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BOOK REVIEWS

Things Fall Apart? The Political Ecology of Forest Governance in Southern Nigeria

PAULINE VON HELLERMANN
BERGHAHN BOOKS,
OXFORD, NY, 2013
206 Pp. \$70.00 HARDCOVER

REVIEWED BY PRAKASH KASHWAN

The World Resources Institute (WRI), a progressive advocacy group, defines forest governance as the ‘scope of institutions, laws, and practices that influence governance of forests’ (Williams et al. 2012: 6). Moreover, WRI associates “good governance” with principles of transparency, participation, and accountability. In much interdisciplinary research on forest governance, the basic tenets of scientific forestry are rarely challenged. The standard storyline, to simplify a bit, is that for far too long foresters paid little attention to how the broader social, cultural, and political contexts affected the success of scientific practices of forestry management. Contemporary discourses of good forest governance thus emphasize the need for a better understanding of the context and a closer engagement with key actors outside of the forestry sector.

In this book, Pauline von Hellermann nudges the proponents of forest governance to rethink the standard storyline. The author asks if scientific forestry, an enterprise founded on a combination of forest reservation, logging regulations, and regeneration programs, is inherently conducive to the pursuit of sustainable forestry. She shows

convincingly that there is little ground to take that link for granted. Second, the author argues that the recent “failures” of forest governance in Southern Nigeria are attributable to the shortcomings “internal” to scientific forestry, which changing economic and demographic circumstances have further exacerbated. Von Hellermann argues that contemporary forestry reforms are based on an inadequate and, at times, incorrect understanding of the reasons for the failures of centralized forest management. The author situates her work within the broad tradition of political ecology, with an emphasis on “place, nature, and history”: “an ethnographic focus on one locality; a serious engagement with ecology; and a deeply historical approach” (p. 6). The author emphasizes that, while she strives to pay “equal attention to political economy and ecology,” her focus is on “policy processes and their role in landscape change” (p. 8).

A very crisp introductory chapter offers an insightful review of the history and politics of scientific forestry: its roots in Germany and France, the development of its administrative mechanisms in colonial Burma and India, its application to colonial forestry in Africa, and its continued prevalence in post-colonial Africa. Notwithstanding the pretenses of Weberian rationalization, colonial scientific forestry invariably got entangled in local political economy and failed to secure a balance between its developmental and environmental goals.

Next, the author offers a comprehensive review of ecology and politics in the Benin Kingdom (Chapter 1). She describes what I would call a schizophrenic social landscape: chieftaincy titles, linked to honor and status and crucial access to resources in the highly regulated economy of the Kingdom, were transacted like a market commodity: literally bought and sold. Village-level authority, on the other hand, was organized around egalitarian norms of gerontocracy, that is, a rule by elders, which counterbalanced and complemented the commoditized traditional patrimonialism that prevailed at higher levels of politics. This chapter also documents the nuances of the ecology of

customary resources use, with fascinating details about traditional soil testing methods (p. 35).

This is followed up in Chapter 2, on “Separating Farm and Forest,” which shows that scientific forestry ended up stunting the regeneration and growth of indigenous timber species, such as mahogany and sapele wood. These and many other valuable timber species needed an open canopy and well-lit ambience, made available through periodical clearing by farmers, the very conditions that professional foresters had deemed destructive of productive forests. This chapter also offers deep insights about the political economy of forest reservation, which is worth a careful reading by forest governance enthusiasts.

Before forest reservations arrived on the scene, the chiefs were the *de facto* owners of land. Similar to the colonial discourses elsewhere in Africa and Asia, the colonial administrations promised to protect the customary rights in land and forests. Over time, though, the colonial administrators reneged on these promises, as the expediency of commercial interests led to indiscriminate and large scale reservation. Most importantly, multiple chiefs gave their consent to forest reservation. To facilitate forest reservation, colonial administrations and chiefs colluded to reassert the ‘official ownership’ of Benin’s customary monarch (p. 52). Earlier in Chapter 2, the author refers to these changes as the creation of “legal conditions and structures of land control,” which is a reference to the transformation of property relations (p. 46). In the process, customary rights to forest and land received a significant setback.

The significance of the new legal conditions was to become clear when the post-independence government exploited state ownership of forest reserves to convert them into large-scale plantations. The author diligently documents the varied drivers of these changes in land use and forest tenure, which benefitted everyone involved in one way or another. As one would expect, though, the most significant benefits of these changes were cornered by

politicians, who used them as a source of patronage to facilitate preferential access to forest reserves for private corporations. Chiefs benefited by allowing migrant cocoa farmers, smallholder farmers found it relatively easy to hold on to, or expand even, the Taungya farms (see below), and plantain farmers and women plantain traders benefitted from easier access to reserve land. The author thus concludes, “Just as reservation did not actually constitute successful forest management, so its recent weakening has neither been purely the result of management failures and patronage politics nor has it had the destructive effects usually attributed to it” (p. 81).

