was significant variation across the occupations, even at times within districts, including with regard to why a particular farm was occupied. Thus, in many cases, occupiers sought to reclaim a specific tract of land because of its ancestral significance (including the presence of shrines and graves on the land). In other cases, a specific farm was targeted for occupation because of the way in which the white farmer treated local people. Variations also existed in relation to the extent to which women were subordinated and farm labourers excluded, and the extent of involvement of local ruling party and state personnel (for example, the police and army) in the occupations.

This diversity exemplifies the fact that there was no central coordination of the land occupations, certainly not by the ruling party or state but not even by the Zimbabwe National War Veterans' Association (ZNVVA). There were calls by ZNVVA nationally to occupy farms and there is evidence of significant mobilization by local ZNVVA structures. But the playing out of specific land occupations was subject to local conditions and forces which were not structured in an unmediated and direct manner by national politics and processes.

Organization of the Land Occupations in Bindura

There are no focused studies on the land occupation movement in Bindura District. The work by Sadomba is the most relevant, as he touches on Matepatepa in Bindura District along with Mazowe (which borders Bindura) and Nyabira (bordering Mazowe) in Mashonaland West Province.²⁸ By selecting a number of wards in different parts of Bindura District for our study (including Ward 2 in Matepatepa), we are not claiming that the occupations were in any way or necessarily organized or coordinated within wards or at ward level. In fact, the delineation of today's wards is different than they were in the year 2000. Overall, the forms and levels of organization of the occupations varied considerably within wards and the district more broadly such that any coordination of occupations was quite localized.

There were cases of significant levels of organization just beyond the borders of Bindura District. In Mazowe, for example, the well-structured Nyabira-Mazowe War Veterans' Association—formed in February 2000—performed a key coordinating function for land occupations in Nyabira and Mazowe.²⁹ Both Nyabira and Mazowe are closer to Harare than to communal areas (where many war veterans resided) so that war veterans from Harare led the occupations there. Many of the Harare war veterans would only come to the farms on weekends because they worked full-time, but they would ensure that there was a sufficient occupying force. The same was the case for some war veterans based in Bindura town with reference to the occupations in Bindura District.³⁰

In Bindura District, there was some evidence of localized (cross-farm) coordination but this was fluid and adaptable and not highly structured as in the case of Nyabira-Mazowe. In the main, the occupations in Bindura District were led by war veterans. The role of war veterans included providing leadership and mobilizing people (often in communal areas), especially by drawing lessons from their involvement in the guerrilla struggle and explicitly making it clear that the land issue forced them to join the war and still needed to be resolved. As noted by Councilor Zanamwe: "As you may ... be aware, the war of liberation was all about repossessing our stolen land and, in 2000, the time was now ripe for us to take over the farms."³¹ A war veteran added that "[w]e joined the occupations in fulfillment of our desire to take over the land that had been taken by our enemies over the past years."³²

At times, war veterans were sent to particular areas where a shortage of veterans existed. Sadomba, as a war veteran and land occupier, recalls attending a meeting in Glendale in early 2000 in which a request was made for war veteran reinforcements in Matepatepa, with war veterans from Mt. Darwin soon moving into the area.³³ But some farms in Matepatepa, close to Chiweshe communal lands, were occupied by communal farmers without any war veteran

involvement. Chief Negomo in Chiweshe apparently supported these occupations, if only as a way of decongesting the communal area.

In Bindura District, occupations took on different forms, with occupations being relatively spontaneous or more organized depending on locality. In Ward 7, occupiers appeared to have settled in the following pre-set order: Chipadze, Koodoo Vlei, Beacon Hill, Chiwaridzo, and then eventually Avillion farm. Avillion was occupied last because part of it was occupied and farmed already by black farmers from the 1980s. In Ward 5, the first farm to be occupied in February 2000 was Kanjinga. After this farm, there was no particular order followed. New occupations emerged in the context of prevailing circumstances such as the existence of too many occupiers on a particular farm, and hence some occupiers needed to move elsewhere. For instance, in Ward 5, when war veterans heading the base camp at Kanjinga realized that there were more people present than the farm could accommodate, some people were moved to occupy Chenenga. Occupiers admitted that there was confusion, disorder and even conflicts and displacements during the occupations, with war veterans and other occupiers displacing each other.

