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South African Contested Territories: Eco-frontiers Dynamics and Livelihoods in Pondoland

Sylvain Guyot and Julien Dellier's work presents a lively and stimulating collection of scholars' essays on the Wild Coast area of the Eastern Cape Province (South Africa), more precisely the Pondoland zone, regarded as one of the poorest of the country.[1] This volume contributes to a better understanding of the controversial and changing ruralities of this area. According to the coeditors, it tries to demonstrate to what extent the end of apartheid opened a new era for Pondoland, "starting with the lodging of land claims on historically seized land" (p. 29). Its focus helps to apprehend the sound entanglement of state plans, development discourses and practices, and conflicts over this rural part of the former Transkei homeland. The contributors–all sharing intensive experience of the field in Pondoland–are from diverse horizons, including four Africans (three South Africans, one living in Canada, and one Zambian) and six Europeans (three French, two Swedish, and one British); and from various scientific backgrounds (human and development geographers, local nongovernmental [NGO] representatives, race relations historian, agro-ecologist, and environmental consultant).

The authors engage in a dialogue over one of the key ideas "about rural areas in South Africa (especially former homelands), that shows them as just the spatial extension of mining, logging and urban economy" (p. 13). This volume is not unified around a single overarching conclusion but provides strong elements for further discussions on the issue. By so doing it tends to overcome the apparent dichotomy between the "appropriation processes imposed from the outside" (for example, mining, state and NGO plans, and eco-tourism) and "local livelihoods" (p. 29).

The book presents a deep insight into the issues of land uses and local livelihoods, community-based and state-planned environmental management, and the conflicts opposing a wide array of stakeholders (the state, local communities, and NGOs) "disputing different legitimacies based on different uses of ecosystems, resources, or land" (Guyot, p. 26). To do so, it strongly relies on the idea of "eco-frontier," as Dellier and Guyot note in the first chapter, to grasp the "territorial processes" of "conflicting political appropriations."[2] The notion of "eco-frontier" is threefold: it is a normalized and instrumentalized notion used by stakeholders (such as environmental NGOs producing green politics); a westernized system of political and spatial representation of nature; and a spatial category that encompasses territorial processes and appropriations.[3] As Dellier and Guyot put it, "the creation and use of the 'eco-frontier' illuminates the history of the global territorialisation of nature" (p. 77). Their notion of "livelihood" reminds me of, though not completely, the "livelihood styles" discussed by Leo de Hahn and Annelies Zoomers, for it tends to avoid a purely materialist focus on "trade-off of capitals" and encompasses notions of "local knowledge" and contextual responses to policies and institutions. However, the analysis could have been strengthened by furthering the study of livelihoods as "specific cultural repertoire" and by highlighting the entanglement of symbolic and material actions involved in it.[4]

Navy Simukonda and Mcebisi Kraai (chapter 2) discuss the territorial conflicts in Pondoland from the perspective of the NGO for which they work, the Transkei Land Service Organisation (TRALSO). Involved since 1994 in the lodging of people's land claims, they sketch a synthetic view of the elements at stake: the entanglement of state plans and authority; informal arrangements with local chiefs; conservation objectives; and very diverse livelihoods (from cattle, cropping, hunting, and growing marijuana to "migrant remittance, commuter employment, and skilled labour" [p. 41]). By doing so, they contribute to a better approach to current issues at stake in the Wild Coast: titanium mining in the Xolobeni

community, the construction of a toll road, state power over historically seized lands or the issue of the Wild Coast Casino, and the local community for land claims. To them, "the continuous unmanaged use of natural resources by a growing population in a context of institutional failure will … lead to environmental degradation and depletion of these resources" (p. 43). As a consequence, they advocate for both "better access to land and secure land rights" and community-based management of resources (p. 41). However, their position remains unclear as to how to link this local authority with the broader context of land reform, eco-tourism, and use of the resources.

