The grass versus the people: sacred roots of environmental conflict in the Chilonga communal lands in Zimbabwe

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Abstract This article analyses a conflict that erupted in 2021 between the government of Zimbabwe and the people of Chilonga in the south of the country over the expropriation of their ancestral for the production of lucerne grass. The people of Chilonga resisted being displaced from land to which they are deeply attached and have a sacred connection. This conflict provides a rare opportunity to analyze the often marginalized, muted and misunderstood sacred roots of the environmental conflict that shape collective agency. The article uses the concepts of emplacement and displacement to comprehend the deeper and more intangible impacts of displacing people from their grazing lands, sources of water and traditional herbs and medicines, and sacred sites—natural resources they claim to be sacred. Thus, while displacement has been used to explain why people find themselves moving, the article uses it to show the opposite: why they resist moving and demonstrate the not easily measured losses upon which resistance to moving hinges.

Keywords Environment · Conflict · Sacred · Emplacement and displacement · Zimbabwe

1 Introduction

In 2021 a conflict erupted between the government of Zimbabwe and the people of Chilonga in the south of the country over the expropriation of their ancestral and hence sacred land by the government and Dendairy, a private producer of dairy products. Dendairy is the second-largest dairy producer in Zimbabwe. It started in 2004 and produces full cream milk, long-life milk, powdered milk, ice cream and

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yoghurts, among other dairy products. It exports some of its products to Mozambique, Malawi and Zambia. The company has partnered with government institutions such as Kaguvi Vocational Training Centre, to which it donated dairy cows in 2017. The government promulgated several Statutory Instruments (SI) allowing it to acquire the land so that Dendairy could grow lucerne grass, for grazing, hay, green manure and silage (SI 50/2021). However, the people of Chilonga refused to relocate from the land to pave way for the purported irrigation scheme and the cultivation of the lucerne grass. The conflict drew the attention and interest of various stakeholders, such as political parties and civil society organizations, who put forward various arguments against the government plan. This resistance forced the government to make three amendments in a very short space of time. The conflict went beyond the economic rationale upon which the government's original actions were premised. It found itself entangled with cultural concepts, especially the idea of the sacred that is of interest to this article. The people of Chilonga resisted being displaced from land to which they are deeply attached and with which they have a sacred connection, as it is where their ancestors lie buried.

The Chilonga conflict provides a rare opportunity and vantage point through which to analyse the hitherto marginalized, muted and misunderstood sacred roots of the environmental conflict, that shape collective agency. This conflict resonates with the well-documented cases of indigenous communities across the world entering into conflict with the state or corporations over violations and dispossession of resources the local communities consider sacred. Cases in point include the U'Wa indigenous community in Colombia, which had a conflict with the American oil company Occidental Petroleum Corporation and the Colombian state-owned oil company, ECOPETROL. The indigenous community wanted to stop the state and the corporation from drilling for oil on their ancestral land. Occidental Petroleum Corporation and ECOPETROL advanced similar reasons to those we will see in the case of Chilonga to argue for the drilling of the oil: investment in health, education and road infrastructure. On the contrary, the indigenous community argued that it could not sell oil, the blood of its sacred Mother Earth (Arenas 2007).

We see the same developmentalist philosophy, which assumes that development is imperative, popular and has self-evident advantages, in the conflict between the Aborigines in Australia and the Federal government's decision to allow uranium mining Kakadu National Park. The Aborigines protested that mining would jeopardize the integrity of key cultural and natural values because the shaft reached a sacred site (Aplin 2004; Pockley 1999). These conflicts and indigenous people's failure to control ancestral land continue despite increased recognition of indigenous communities' rights by statutes such as the Declaration of the rights of indigenous people adopted by the UN in 2007 (O'Faircheallaigh 2012). There are also international policies that companies must follow while considering development projects on indigenous land. These policies involve assessing if the land has cultural or spiritual value. An example of such a policy would be the Akwe Kon Guidelines (Secretariat for the Convention for Biological Diversity 2004). As we will see, in the case of Chilonga, no such process was followed. The rationale guiding the government was "developmental" and economic.

In some cases, the violation continues under the guise of sustainable development. The rhetoric of sustainable development in Eastern India on lands belonging to indigenous communities has exposed the “reality gap” between this rhetoric and events on the ground, especially the resistance from the local communities. The net effect of the indigenous communities’ failure to control their ancestral lands, which are often entangled with their identity, is cultural genocide (Padel and Das 2010). However, other communities have mobilized the cultural beliefs and practices and their connection and attachment to land to form movements against the state and corporations (Borde and Bluemling 2020). The connection to and sacredness of the land, which is at the centre of the conflicts is often bolstered by the fact that the communities’ dead lie buried therein. As Fontein (2011) argues, the affective presence of graves and ruins, materialize past and present occupations and engagements with/in the landscape, hence can be entangled in complex, localized contests over autochthony and belonging. This worldview provides not only the lens through which to read the violation and dispossession of land and other resources, but also the actions taken, which in the case of Chilonga people is resistance.