Women occupiers at Chenenga therefore indicated that they were once displaced to Munzi farm and, when they thought they had settled, they were forced to move back to Chenenga. War veteran Musangomuneyi also talked about his conflict with war veteran Muropa who wanted him to move from Kanjinga farm in Bindura to Mhokore in Shamva. In Ward 7, some of the occupiers admitted that they attacked fellow occupiers and burnt their temporary shelters so that they could displace them as they were aligned to former state vice-president, now opposition party leader, Joyce Mujuru. The fluid character of the occupations in Bindura District was also somewhat different to the case in Shamva District, where occupations involved a district-wide coordinating committee led by war veterans and tended to follow a clearer sequence.³⁴

This is not to argue of course that farm occupiers had no reason for occupying certain farms as opposed to others. Certainly, closeness to communal areas meant a greater likelihood of occupation. Kanjinga in Ward 5 for example was occupied for this reason. But the cruelty of particular white farmers, and the local reputation of farmers more broadly, was also a factor. One female occupier at Chenenga, who previously lived in a communal area, thus spoke about being fined for collecting wood on the nearby commercial farm. In Ward 7, Chipadze was occupied by people from Chipadze clan because they claimed it was their ancestral land. In this way, autochthonous claims also were of some significance. But war veterans still played a part in these cases, such as Nhunzva and Tito Pela at the Chipadze farm base.

Regarding how the occupations began, it was generally argued that several meetings were held by war veterans, normally in communal areas, where people were informed about the intention to occupy land. One occupier narrated how the occupations started: "The war veterans and all other stakeholders ... sat down and discussed the way forward. It was then agreed to approach the white farmers and advise them verbally, without any violence, that we were going to take over our land."³⁵

While the occupations were largely initiated and mobilized—by war veterans—through meetings, word about the occupations was also spread by way of the radio, church meetings, and other informal gatherings and announcements. The case of Sirewo Chipadze from the

Chipadze clan stood out as he mobilized his kinspeople when occupying Chipadze farm. He moved to and around several places (such as Bushu, Madziwa and Murewa) where Chipadze kinspeople had settled after they had been displaced originally from their ancestral lands, and where they had only limited access to land.

While reactions of white farmers to the occupations varied across the district, there was significant resistance by many farmers, as an occupier from Chenenga farm highlights:

The white farmers did not take that [the occupations] well and they tried to fight us off the farms. The MDC supporters also joined in the fighting [supporting the farmers] and urged us to go back to our rural homes. They accused us of occupying the farm unlawfully. We lost a lot of our property during that time, and some of our belongings were burnt.³⁶

Others spoke about how farmers would fire their guns into the air, or dump rotten fruit near the base camp of the occupiers, to discourage their ongoing stay. There were therefore various unpleasant encounters with white farmers during the occupations. Accusations were made against some white farmers that they would “cook up” stories (such as occupiers beating up school teachers) so that the occupiers would be arrested by the police for criminal acts. Conflict with farm labourers were also prevalent, with the white farmers sometimes instigating their labourers against the occupiers. This though reflected also a tactical weakness on the part of the occupiers. Unlike in Nyabira, war veterans in Mazowe and Matepatepa only realised months into the occupations the need to mobilize farm labourers in making the occupations more effective.³⁷

At first, white farmers expected the occupations to be a passing phase and were quite adamant in resisting the occupations without fear of reprisals from the ruling party and state, and they often called the police to evict the occupiers. In being intimidated by white farmers and their labourers, some occupiers in Bindura District returned to their communal homes. When the occupations began, the initial response from the ruling party was in fact to label the occupiers as invaders and to have them evicted and even arrested. For instance, war veteran Jones Musangomunei emphasized: “Some of our [state] ministers supported the white farmers when the occupations started... Minister Msika is one of those who sent police to the farms so as to force us out of the farms.”³⁸ But, with support for the occupations (particularly from the state president) becoming increasingly clear even before the announcement of fast track, white farmers began to realize that the occupiers were there to stay, including with the tacit support of local state and ruling party personnel. In the case of Bindura District, the presence of the ruling party’s national political commissar (Border Gezi) in the area, as governor for Mashonaland Central Province, was significant in that he (in his personal capacity) often provided material support to the occupiers.