Dellier and Guyot (chapter 3) question Pondoland territorial dynamics through the opposition between outsiders' appropriations and communities' livelihoods and claims. This is a key chapter, central to the understanding of both the issues inherent to the context of land conflict resolution, at a national level, and the diversity of eco-frontier processes, at the local, Pondoland level. Conflicts between traditional authorities in the former homelands and newly elected leaders are central issues in land reform. As a consequence, "the land question in the countryside in the former Transkei introduces a double stake, of land property and of citizens' representation, for the access of local populations to the land ownership" (p. 64). The two authors assess four different case studies: Mkambati, Port St. Johns, Wild Coast Sun Casino, and the Xolobeni mine (their results are well summarized in table 3.1, "Land Conflicts Studied," analyzing each eco-frontier case through its historicity, its current conflicts, and the possible outcomes and freezing factors).

The Wild Coast presents strong evidence of eco-frontier dynamics: physical parameters, such as "friendly climate, beautiful landscape," a biodiversity hot spot; geographical parameters, such as "physical isolation, political marginalization (Homeland policies) and low population density"; socioeconomic parameters, such as chronic poverty; and "pioneer-minded White people living in the neighboring cities linked to a preservation-friendly inherited mentality," somehow deriving from David Nye's "foundation narratives" from his *America as Second Creation: Technology and Narratives of New Beginnings* (2003) (p. 69). Referring to Guyot's basic categories of eco-frontiers, one can understand the Wild Coast through three categories. Firstly, the landscape category is found in from tourism (St. Johns's old hotels and Wild Sun casino) to eco-tourism (European Union-funded hiking trails). Secondly, the wilderness category is attached to conservation initiatives and the creation of reserves. Thirdly, the extractive category is attached to logging and mining cases (e.g., the Xolobeni area). From this emerge three different dynamics: conflict around reserves co-management (Mkambati); land claims (Port St. Johns and Wild Coast casino); and land rights and land use conflicts (eco-tourism versus mining in Xolobeni). The authors succeed in analyzing the issues at stake–and the conflicting appropriations–being synthetic without oversimplifying, for they ground their chapter in detailed and extensive case studies.

In chapter 4, Thembela Kepe and Webster Whande interestingly tackle the controversy and conflicts surrounding the comanagement of natural resources and the diversity of related rural livelihoods in the area and the degradation of resources (for analysis of the degradation and conservation narratives on the Wild Coast, see Flora Hajdu, chapter 6). First, they point out that it is counterproductive to tackle environmental issues without addressing equity, social justice, and poverty.[5] Then they show that successive administrations in South Africa have not been able to "successfully reconcile conservation, poverty reduction and land rights" (p. 103). By so doing, they question the application of the "buffer zone policy." For them, this application fails whenever resource tenure rights lack clarity, as it weakens local stakeholders when voicing their authority over land. As a result, these zones become overbalanced in favor of eco-conservation, excluding de jure the local livelihoods that relied on them. Their exclusion from the definition of buffer and conservation zones is not new. Kepe and Whande reveal an existing continuity from protection of indigenous forests since the end of the nineteenth century to rehabilitation schemes in communal rangelands (Apartheid "betterment planning") and the 1980s Transkei Developmental Control Plan: "the restriction on local resources use and access" (p. 109). Kepe and Whande see a reason behind this in the combination of the "deforestation" discourse and the narrative that considers "the rural people" as unable to use and manage natural resources without damaging them. This exclusion has a major consequence, as "the overwhelming scarcity of local and external employment … makes natural resources" and land-based livelihood in general use extremely important (p. 111). Adam Kuper has made a similar point in his article dealing with the necessity for social anthropology to grasp the unprecedented dimensions of indigenous livelihoods, in a global era.[6]