This article understands the sacred as the deeply important and life-guiding beliefs, symbols and rituals that manifest themselves as the flexible and fluid elements of a cultural tool kit that is used to make sense of life and manifest destiny, of the dreams of a people, as well as structure their moral boundaries (see Farrell 2015; Taylor et al. 2016). The conflict in question can be construed as having been induced by climate change because, as agricultural production faces challenges from rapid climate change, options for food management become imperative. The article uses the concepts of emplacement and disemplacement to critically analyse the sacred dimensions of environmental conflicts (De Wet’s 2008). Emplacement refers to how individuals construct a narrative of identification and relationship with a place, and disemplacement a people’s inability to maintain their social, institutional, and economic relationship with that place. These concepts help us comprehend the deeper and more intangible impacts of displacing people from their grazing lands, sources of water and traditional herbs and medicines, and sacred sites—natural resources they claim to be sacred and thus have a sacred relationship with. Identifying invisible losses in environmental conflicts leads to a better understanding of the intangible benefits communities derive from their resources, this often being as or more important than economic gain. These benefits include owning land versus using fields, and ancestral identity and social belonging linked to gravesites. This helps us understand the motivation behind such resistance as that described here and to develop appropriate and sustainable peacebuilding solutions to prevent and mitigate such conflicts. Thus, while disemplacement has been used to explain why people find themselves moving, we will use it to show the opposite: why they resist moving and demonstrate the not easily measured losses upon which resistance to moving hinges.

2 Methodology

This chapter utilized desk research. The thrust of desk research was to find documents and sources that dealt with the information needed to look at the case in question. The method was appropriated because there is information on this conflict since it has been subjected to the test of public scrutiny. Therefore, the sources used include first-hand accounts of the Chilonga villagers and documents from the government and non-governmental organisations. It also used newspaper reports written during the conflict. I analyzed, evaluated, contextualized, and synthesized these materials in the research process. Detailed firsthand accounts of the experiences of the Chilonga villagers were captured and recorded in video clips, newspapers and reports. The discursive interaction between the government, Chilonga villagers and non-governmental organisations can best be interpreted using discourse analysis to disentangle the knots or arrangements made by various strands or arguments put forward by the various stakeholders in this conflict. Practically this means examining the textual (e.g. Statutory instruments, litigation documents), linguistic (e.g. statements of the villagers and politicians) and practical (e.g. court processes, protests, different stakeholders meeting amongst themselves and with the villagers) dimensions of the conflict from the various stakeholders. This is imperative because the first-hand information provided by the villagers cannot be taken as given because it is influenced, shaped and mediated by the relationship the villagers have with the non-governmental organisations that recorded their accounts, the government with which they are in conflict and their socio-cultural, economic and political interests. The same goes for the government and non-governmental organisations. The information they present to the public is a discourse arrived at by a conglomeration of various discursive strands and their relations which need to be factored in the analysis.

3 The geographical and sociocultural contexts of Chilonga

Chilonga's communal lands lie in Chiredzi district, which consist of semi-arid areas mostly within the agro-ecological Region V of Zimbabwe's farming regions. The district receives mean annual rainfall of less than 450mm and therefore has dry conditions, erratic rainfall and a short growing season, hence is considered suitable for extensive livestock production. Common crops grown include maize, sorghum, millet, cowpeas, sunflower and cotton, even though maize-growing is always at risk of crop failure due to erratic rainfall. The communal areas of the district also experience a shortage of grazing pastures for livestock, which constrains livestock production (Jiri et al. 2017). The Chilonga communal lands are inhabited by the Shangaan, so-called after the language they speak, Shangani.

The Shangaan believe in a close relationship between creation (*Ntumbuluko*) and the supernatural power they refer to as *tilo*. They believe in God's actions as Creator, the gods and other supernatural forces, both good and evil. They believe in venerating the ancestors and practice libation as a way of speaking to them. Some spirits or ancestors are believed to live in certain sacred places where ancient chiefs

have been buried, each clan having several of these burial grounds. The community's religious leaders lead the community in making offerings to the ancestors in times of trouble or cases of illness and on special occasions. The community also makes an effort to please the ancestors, as restless ancestors can cause trouble (Siyabonga Africa 2021). The Shangaan conduct a number of traditional and cultural ceremonies. During these ceremonies, high-spirited dances such as Chinyambe Muchongoyo, Chokoto, Marula, and Chigubu are performed. They perform rainmaking ceremonies at several sacred sites, and brew traditional beer to ask for the rains from their ancestors. They conduct male initiations to adulthood ceremonies. Before the actual circumcision, young boys are isolated from their villages. They usually are taken to the sacred hills where no unauthorized persons are allowed. The boys are taught about manhood, get circumcised and receive further lessons before graduating into manhood. Girls are isolated from their families for a month to undergo initiation into womanhood through a ceremony called Khomba, which is considered sacred. The Shangaan elders have vast indigenous knowledge, which enables them to interact with their natural surroundings sustainably. They know unique herbs and shrubs that have medicinal properties for both the people and their livestock. Their traditional healers have sacred sites where they perform rituals and ceremonies. The traditional healers obtain medicinal and spiritual resources from the forests and water bodies within their jurisdiction (MACRAD 2020).

