

Book Review

Tobias Haller, ed. 2010. *Disputing the Floodplains: Institutional Change and the Politics of Resource Management in African Wetlands*. Leiden: Brill.

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With their year-round water availability and often high resource base quality, wetlands in sub-Saharan Africa present increasingly contested hotspots for agricultural production, but they also host a range of other common pool resources, from wildlife and water to pasture and fish. Not surprisingly they attract a variety of user groups, including pastoralists, smallholders, fishermen, industrial horticultural farmers, conservationists, and tourist entrepreneurs, resulting in a number of conflicting claims to access and use. Resource management is not only complicated by the diversity of user groups and tenure systems, but also by the seasonal variability of resource availability. Haller's research project, the *African Floodplain Wetlands Project*, and the edited volume that has resulted from it, therefore presents a timely effort to systematically address the challenges of resource management in these fragile environments from a comparative, theoretically grounded and ethnographically informed perspective.

The book starts with an introductory chapter by Haller, which comprises an overview of human-environmental relations in African floodplains as well as an outline of the theoretical framework of the study. This framework is mainly based on theories of New Institutionalism, particularly on the work of Elinor Ostrom (1990) and Jean Ensminger (1992), but also makes reference to theories of Legal Pluralism and Political Ecology. Focusing on the dynamics of institutional change, it arrives at a set of eight working hypotheses, in which much emphasis is placed on the role of ideology and bargaining power.

Chapters 2 to 8 consist of in-depth case studies on human-environmental relations, environmental management and institutional change on six African floodplains: the Niger Inner Delta (Mali); the Waza-Logone Floodplain in northern Cameroon (two case studies); the Pangani River Basin and the Rufiji

Floodplain (both in Tanzania); the Kafue Flats Floodplain (Zambia), and the Okavango Delta in Botswana. All case studies describe the political, economic and institutional setup of their respective research areas from pre-colonial times to the present. They outline the importance of wetland-based resources for local livelihoods, the relations between the different resource users, and the conflicts and conflict-resolution strategies that emerge out of these constellations. The case studies are comprehensive, and facilitate cross-case comparisons through their use of a common template, and direct the reader, where appropriate, to similar dynamics in the other case studies covered.

The book concludes with a comparative outlook that summarizes the main findings of the case studies. Central here is the role of the post-colonial state which, claiming control over the floodplains but lacking the financial and logistic resources necessary for their protection, effectively dismantles common property and turns the floodplains into open-access regimes. This “paradox of the presence-absence of the state” is further aggravated by an increasing number of immigrant users who feel entitled to use wetland resources on the basis of their citizenship rights. As local long-term users are generally not empowered by the state to protect their resources, actors with high bargaining power benefit most from the dismal situation. They transform the remaining traditional institutions that grant access to tradable resources into profit-seeking institutions. Not all traditional resources are eroded, therefore (rules that pay will likely stay), resulting in legal pluralism and a fragmentation of management and regulation. Increased use pressure, fuelled by the generally weak economic performance of the nations in question, has led to a steep decline of common pool resources in all case study scenarios covered by the book, with the notable exception of Botswana.

Given the richness of material presented, it is lamentable that a description of the methods applied in the field research is missing. The absence of any reflections on the methodology of cross-cultural comparison is equally disappointing. Further points of critique are that the emphasis on institutional change – which is associated with the colonial, and particularly post-colonial eras – implies a problematic notion of pre-colonial harmony and resilience. In a similar vein, the narrow focus on economic factors and external drivers of change sometimes appears to cut short other potentially valid explanations for change that transcend this framework. On a more technical side, it must also be said that the book suffers from a lack of editorial attention to the language used, resulting in frequent repetitions, spelling errors and linguistic inconsistencies, which at times disturb the reading process. The merits of the book, however, outweigh these shortcomings: it successfully documents the endeavour to reach theoretically well-founded generalisations about institutional changes in highly complex human-environmental systems. The rich and detailed case studies provide a solid basis for the comparative analysis on which these generalisations are based. This book, therefore, is a valuable source of information for the readers of this journal.

Literature cited

- Ensminger, J. 1992. *Making a Market. The Institutional Transformation of an African Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ostrom, E. 1990. *Governing the Commons. The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.