Dealing with apparently different issues, Lizile Mniki (chapter 5 on indigenous subsistence fishing) and William Beinart (chapter 7 on livestock management) address the question of the practices of space and of natural resources, and the way land claims "ground"

themselves in such practices. Their analysis could have been furthered in light of Francesca Merlan's work on Northern Territory Australian Aboriginal communities, to see how politics of localism and indigeneity are also highly spatialized practices.[7] Mniki and Beinart show the entanglement of scales: national agriculture plans and displacement politics; transnational origins of global concurrence, hygiene standards, and development/conservation narratives; and local dynamics of resistance, reappropriation, and framing of new claims. Once again, the two case studies demonstrate to which extent local populations are being marginalized. Drawing back on various contributions–the buffer zone concept (chapter 4) and the "landscape and wilderness categories" (chapter 3), as well as work by Patrick Thipe Ntsime, Maano Ramutsindela, and Guyot–Mniki's chapter shows just how much colonial practices "around protected areas did not end with the end of the formal colonization. Instead they have continued in new forms" (p. 124).[8] Marine protected areas have "alienated rather than benefited the local indigenous populations, because the design and the execution of the fishing policy has had the effect of regulating the people out of the subsistence fishing, which they regard as their right" (p. 123). Moreover, "tourist landscapes are developed and marketed under the agency of national and international economic and political institutions which lie outside the control of the majority of the local residents who inhabit these spaces" (p. 123). Though Beinart does not evaluate extensively environmental effects of livestock variation in number, he too concludes that there is a sound need for discussion and common approaches between state conservation agencies, environmentalists, and local communities, to overcome the current opposition between local knowledge and top-down external management.

In chapter 8, Klara Jacobson evaluates the interests of an agriculture state program directed to Pondoland smallholders, aiming at implementing commercial farming methods. The author clearly states that development plans are embedded in (neo)colonial binary thinking opposing "unproductive" subsistence agriculture to "productive" commercially oriented agriculture (p. 195). These plans lack any extensive understanding of local livelihoods. The apartheid administration "systematically undermined the possibilities for black South Africans to make a living in rural areas," through restrictions on movement and reduced access to land (p. 201). By so doing, it played a bigger role in reducing the viability of rural smallholder agriculture than the structural adjustment conditionality of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in the 1980s ever played in many sub-Saharan countries. This systematic undermining created and reinforced "a link of dependency between labour migration and agriculture in the homelands, where neither alone could provide a livelihood" (p. 201). Therefore, any development plan will fail as long as it does not take into serious account land redistribution.

Flora Hajdu's brilliant chapter (chapter 6) addresses broad narratives of the degradation of natural resources through case studies of two small villages–Cutwini and Manteku– and their local livelihoods. She challenges those narratives, largely found in development programs, environmental NGOs and initiatives, and state-driven plans of conservation, to show how they somehow misread the situation on the ground and give a strong but false interpretation of the diversity of livelihoods in rural former Transkei. This challenge is key to a better understanding of the politics at work in Pondoland, for these narratives constitute the cornerstone–or at least a part of it–of most of the externally imposed dynamics in the region. The author examines the links between the belief that the former homelands were overpopulated and severely deteriorated–"like eroded, overstocked and overcrowded rural ghettoes," "characterized by … frequent environmental collapse"–and the belief that, today, the Transkei environment is under extreme pressure; and shows how both inform current development policy.[9] It is often posited that local people overexploit natural resources because of their ignorance and/or poverty; this conviction often leads to another one, "that areas have been originally covered by a dense forest, which the inhabitants have converted into a savannah through their practices of land" (p. 133).

Hajdu underlines that it is hard for researchers to point out that there might not be degradations in some zones of "former homelands without seeming to suggest that apartheid policies did not lead to environmental problems" (p. 137). She nevertheless succeeds in making a clear twofold argument. Firstly, she challenges "the belief that there is a severe degradation all over Transkei, linked to local overuse of resources," as local livelihoods show a low reliance on the environment and the two villages show no evidence of "any acute and severe degradation" (p. 152). Secondly, she addresses the dangers and problems of these "paternalistic" discourses and shows their multi-scaled entanglement. These narratives seem to serve within "African societies and internationally, to sanction the appropriation of resources by states from local communities" to justify "international organizations that take resources from African States" and–in a different context–are used by governments of developed nations as "a stick with which to beat their un-

derdeveloped counterparts."[10] Such narratives reassert an artificial divide and enduring colonial dichotomy between "modernity" (associated with progress, development, and order) and "tradition" (associated with underdevelopment, poverty, and disorder).[11]