Understanding how this kind of world shapes the values, beliefs and practices of the Shangaans will illuminate understanding of what motivates and propels them in the conflict in question (see Risenga 2002). While many Shangaan people have accepted Christianity, especially Roman Catholicism or one of the Protestant denominations, many remain faithful to ancestral spirit worship, while yet others practices both Christianity and the indigenous religion.

The government's argument is that the local people will be the first beneficiaries of the lucerne grass project. However, despite the government's promise that the people of Chilonga would be the first to benefit from the project, the latter resisted it, giving rise to the question why. Asking this exposes the limits of conventional assessments of compensation that restrict thinking about the loss to material resources, the obvious economic value and their equivalent (Witter and Satterfield 2014). This article argues that underlying the Chilonga conflict is the idea of the sacred, which influences how the Chilonga community makes sense of it and positions itself within it. Understanding the idea of the sacred in the Chilonga land conflict will help us grasp the motivations that are behind the community's resistance to these proposed changes and that therefore shape the strategies of resolution of those who are intervening the conflict failure to resolve which will result in unsustainable solutions with negative impacts on both the local people and the project.

4 Emplacement, disemplacement and the idea of the sacred

In seeking to understand this conflict, De Wet's (2008) concepts of emplacement and disemplacement will be used to analyse the idea of the sacred, as expressed in the concern that the Chilonga people are being forced to leave their ancestral

land, a move that will result in losses that are not only physical and tangible but also invisible and intangible (Turner et al. 2008). These two concepts illuminate understanding of the conflicts that potentially erupt by displacing a people from a context to which they are deeply and emotionally attached. While different stakeholders put forward against the project arguments ranging from the legal to the political to the economic, a red line runs through all of them, namely that the eviction of the Shangaan people would alienate them from their agricultural, religious and cultural heritage, as the interests of private capital trump the community's needs (Green Governance Zimbabwe Trust 2021). The moot questions are, what is special about this land and how are the land and the sacred entangled with each other? The concepts of emplacement and disemplacement help us to address these questions. Being emplaced arises through the individual's ability to construct a narrative of identification with a place (Farrer 2010), for example, the relationship that develops when an individual associates a place with his or her cultural heritage. Emplacement has as one of its aspects "a kind of a local citizenship or enfranchisement which thereby provides one with access to the resources and relationships associated with the area [It] does not necessarily imply permanent residence ...but it does imply identification and recognition and the right of members to derive sustenance, society and significance from the place they hold in common" (De Wet 2008, p. 116). An emplaced individual thus identifies with and creates community through a particular place. Emplacement can be so powerful that, even when the local environment no longer represents the place to which attachment was first formed, the population refuses to relocate from it (Francaviglia 1997). Emplacement thus means more than just living in or visiting a location: it signifies a deep bond that manifests itself in both tangible and intangible ways (Farrer 2010). Understanding how individuals and communities use land provides clues to how they relate to place, as well as to one another (Brandt and Spierenburg 2014). Some places serve as intangible containers of memory (Trigg 2012), prompting the recall of religious and sacred activities (Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2004), historical events and life milestones (Manzo 2005). Emplacement in the Chilonga village is realized through ongoing resistance to resettlement.

The two concepts of displacement and disemplacement are not exclusive of each other in the processual sense. People first become disemplaced, which may then lead to more formal displacement. Disemplacement reflects a process whereby people "are squeezed out of a place (and out of a community) in as much as they become progressively unable to maintain their social, institutional, and therefore their economic relationship, with that place" (De Wet 2008, p. 120). This may but does not necessarily require movement from one place to another. A change in the social and political nature of a place can disemplace a people. From this we can understand why the government's proposal that the villagers share the land with the dairy business after they had resisted doing so does not solve the problem of disemplacement. This concept acknowledges that individuals have special ties to particular places, thus allowing investigation of the intangible and invisible losses that people suffer when they have to move. As a theoretical tool, disemplacement has been used to explain why people find themselves moving. However, because it directs attention to the more social and place-based aspects of people's dislocation

from their homes and communities, in this article (see also Hemer 2016) we will use it to show the opposite: why they resist moving and demonstrate the not easily measured losses upon which resistance to moving hinges.

