Carving up Communities: Local Governance, Boundaries, and the Promise of Community-based Natural Resource Management in Mozambique

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Supporters of community management of natural resources defend that this is a viable institutional arrangement to secure the rights of people over their property (land and related resources of critical importance for livelihoods) and to have them put to a profitable, revenue-making use. On the other hand, in addition to pointing at the mixed performance of CBNRM institutions, critics stress that unequal patterns of resource access may become more deeply entrenched as a result of policy and legislation that institutionalise communal management. Both supporters and critics, however, share the notion of community as a strong entity: Institutional theory, the literature on collective action, and ethnographic evidence contribute to present communities as resilient collectivities of governance, who keep a strong imprint of their 'traditional' past and a high degree of social cohesion and that, also by virtue of those same resilience and cohesion, may as well adapt to newly crafted institutions for collective management, as well as turn them into powerful exclusionary mechanisms for marginalising members whose identities and status are weak, ex. women, non-natives etc. Communities are stronger, and their rights better protected towards external encroachers, if they identification is tied to a spatial grid (Peluso 1992). What is more, we need maps and boundaries to understand localities, despite what maps often leave out (Rochelau 2005). A cornerstone of CBNRM is thus mapping and the application of clear boundaries to a given community's area. But what if the capacity of communities to assert their identity and claims was weakened by the increased rationalisation and legibility of space achieved through demarcation? What if CBNRM itself was undermined by the juxtaposition of inclusion and exclusion achieved through delimitation?

Drawing on a fieldwork conducted in a rural district of Mozambique and the rich literature on African agrarian systems (esp. S.Berry and T.Bassett), this paper suggests a shift away from community-based management towards more comprehensive locally-based governance, which is better apt to appraise and contextualize existing patterns of resource access and use. It does that by questioning the strict identification of communities with their cadastral boundaries and it argues that localities carved up by extensive delimitation campaigns are institutionally weak entities. It especially contends that in Mozambique the received model of CBNRM contributes to parcelling out each community into isolation and locking up the complex web of relations that connects a community to another and its members to members of wider networks.