Violence by occupiers did take place, though they claim that this was a reaction to farmer-instigated violence. Otherwise, the sheer presence of occupiers and their tactics of intimidation were the weapons often deployed to force farmers off their land. For instance, occupiers were involved in singing, dancing and beating drums on the farms, and normally just outside the farmer’s main homestead, day and night. War veteran Jones Musangomuneyi said:

We would ... camp at his gate and start singing and playing our drums. The wives of these farmers got irritated by the noise and we knew they would be the first to leave. Indeed, that's what happened. They were the first to leave. The men braved it and tried to stay on until they eventually gave up and left.³⁹

This loud presence then was supposed to constantly annoy farmers, to strike fear into their families, and to ensure that farmers left the farm "voluntarily."

When a farm was occupied, war veterans would immediately go and talk to the farmer and request (or demand) a map of the farm, in part to understand the layout of the land and to identify a location for their base camp to signal their presence on the farm. It was claimed that the war veterans were able to discern if the map was an original one or an adulterated and fabricated photocopy. In the meantime, as the war veterans talked to the farmer, the occupiers would always remain at a distance. This was followed by the immediate establishment of a base, or base camp, on the occupied farm. The bases were led by a base commander (normally a male war veteran), who was supported by a team of mainly war veterans, with positions such as chief of security, secretary, and treasurer. Registers were usually kept at the bases to indicate the name of the occupiers and their interest in acquiring land. There were also *pungwes* that were conducted to boost the morale of the occupiers, as well as to mobilize farm workers who might resist the occupations.

In the meantime, occupiers had to organize accommodation and to survive. The living conditions in the bases were at times challenging, including living in tents during heavy rains or even sleeping on the ground without any accommodation. They sought to grow their own vegetables, were sometimes donated cabbages and mealie meal by sympathetic black farmers in the area, or even went back to their communal area to replenish their food supply. Coming into the June 2000 parliamentary election, most occupiers were not registered in the area of the farm they occupied, so they had to return home temporarily to vote. War veterans ensured though that there was a sufficient occupying force at all times. Indeed, it was normal for occupiers who were on farms close to their communal area to spend time between the two places. This was notable with women occupiers, who sometimes left their children at home in the communal area in the care of relatives and needed to check on their well-being.

Finally, the land occupations nation-wide were supposedly guided by ancestral spirits. This is particularly significant for the Bindura District and surrounding districts. The medium of the spirit of the original Nehanda during the anti-colonial rebellion in the late 1800s was a woman named Charwe, who was born in the Mazowe Valley. The discursive construction of Charwe as a warrior against colonial rule became important during the guerrilla-nationalist struggles against Rhodesian rule in the 1970s. Mediums of Charwe arose in and around Mazowe after independence in 1980, such that the memory of Charwe remained alive "among her people in the Mazowe".⁴⁰ The occupations, as an awakening call to repossess land expropriated during the late 1800s, were seen as fulfilling Charwe's clarion call of "my bones shall arise," as manifested in the messages of local spirit mediums. These include the spirit mediums in Madziwa and the spirit of Chapoin Ward 5. Various rituals were conducted by mediums in the midst of the occupations, supposedly to strengthen the occupiers and weaken the resolve of white farmers.⁴¹

The occupations in Bindura District were in large part de-centralized with no clear evidence of pre-planned and ongoing coordination by war veterans across a range of farms. War veterans did mobilize communal farmers to occupy farms and they ensured that there was a base camp established on each farm. But there was also considerable self-initiative on the part of occupiers in moving onto a particular farm. The relationship between the state (and ruling party) and occupiers was marked by uncertainty, ambiguity and fluidity, with the occupiers not always guaranteed of state support and protection.

Memories and Motivations

The land occupiers in Bindura were diverse in terms of their socio-historical backgrounds. Male war veterans were present on all the farms studied. And many of these war veterans, in recounting their guerrilla days, clearly were familiar with the area as it was their zone of military operation during the 1970s, with many meeting for the first time again during the occupations. Ordinary men and women as well as youth also participated and occupied the farms. What is even more interesting is that some farm workers facilitated and supported the land occupations. The presence of such diverse actors echoes the argument by Sadomba that the land occupations in certain instances became quite inclusive.⁴² Certainly, both rural and urban dwellers were present in the Bindura occupations, with urban occupiers more prominent at farms, such as Saimoona Estates, close to Bindura town. Occupiers came from areas as far away as Masvingo, Bulawayo, Murewa, Seke, Dotito, and Uzumba. Most occupiers however came from surrounding areas such as Shamva, Chiweshe, Madziwa, and Bushu, mainly due to close proximity to the farms and strong ancestral ties to land dispossessed under colonial rule.