Displacement arises when “the area where people live or with which they associate is no longer able to support or sustain them [socially, politically, culturally, religiously etc.]. ... They are thus no longer able to remain emplaced, and increasingly become uprooted, unsettled, ‘displaced’” (De Wet 2008, p. 115). As we shall see, the Chilonga villagers themselves claim that their communal lands provide them with a direct connection to their ancestors, who bless their production of crops. Their resistance to relocating is not evidence of an irrational response by people who are too ignorant to understand the benefits of the government initiative in introducing lucerne grass and the irrigation scheme. The land will have a different meaning in the new areas, where it will merely represent a place at which to build a house or plant crops, meaning that the protection of the ancestors can no longer be invoked (see Artur and Hilhorst 2014). Thus, the concept of displacement captures the invisible losses involved in relocating people by focusing on the intangible features of the person-place bond (Casey, 2009; Relph 1976). This foregrounds what links a person and group to a place physically *and* psychologically. Basing ourselves on displacement as a theoretical tool helps us to capture the intangible impacts of relocating the Chilonga people from their ancestral land. Abandoning their land means not only moving from one’s inherited land but also experiencing other losses that are difficult to quantify (Witter and Satterfield 2014). These communal lands represent the community’s rightful inheritance, which promotes a farming identity and is directly connected to the community’s ancestors (see Strong 2019).

5 Displacement and the conflict

In April of 2020, the Minister of Local Government, Public Works and National Housing, acting on behalf of the Minister of Lands, Agriculture and Rural settlement convened a meeting in with the local leadership and other stakeholders in Chiredzi, to announce the government’s plan to acquire the land for Lucerne grass project. On the 18 of May 2020 Chiredzi Rural District Council (CRDC) called for a meeting with about thirty local leaders to discuss the government proposed evictions. It is reported that the meeting was abandoned after villagers started to protest. The District Development Coordinator abandoned attending the meeting. In June of 2020, the Vice President visited Chilonga communal lands with a strike force of politicians and technocrats from the ministries of agriculture, energy, local government, health and finance to reinforce the message of evictions for the proposed project. Some villagers protested, raising placards inscribed with messages such as “Consult us on lucerne” and “Takaramba investor” (We rejected the investor) (MACRAD 2020). This development drew the ire of various stakeholders, including opposition politicians and civil-society organizations, which accordingly started litigation against the government.

The government proceeded with this particular example of displacement through government statutory instruments or SIs, “a form of legislation that al-

lows the provisions of an Act of Parliament to be subsequently brought into force or altered without Parliament passing a new Act. They are also referred to as secondary, delegated or subordinate legislation (House of Commons Information Service 2008).” Through SI50 of 2021, published on the 26th of February 2021, the government gazetted 12,940 hectares of communal land for the production of lucerne grass for dairy production by Dendairy. This SI required the local population to be relocated to pave the way for this project. It states that:

‘The area of land described hereunder in terms of the Schedule shall be set aside with effect from the date of publication of this notice for Lucerne production. Any person occupying or using the land specified in the schedule, otherwise than by virtue of a right held in terms of the Mines and Minerals Act, is ordered to depart permanently with all of his or her property from the said land by the date of publication of this notice unless he or she acquires rights of use or occupation to the said land in terms of section (9)(1) of the Communal Land Act.’

A Chilonga villager, representing the community challenged the constitutionality of SI 50 of 2021, as the first applicant, while the land rights pressure group, the Masvingo Centre for Advocacy, Research and Development (MACRAD) was the second applicant. The SI 50 of 2021 ordered the Shangaan to relocate from the Chilonga communal land. Another land rights, The Zimbabwe Environmental Law Association (ZELA) filed an urgent chamber application at the Masvingo High Court seeking to interdict government from going ahead with its plan to displace the villagers (Mafirakureva 2021). In what can be interpreted as giving in to pressure while continuing with the project, on the 9th of March 2021, the government published Statutory Instrument 63A of 2021 which amendment Statutory Instrument 50 of 2021. The amendment reads:

‘It is hereby notified, for general information, that the Communal Land (Setting Aside of Land) (Chiredzi) Notice, 2021, published in Statutory Instrument 50 of 2021, contained errors. The statutory instrument is corrected—(a) by the deletion of the words “Minister of Local Government, Urban and Rural Development” and substitution of “Minister of Local Government and Public Works”; (b) in section 2 by the deletion of the words “purpose of lucerne production” and substitution of “establishment of an irrigation scheme”.’

This change was seen as an illusion and a distraction, which changed the explicit reason for the permanent removal of the Chilonga people from the land being acquired from its use for “lucerne grass production” to the “establishment of an irrigation scheme”. It was meant to deflect the criticism that the government was prioritizing grass and capital over the community’s cultural and sacred beliefs and practices.