In contrast to the richness of the evidence the author presents throughout the book, the book’s conclusions, such as the one quoted in the previous sentence, tend to portray a somewhat exaggerated sense of ambiguity. While no one who has undertaken careful field research would dare think in terms of the binaries and crude structuralism of yesteryear, the book’s conclusions sidestep the evidence of highly differentiated and unequal effects of changes in forest tenure. Taking such evidence into account would reveal the productive potential of building on the significant advances that the book under review makes in furthering interdisciplinary research on questions of forest governance. As a very apt illustration, let us consider Taungya, an agroforestry system of Burmese origin, which the colonial British authorities adapted as a labor recruitment method in colonies throughout Asia and Africa. In essence, colonial forestry agencies permitted peasants, many of whom had used forest land in pre-colonial times, to intercrop (or, in some cases, to plant in separate plots) food crops at the early stages of the establishment of a commercial forestry plantation. Once the forest plantation matured, peasants, whom the colonial records often mentioned as “squatters,” were required to move to the next site for commercial plantations (Bryant 1994).

The author’s analysis of Taungya is quite positive, as evident from the title of the relevant chapter, “Reinventing Farm and Forest” (Chapter 4). The

author puts together evidence from field research and satellite imagery of the reserves and their surroundings to show that the proliferation of Taungya has led to the deforestation inside the reserve, even as community lands outside the reserve show much better forest cover. If one were to examine the issue from the perspective of foresters, who generally consider improved tree cover as an indicator of successful forestry, the Taungya has “failed woefully” as a form of afforestation (p. 126). However, the author argues that in its current form, Taungya “can be portrayed not as a failure but actually as quite a success, presenting a fairly realistic, socially accepted system of land allocation” (p. 133). By making these arguments and by portraying contemporary forms of Taungya as a form of “policy adaptation,” the author demonstrates an incomplete appreciation of the origins and the history of Taungya. As Raymond Bryant argued, such adaptations were often “the outcome of an antagonistic relationship between an acquisitive colonial power and a threatened indigenous people whose reactions varied from covert resistance to defensive compliance” (Bryant 1994: 21). A careful reading of the evidence that von Hellermann presents suggests that little has changed in contemporary Nigeria.

Smallholders’ land access continues to be mediated by ‘head farmers’, who must renew Taungya permits annually. Moreover, forestry staff demand feasts and drinks before they issue permits, and ask for ‘donations’ after they send the assessment forms, and so forth. It does not come as a surprise then that “farmers speak negatively of Forestry staff”; the author depicts these incidents of bribery involving forestry staff as “signs of hospitality and respect” indicating a “tacit understanding” (p. 134). Such a portrayal is to lay the groundwork for the author’s argument that Taungya has “made farmland more accessible to women” (p. 135). Moreover, she argues, “access to Taungya land has enabled farmers to optimize land use on their own terms, allowing individual landowners to rest their own land for considerably longer periods than they could otherwise” (p. 137). All of this taken together

constitutes the author’s advocacy of Taungya as a means of land reform on the sly (my words, not hers), which also explains, perhaps, why the phrases “land reform” and “land rights” do not appear in the book.

Ultimately, the author fails to recognize the contradiction between state ownership of forests and her interest in proposing a more equitable and sustainable forms of agroforestry systems. The author showcases the ecologically productive credentials of Taungya, while advocating for “strong government protection of some parts of forests” to control the rapid expansion of large expatriate plantation projects (p. 159). In the end, the author effectively surrenders the historical land rights of forest-dependent populations to the instrumentalities of nature conservation, which she presents in the form of locally appropriate conservation measures. Ironically though, even after completely sidestepping the question of land rights, the proponents of strict nature conservation are likely to accuse von Hellermann of advocating populism at the cost of forest conservation. In a fitting tribute to the rich potential of the text, even with its limitations, this book sheds light on the central paradox of environmental politics: a critical scrutiny of the rather simplistic tradeoffs between social justice and environmental conservation does not necessarily lead to the proverbial win-win solutions at the intersection of social justice and environmental conservation. Studying forested landscapes is a political process, as has been the long history of the making of state forests and the populations that inhabit these landscapes.

This book is most suitable for social science scholars and researchers of forest politics who are already equipped with the necessary background knowledge. It may also be used as a supplementary text book in upper division undergraduate or graduate courses, though doing so would require the guidance of an experienced instructor. The paradoxes that become apparent from a critical engagement with the rich material provided in the book are likely to contribute to the debates about

environmental politics beyond the sectoral confines of forestry. For all of these reasons, the book is a recommended reading for those interested in pursuing the complex but increasingly more relevant field of environmental politics.

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