One of the critical questions which remains unresolved, and is particularly contentious, is why the land occupations took place at the time they did. In contrast to the dominant scholarly view on this matter, the occupiers in Bindura District deny that they acted at the behest of the ruling party. War veteran Musangomunei for example highlighted the political distance which existed between the ruling party and war veterans leading up to the referendum and occupations. He clearly stated that: "During the war of liberation, our ZANU-PF leaders had promised us office jobs, a decent way of living, with plenty of food for us and our families. Sadly all these promises were not fulfilled.... [T]hey had forgotten all about us as they were now comfortable and in power."⁴³ War veterans referred to the rejection of the new constitution in the referendum as the spark which ignited the occupations, without being ordered by the President to occupy land. In the end, the "no" vote in the referendum meant the denial of more radical land reform—including land expropriation without compensation—as stipulated in the draft constitution. In the eyes of the war veterans, they had lost once again, in the same manner that they had lost during independence negotiations at the Lancaster House Conference in 1979.

Land was central to the national liberation struggle, including the guerrilla war in the 1970s. But the narratives of ordinary occupiers in the district speak to multiple grievances and motivations for joining the land occupations, with current maladies hopefully being addressed and rectified through the occupations. Occupiers were aggrieved by various encounters with the colonial system and nearby white farmers (before and after independence), including worker exploitation, racism, and denial of personal liberties. War incarcerations during the

1970s, loss of land, cattle and other wealth, long working hours, *chibharo* (forced labour), and curtailed freedom of movement were all part of local memories. One occupier at Chipadze farm narrated that “[m]y grandfather told me that our forefathers were chased away from Bindura by the white people in 1918. They were forcibly moved to Madeira, onto a very small piece of land. Others were relocated to the Bushu area, Murewa, Chiweshe and Musana.”⁴⁴ Placement in “keeps” (protected villages to prevent villagers from supporting the guerrillas during the war) were also cited. In Matepatepa, occupiers referred to the famous “Keep 10” in Madziwa where black people had faced severe ill-treatment. For young men, growing up in protected villages was one of the most alienating and inhumane experiences during the armed struggle. One male occupier at Chipadze described “being harassed to unimaginable proportions when we were at these keeps.”⁴⁵

Motivations for occupying land had gender connotations as well, which highlights the importance of identity-based experiences in making sense of the occupations: “As women within the clan, we faced a lot of problems, and these forced us to come here. It was difficult to be women married in a big [polygamous] family. If there were many sons, it meant many daughters-in-law and all of us in one homestead.”⁴⁶ In wanting to lead a different life, another female occupier at Chipadze farm stressed that she “wanted freedom and independence from my family so as to have a home I call my own where people can visit me.”⁴⁷ The issue of *chipari* (polygamy) in communal areas, which is intimated in these two quotations, drove many women to occupy farms. Those married into polygamous families ended up with small plots of land in communal areas to call their own and the emerging occupations provided the basis of escape from very troublesome and stressful arrangements.

Some men from communal areas left their wives behind to care for the communal homestead. Women at times though took the initiative in joining the land occupations. Many of the women had husbands working elsewhere when the occupations took place. As one woman put it: “When we first heard about the land occupations in Chipadze, my husband was still working. I am the one who came and registered for the land. My husband only got to know about this when he came back home at the end of the month.”⁴⁸ Even when the husband was present, some women seized on the possible opportunities arising from the occupations: “My husband was initially doubtful of the occupations. I had to push and convince him that the land was going to benefit us and our children. I told him if the occupations failed, we would have at least tried.”⁴⁹

Hence, whatever the ostensible objective of the land occupations, deeply-felt historical memories and contemporary grievances were pervasive amongst the occupiers. These highly localized memories and motives made communal farmers susceptible to the national call by the ZNWVA to occupy farms and to the mobilization activities of war veterans in Bindura District. However, with reference to farm workers and women, the land occupations were in large part characterized by forms of exclusion and subordination.