Resistance therefore continued, resulting in the government issuing SI72A of 2021, this time repealing the initial decree and removing the clause forcing the Chilonga community to depart permanently from their land. The SI reads: “Communal Land Setting Aside of Land (Chiredzi): The Minister of Local Government and Public Works, in terms of section 10 of the Communal Land Act (Chapter 20:04)

hereby makes the following notice; this notice may be cited as the Communal Land (Setting Aside of Land (Chiredzi)) Notice, 2021”:

‘The area described hereunder in terms of the schedule shall be set aside with effect from the date of publication of this notice for the purpose of establishing an irrigation scheme. The Communal Land (Setting Aside of Land) (Chiredzi) Notice, 2021, published in Statutory Instrument 50 of 2021, is repealed.’

In addition, because of opposition in court, the government said that it was no longer going to evict the villagers without compensation.

The Chilonga villagers and their legal team removed the case from the court roll, since the core of their argument, the evictions from their sacred land, which the government now proposed to halt, had apparently been acknowledged. According to the legal team, the Chilonga people had won the battle to stay on their ancestral land, and the categorical demonstration of their disemplacement had been lifted. However, while SI72A of 2021 repealed SI50 of 2021, it did not repeal SI 51 of 2021, through which land was to be taken away. In SI51 of 2021, “*His Excellency the President, in terms of section 6(1)(b) of the Communal Land Act [Chapter 20:04], hereby makes the following notice:—1. This notice may be cited as the Communal Land (Excision of Land) Notice, 2021. 2. The area of land described hereunder in terms of the Schedule shall cease to be part of the Chiredzi Communal Land.*” Despite this outstanding state of affairs, SI72A of 2021 represents a significant reversal to an unjust and arbitrary policy that disrespected citizens’ rights.

The Chilonga conflict is replete with various arguments, economic, legal, political and cultural. The government has advanced the economic argument, wanting to set up a forage crop project to boost livestock production, a move it estimated would earn the country more than USD fifty million a year. The government’s justification for the project resonates with the conventional arguments recommended by technocrats, whereby assessments are based on whether the resettlers will have access to material resources and services (i.e., land, housing, schools) in host communities. This approach fails to account for invisible losses that are significant, even devastating, for local people but not recognized, measured, or seen as essential or legitimate, or else seen as lying beyond the purview of the project’s authorities (Turner et al. 2008). The loss of identity and emotional connection based on deep attachment to and emplacement in one’s sacred land and natural resources are examples of such invisible and immeasurable losses. The main opposition political party, the Movement for Democratic Change-Alliance (MDC Alliance), called on Zimbabwe’s citizens to boycott Dendairy (Pvt) Limited products as a protest against its attempt to dislodge Chilonga villagers from their ancestral land to make way for the government-sanctioned grass project. It charged that the evictions were arbitrary and illegal, as Section 71(3) of the Constitution did not allow deprivation for government-sanctioned purposes that are not beneficial to the community. It accused the government of violating Chilonga villagers’ livelihoods, cultural practices, dignity, land rights and indigenous knowledge systems (Vinga 2021).

The villagers claim to have a symbiotic relationship with their land and environment. Their ancestors are buried in the land the government wants to give to the private investor (MACRAD 2021). Their graves and other sites are of existential

significance to Chilonga people. The sites include places where rainmaking rituals are performed annually. The villagers fear that if they are ever evicted, their ancestral graves, sacred mountains, streams, pools and other cultural, religious and spiritual sites will no longer be preserved and protected, and they also fear not having free access to them. Some claim that the last time they were displaced and resettled to pave the way for sugarcane farming they had four years without rain. They blamed the drought that followed on the displacements because they no longer had access to their sacred places of worship and the performance of cultural ceremonies (MACRAD 2021). It is this characterization that makes their land and environment sacred. In a court case, the Masvingo Center for Advocacy, Research and Development (MACRAD) argued that the land was of religious and cultural significance, and that banishing Chilonga villagers from it would be a direct affront to their freedom of thought, opinion, religion and belief.

Legal commentators have invoked sections of the Constitution that cater for what we might regard as constitutive of the idea of the sacred. This included Section 3, which binds the government to recognize the rights of ethnic, racial, cultural, linguistic and religious groups, and Section 33, which mandates the state to take measures to preserve, protect and promote indigenous knowledge systems, including knowledge of the medicinal and other properties of animal and plant life possessed by local communities. They also appealed to Section 16, which imposes an obligation upon the government to promote and preserve cultural values and practices that enhance the dignity, well-being and equality of all Zimbabweans. They argued that the Shangaan depend upon what they consider to be sacred mountains, streams, pools and other unique cultural sites within their ancestral land. The net result of evicting the Shangani people from their land is that it will disconnect them from their religious and sacred spiritual sites (Sambiri 2021). The preceding arguments testify that to displace the Chilonga villagers from their land and natural resources is to disemplace them from their life-guiding beliefs, symbols and rituals through which they make sense of life and structure their moral boundaries. They are thus threatened with disemplacement from their sacred anchor of existence, making resistance and defence of the land a “good” thing in itself.