This volume constitutes an excellent overview of the key issues of land claims, eco-frontiers, and the politics of space at work through narratives, conflicts, and development plans in Pondoland and Eastern Cape Province. The authors provide the reader with a rich and yet not homogenous picture of the area, leading to a better understanding of the complicated entanglement of stakeholders and scales. It would now be of the utmost interest to ground further discussions on these materials and question the very notion of livelihood, by introducing "livelihood styles"–not just material focus but "a specific cultural repertoire composed of shared experiences, knowledge,... an integrated set of practices and of the interrelations with markets, technology and institutions; and responses to policies" –to highlight "the interconnection of the symbolic and material dimensions of economic action."[12] Moreover, it would be useful to reflect back on Clifford Geertz's "agricultural involution" (*Agricultural Involution: The Processes of Ecological Change in Indonesia* [1963]) in Java and, without ignoring dramatic difference in context, cast a new light on the results of the present volume.

Notes

[1]. Leslie Bank and Gary Minkley, "Going Nowhere Slowly? Land, Livelihoods and Rural Development in the Eastern Cape," *Social Dynamics* 31, no. 1 (2005): 1-38.

[2]. See also Sylvain Guyot, "Fronts écologiques et éco-conquérants: Définitions et typologies. L'exemple des ONG environnementales en quête de Côte Sauvage (Afrique du Sud)," *Cybergeo: European Journal of Geography, Environnement, Nature, Paysage* (2009): article 471, last version updated on Web site on July 27, 2010, http://cybergeo.revues.org/22651.

[3]. Ibid.

[4]. Leo de Hahn and Annelies Zoomers, "Exploring the Frontiers of Livelihoods Research," *Development and Change* 36, no. 1 (2005): 28-29.

[5]. See also Ben Cousins and Thembela Kepe, "Decentralisation When Land and Resources Rights Are Deeply Contested: A Case Study of the Mkambati Ecotourism Project on the Wild Coast of South-Africa," *European Journal of Development Research* 16, no. 1 (2002): 41- 54.

[6]. Adam Kuper, "The Return of the Native," *Current Anthropology* 44, no. 3 (2003): 389- 402.

[7]. On indigeneity, see Francesca Merlan, "Indigeneity: Global and Local," *Current Anthropology* 50, no. 3 (2009): 303-333.

[8]. Patrick Thipe Ntsime, "Deconstructing Sustainable Development: Towards a Participatory Methodology for Natural Resources Management," *Development Southern Africa* 21, no. 4 (2004): 707-718; Maano Ramutsindela, *The Science of Sustainable Development* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Sylvain Guyot, *Zulu Shores, South Africa: Green Disputes in Black and White* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag, 2008).

[9]. Quotations from Colin Bundy, "The Emergence and Decline of a South African Peasantry," *African Affairs* 71, no. 285 (1972): 369; and Etienne Nel and Jack Davies, "Farming against the Odds: An Examination of the Challenges Facing Farming and Rural Development in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa," *Applied Geography* 19 (1999): 260.

[10]. Gregory Maddox, "Degradation Narratives and Population Time Bomb: Myths and Realities about the African Environments," in *South Africa's Environmental History: Cases and Comparisons*, ed. Stephen Dowers, Ruth Edgecombe, and Bill Guest (Cape Town: David Philip, 2002), 253-254.

[11]. Akhil Gupta, *Postcolonial Developments: Agriculture in the Making of Modern India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

[12]. Quotations from De Hahn and Zoomers, "Exploring the Frontiers," 40; and Derrick Fay, "Land Tenure, Land Use and Land Reform at Dwesa-Cebe, South-Africa: Local Transformations and the Limits of the State," *World Development* 37, no. 8 (2009): 148.

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