Farm Workers and Women

Farm workers occupied an intercalary position during the occupations. Occupiers observed that farm workers were generally against the occupations, though some labourers did participate because of their marginalized and exploited status on white commercial farms (including

workers at Chenenga farm in Ward 5 and Ashcot farm in Matepatepa). One Ashcot worker in Matepatepa spoke about his experience: “My boss did not allow us to participate in the land invasions, so I would sneak out at night and cycle to join the group led by war veteran Muchenje.”⁵⁰ There was an unusual arrangement in Matepatepa along the border with Chiweshe communal area, in which farm labourers with roots in this area worked undercover by assisting the occupiers in providing information about farm layouts and farmer presence as well as necessities such as food.⁵¹ In the main, though, the evidence from Bindura indicates that occupiers engaged in forms of intimidation against assumed MDC-linked farm labourers (including through *pungwes*) who were regarded as anti-land reform traitors, and this took place increasingly as the June 2000 national elections approached. At Chipadze farm, female occupiers stated that “[o]n one of the evenings, some of our [MDC] deserters were beaten up and urged to come back the following day and rejoin the ruling party and surrender their MDC regalia.”⁵²

In the case of women, there was evidence of women partially breaking out of the patriarchal mould. Thus, at some farms in Matepatepa, women participated in security patrols undertaken at the farms and in pegging the plots. Further, the base camp secretary at Koodoo Vlei was a woman, and she was involved in integrating new occupiers into base-life and ensuring food supplies. Another woman was also later selected as the treasurer and, with the secretary, she collected and registered cash donations.⁵³ In this gendered view, women (as caregivers at home or in the community) were seen—quite justifiably—as more responsible than men as treasurers, who would often use the cash donations for their own pleasures. Patriarchal discourses about women, including their moral character and sexuality, prevailed on the occupied farms. Women, particularly widows and divorcees, were sometimes accused of prostitution or seeking illicit love affairs when they joined the occupations. Married women, if their husbands were away or did not join them, were accused likewise. Women tended to be subordinated to the dictates of patriarchy during the occupations, including undertaking all the domestic chores at the base camps. Even the singing and dancing was done primarily by women and it was designed to boost the morale and militancy of the male occupiers.

Broadly, the failure of the occupiers to incorporate farm labourers and their families into the occupation process, as well as the subordinate inclusion of women, raises serious doubts about the presence of inclusive and leveling tendencies within the land occupations as a commoning movement. In this sense, we differ from the claims by Moyo as he tends to romanticize the character of the occupations.

Conclusion

In examining the Bindura occupations from an autonomist commoning perspective, the occupations shared many similarities to the land occupations in Zimbabwe more broadly. More specifically, the nation-wide occupations were marked by internal tensions and ambiguities. On the one hand, the occupations involved an anti-enclosure movement in taking over farms marked by the private property regime and they had an anti-state moment in the sense that the occupiers—in seizing land—were acting against a post-colonial state which had failed to address the nagging colonial land question. On the other hand, the occupiers—mainly from

communal areas—failed in the most part to incorporate farm labourers into the occupation movement if only because they felt troubled by labourers’ close proximity to, and dependence upon, white commercial farmers particularly in the context of heightened political party tensions. Additionally, communal women were incorporated into the occupation movements in a subordinate and gendered position. However, there were some countervailing tendencies to these processes of exclusion and subordination as evidenced in the Bindura occupations.

In the end, the anti-state position of the occupiers was not in any genuine sense an (in-principle) anti-statist moment, which meant that the war veteran leaders were prepared to engage tactically with the state during the occupations, including receiving police protection and material resources from state and ruling party personnel. For this reason, the occupations became easily subsumed under the state’s fast track land reform programme. In other words, the occupiers expressed a deep dissatisfaction with the state’s incapacity to bring about radical land reform without, however, challenging the state and its modalities of operation. Because of this, the “autonomist character” of the occupations is questionable. They may have had an institutional autonomy vis-à-vis the state but they did not go against the manner in which the state institutes and reproduces modalities of hierarchy, exclusion, and subordination. Thus, while local forms of authority and solidarity existed at the base camps on the occupied farms, there was no real attempt to bring about a new kind of sociality in terms of everyday practices, which is exemplified most clearly in the maintenance of patriarchal arrangements around social reproduction activities. Of course, it might be argued that, even if the occupiers were inclined to undercut these and other such arrangements, there was simply no time to do so given the speed at which the state moved in under the fast track programme. But the absence of any clear emerging signs of reconfiguring everyday practices questions likewise the “commoning character” of the occupations.