Claims that the sacred forms the bedrock of Shangaan culture has informed the various arguments against the project made by the different stakeholders. During an interview, one villager stood before the grave of his father and said:

This is the grave of our father. He is buried in such a way that we cannot ex-hume him and rebury him following the same funeral and burial rites that were followed to bury him. Those who could do it have all died. Those remaining are us, the children, and we do not know how to do the appropriate rites, and if that won't be done, we will suffer wherever we will be relocated to. We need to protect and preserve it until eternity. If we are to be relocated or caterpillars violate this grave, our sacred beliefs and practices will have been violated (Skymirror24 2021).

Claims linking the sacred to the environment and natural resources like the land show why the cultural argument is so fundamental in this conflict. The claims of the sacred describe deeply important and life-guiding beliefs, symbols and rituals,

flexible and fluid elements of a cultural toolkit that is used to make sense of life, and not necessarily a fixed dogma or doctrine, which is how religion is conventionally defined (see Farrell 2015). The guiding question for theoretical explorations is why and how sacred beliefs and practices function to influence the discourse about environmental conflicts.

First, sacred beliefs and practices help set the institutional dimensions of everyday environmental management, establishing rules in use, routinized practices, and rights and responsibilities. These institutions are enmeshed in culture (Watson 2009). The Chilonga people's environmental management practices, rights and responsibilities are mediated and routinized through their sacred beliefs and practices, which guide everyday social action. Through contact with their environment, the Chilonga community has generated invaluable indigenous knowledge in managing its natural resources, traditional ways of weather and seasonal forecasting, ethnomedicine among others. They have also generated moral geography which is important for hosting sacred rain making ceremonies. Performing rain making ceremonies is critical as part of worshipping ancestors, appeasing them as well as avoiding impending dangers like droughts in their agro-based livelihoods (MACRAD 2021). Forced evictions will thus result in the loss of the moral compass that guide their everyday lives.

Second, sacred beliefs and practices influence the qualitative nature of human relations with the environment—how people perceive it, how they feel about it, how they value it and how they treat it. Thus, it is vital to theorize the role of sacredness in moral decision-making (Durkheim 2001 [1920]). They influence the degree to which the environment is respected, revered, dominated or considered dispensable or indispensable, divisible or indivisible. It therefore structures how relations with others are constructed and negotiated. This means that the religious, spiritual and sacred connections between communities and the environment are instrumental in forming and maintaining the different kinds of inter-group relations (Watson 2010). Sacred beliefs and practices are assumed to influence adherents' attitudes and subsequent behaviour (Haluza-DeLay 2014). They structure movements and engagements with space and the environment. The human-environment nexus is lived, inhabited, performed and experienced, and impacts qualitatively on individual subjectivity, forms of identity and relations with others (Watson 2010). A 63-year-old Chilonga villager stated that he “still cannot reconcile himself to the harsh reality that the crop he is harvesting would be his last ever on this piece of land that was first cleared by his grandfather more than half a century ago” (Zenda 2021). Indicating the form of relationship that is induced by the behaviour of the government he charged: “These people are cruel, very cruel ...In fact they are worse than the colonialists!” (Ibid). The claim that their land is sacred determines how they relate to any agents who may want to dispossess them. In this case, they are refusing to leave the land and perceive the government as cruel colonialists.

Third, sacred beliefs and practices can be a source of connectivity and social capital, thus encouraging a response to environmental challenges through their influence on believers' world views or cosmologies and the moral duties they promote. They can engage a broad audience, many of whom accept and respect their moral authority and leadership. They have significant institutional and economic resources

at their disposal (Haluza-DeLay 2014; Watson and Kochore 2012), this being an organizational requirement for the types of collective action that religions can help promote. The belief in the ancestors as the owners and guardians of the land is the glue that unites the Chilonga people in resisting the government's project. That belief provides connectivity and social capital to mobilize the community against the government. A villager said:

We cannot allow our ancestral land to be auctioned while we clap hands ...If we ever allow this Darren Coetzee and Kruger to grab our land without resistance, then our children will never forgive us. We won't go anywhere and that is why we had to apply for an interdict challenging the constitutionality of Statutory Instrument 50 of 2021 ... (Mafirakureva 2021)

The reference to the land as the community's ancestral land makes the land the rallying point for resistance. The community members are glued together by this characteristic and the language used is collective and not individual.

Fourth, as world views, sacred beliefs and practices seek to provide explanatory narratives regarding general orders of existence. Explanatory narratives relating to the environment are crucial to how problems are identified and causes diagnosed, and hence to how particular solutions are designated as appropriate. They explain how the world was created, why and what the role of humans within it is, and even why natural disasters occur (Pierotti and Wildcat 2000; Spilka et al. 1985, Sachdeva 2016). If sacred ideas and teaching shape local explanatory narratives, they also powerfully shape the selection and implementation of different practical responses to environmental conflicts. They represent a powerful force that offers a framework in which world views and cultural imaginaries frame practical actions, understandings and relations. Their influence reaches far beyond the personal and spiritual to touch other realms of human action (Watson and Kochore 2012). An elderly woman said that their religious and cultural practices will be destroyed as their sacred pilgrimage shrines as well as sites for passage rites will be decimated. She said women and children, particularly girls, will be worst affected.

We have places of worship where we consult our ancestors and do traditional rites and cultural practices. We have places where we annually congregate to teach our girls adulthood (*Ukomba*). Even boys also go for circumcision (*Hoko*) events annually. To destroy them and remove them from us is a very serious affront to our culture. It detaches us from our ancestors and our being as Shangaan people (Chitagu 2021).

The sacred can harden boundaries between conflicting parties, thereby defining the conflict in zero-sum terms and facilitating the demonization of one's opponents in the belief that the enemy is morally inferior as well as dangerous, and so must be dealt with harshly (Pape 2005; Tarusarira 2016; Chitando and Tarusarira 2017). The beliefs of the people of Chilonga in their environment and ancestors provide them with a world-view with which to comprehend the conflict. They read the world, their lives and life developments through the tradition and culture that the ancestors have passed down to them and that must be kept and passed on to the next generation. Their sacred beliefs and practices make this conflict intractable, allowing them to

define the government and its agents as enemies who are bent on destroying their being, so that they must be dealt with harshly or at least vigorously resisted.

6 Implications for environmental conflicts embedded in the idea of the sacred

Dealing with conflict often means adopting secular and technical approaches that undermine the human and cultural dimensions of conflict. This is more concerning in contexts in which the conflict is embedded in and entangled with sacred orders. The failure to factor in the idea of the sacred means neglecting what could be a game-changer in conflicts with sacred implications. At the centre of the Chilonga conflict is the idea of the sacred. The communal lands have a trajectory that is traceable to the ancestors, as the villagers have stressed, as have the organizations that are fighting their corner for them. Sacred beliefs and practices influence how the Chilonga people perceive their land, how they feel about it, how they value it, how they treat it. It hence structures and mediates how relations with others, both friends and foes, are constructed and negotiated. This means that the spiritual entanglement between the Chilonga people and their land moderates how they resist the government's technical agents in implementing the latter's economic program of the irrigation scheme. Sacred beliefs and practices are important influences on Chilonga people's attitudes and subsequent behaviour, making them powerful social actors. They make the conflict intractable by making the Chilonga people resist relocation, despite being promised economic benefits from the irrigation project.

The villagers do not talk about sharing the land as a resolution to the conflict. This means being true to the land and environment, as in conflicts with sacred dimensions generally. The sacredness of the land can only be sustained when the land remains intact and is not divided. To share or split the land is to desecrate it. Such conflicts are called indivisible conflicts. The land is perceived as indivisible in and of itself, it cannot be taken apart. It is indivisible from those who own it, meaning that they will not consider parting with it. Dividing the land or allowing competitors to take it over undermines its symbolic coherence because they are sites at which believers can expect to communicate directly with their ancestors (see Hassner 2009, p. 41–42). Resolving conflicts by establishing a value for the land, negotiating a monetary settlement and trading, to list just some of the dominant options in traditional positivist conflict resolution strategies, may be considered insults and as abhorrent by religious adherents defending sacred land. The promise that the Chilonga villagers would gain economically from the changes is an indirect way of bringing in the economic issue back in through the back door in order to resolve the conflict. Religious and cultural perceptions, rationalities and imaginaries thus contribute to theoretical understandings of why the people of Chilonga act the way they do (their motivations). Understanding their motivations might be the key to unlocking conflicts that seem unsolvable and that keep recurring.

The villagers feel that they could not live apart from their ancestral land, which gives them their collective identity. This belief in the ancestors, the provenance of their identity, is a source of connectivity and social capital. By invoking their unity

through the ancestors, they can mobilize themselves. The land connects them to their history, ancestors, communal identity and embodied spirituality (Captari et al. 2019; Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2004). The land speaks of a past, a history, a culture, a language, spirituality and metaphysical realms. To leave one's communal lands would be an act betraying their ancestors, who passed the land on to them, thus giving them an identity that they do not want to give away. Therefore, arguments about productivity or the lack of it do not help resolve these kinds of conflicts. This is why the promise of economic revitalization is being greeted with abhorrence by the people of Chilonga.