Notes

1 Scoones et al. 2010; Matondi 2012.

2 Hammar and Raftopoulos 2003; Selby 2006.

3 Moyo and Yeros 2005.

4 Holloway 2010; Linebaugh 2008.

5 Holloway 2010.

6 Federici 2012; Linebaugh 2008.

7 Thorburn 2012, p. 254.

8 Stavrides 2012 p. 587.

9 Bohm et al. 2008, p. 6.

10 Stavrides 2012, p. 594.

11 Jeffrey et al. 2012.

12 de Angelis 2014.

13 Masiwa and Chipungu 2004; Hammar and Raftopoulos 2003.

14 Up until the year 2000, besides state land such as national parks and forests, rural spaces in Zimbabwe comprised of large-scale commercial farms (mainly owned by whites), resettlement areas established in the 1980s for small-scale black farmers, and communal

areas. The communal areas were called Tribal Trust Lands before 1980 and were equivalent in status to the Bantustan areas of apartheid South Africa. Communal areas typically fall under the combined authority of local chiefs and democratic institutions. Communal area farmers have usufruct rights and they eke out a living from their agricultural plots while sharing common grazing land for livestock, while also receiving remittances. Large-scale commercial farms relied upon low-paid black wage labourers who normally lived on the farm in villages or compounds.

15 James 2014.

16 Kriger 2003.

17 Chaumba et al. 2003.

18 Sadomba 2008.

19 Moyo and Yeros 2005; Masuko 2013.

20 In this respect, land occupations had taken place before the year 2000. For instance, soon after independence in 1980, communal farmers occupied commercial land which had been abandoned by white farmers during the 1970s. As well, even in the years immediately preceding the fast track land occupations (in the late 1990s), there were highly localized and sporadic occupations of particular farms. In the case of these occupations, it was common for white commercial farmers to call on the police to evict the occupiers (who were labelled as “squatters”) and this was done with the explicit support and backing of ZANU-PF and the Zimbabwean state.

21 Moyo and Yeros 2005.

22 Chaumba et al. 2003.

23 Moyo and Yeros 2005.

24 Moyo and Yeros 2010, p. 93.

25 Chingarande 2010; Mutopo 2011; Scoones et al. 2010.

26 Rutherford 2001.

27 Magaramombe 2010.

28 Sadomba 2008.

29 Masuko, 2013.

30 Interview with war veteran Muronda, Chenenga Farm, Ward 5, 26 June 2016.

31 Interview with Councilor Zanamwe, Katanya Farm, Ward 2, 27 June 2016.

32 Interview with war veteran Chingwaru, Katanya Farm, Ward 2, 27 June 2016.

33 Sadomba, 2008:124.

34 Bhatasara and Helliker 2018.

35 Male focus group, Matepatepa Country Club, Ward 2, 27 June 2016.

36 Male focus group, Chenenga Farm, Ward 5, 26 June 2016.

37 Sadomba 2008.

38 Interview with Jones Musangomunei, Chenenga Farm, Ward 5, 26 June 2016.

39 Ibid.

40 Charumbira 2015, p. 211.

41 Email correspondence, dated 26 June 2016.

- 42 Sadomba 2008.
- 43 Interview with Jones Musangomunei, Chenenga Farm, Ward 5, 26 June 2016.
- 44 Interview at Chipadze Farm, Ward 7, 28 June 2016.
- 45 Interview with male occupier, Chipadze Farm, Ward 7, 28 June 2016.
- 46 Female focus group, Chipadze Farm, Ward 7, 28 June 2016.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 Interview at Katanya Farm, Matepatepa, Ward 2, 27 June 2016.
- 51 Sadomba 2008, p. 139.
- 52 Female focus group, Chipadze Farm, Ward 7, 28 June 2016.
- 53 Ibid.

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