The Chilonga villagers are thus threatened with losing both tangible physical and economic benefits and intangible and invisible special ties to their land. The latter, which motivated them to resist relocation, despite the promise of their benefitting from the lucerne grass and irrigation scheme, are not easily measured. The conflict was metamorphosed into a moral conflict. It went beyond measuring and calculating how many acres the Chilonga land covers, how many acres they need for survival, how many acres can be given to the project and how many can be kept by the community. It transcended calculations about how much the irrigation scheme will earn the country in foreign currency, an argument that the government put forward, or how much the community will benefit. These measurements and calculations are about the truth or falsity of what is verifiable. However, the conflict is now about what the Chilonga people deem right or wrong, and not about what is deemed true or wrong through technical instrumentation and exploration. The economic argument has not persuaded the villagers to accept relocation or the lucerne grass project. It is the belief in the ancestors, in the sacred and moral orders, that determines and gives the villagers agency. Sacred orders provide explanatory narratives regarding general orders of existence. Accepting relocation would be tantamount to abandoning their forefathers and mothers and not keeping faith with the dead. This means that how the land performs in terms of economic production or how much they will benefit economically is overridden by their respect for the dead. Thus, the sacred overrides the economic. Even if the government offered to compensate them for the loss of their graves, that would still ignore the loss of ancestral authority that is linked to them. Abandoning ancestral graves involves vitally important losses of status, identity, belonging and authority over resources (i.e., "ownership of land", as residents define it). They anticipate this loss of ownership, given the spatially defined division of ancestral authority between different villages (see Witter and Satterfield 2014).

The strike force of technocrats who visited the Chilonga communal lands to promise a well-orchestrated development at the inception of the project is thus rendered meaningless. Economic prosperity is subsumed under the sacred canopy because it is only possible, so it is claimed, through the blessings of the ancestors. This resonates with the fortune-misfortune complex according to which indigenous religions are claimed to advance fortunes and protect against misfortunes in many contexts in Africa. The Chilonga villagers live under the sacred canopy of the ancestors, who bless them with rains and protection of their crops. SI72A of 2021, which repealed the earlier SI providing for the forceful eviction of the Chilonga people without compensation, was greeted as a win by the latter. However, this

“win” has not stopped the project of the government, which promises to move the people with compensation instead. What is not clear is whether this compensation will be forced and what happens if it is rejected. The mechanisms have not been fleshed out. Going by the concept of disemplacement, the government might be skirting around the issue. Its actions continue to be based on economic logic and to sidestep the invisible losses that are so important to the Chilonga community.

7 Conclusion

The Chilonga villagers’ resistance to relocating from their communal lands and the emerging conflict with the government have brought to the fore not only how climate change is now a security threat, but also how critical are the sacred and moral orders in addressing such conflicts, especially when the owners of the natural resources involved perceive them as sacred. Because of rapid climate change resulting in the depletion of resources, including land for cattle-grazing, the company in question has had to choose a drought-resistant crop to grow for their dairy cattle. Dominant peacebuilding approaches to climate conflicts advocate the hyperrational, inclusive and equal distribution of resources, as well as investigations into how communities can manage common or pooled natural resources in an ecologically and socially sustainable way. In this case, one approach would be to investigate how the government and the Chilonga villagers could manage the land in question. However, this approach represents a grafting of natural resource management on to already existing approaches to conflict prevention, mitigation and resolution, which lend themselves to secular, positivist and neoliberal sense-making. As already mentioned, some conflicts cannot be resolved through divisions, sharing or side payments, as would standard disputes.

Dealing with environmental conflicts that have sacred dimensions requires more than just considering positivist and technological motivations and approaches. While insightful, approaches based on technology and hard facts do not account for the levels of intensity and intractability and the unquantifiable and invisible losses that parties to the conflict might bear when disemplaced. Like natural resources, land is not only organic matter with mechanical-like properties but also an agentic phenomenon with indivisible, irreplaceable and inviolable characteristics, which have their source in claims of their sacred quality. Traditional environmental peacebuilding relies on approaches such as mediation and negotiation, at whose core are partitioning, sharing, or side payments.

There is thus a failure to comprehend why actors take the positions they do in environmental conflicts. Understanding and dealing with environmental conflicts requires factoring in religious sense-making, which includes rituals and practices. Conflicts in contexts where the communities involved have a religious and spiritual relationship with the natural environment are ultimately more than about the natural resources in question. There is thus a need to link scientific and technical perspectives with moral, religious and spiritual orders. The latter—which is a social sciences perspective—has suffered marginalisation in the age where advocates of modernity believe that everything can be understood through scientific and technical

experimentation and exploration. Social sciences approaches, thus, help us establish the human and cultural dimensions of the intersection between religion and the environment.

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