Abstract

This study explores the links between land rights, identity and forms of knowledge in the community of Madjadjane in southern Mozambique. Madjadjane had its community land registered in 1998 and the registration followed after the Mozambican Parliament passed a new Land Law in 1997. The law recognises customary user rights to land and provides communities the legal rights to communally register land. The registration of community land in Madjadjane was initiated by an NGO in order to reduce conflicts over land between a tourism concession holder and the local community.

With a basis in phenomenology, applying an actor-oriented approach, I illustrate the several meanings land hold for people in Madjadjane. Land does not only have economic value, but is also significant to local residents in terms of identity and for their sense of belonging. I discuss how Madjadjane residents use narratives to present their knowledge of the land, as vehicles of resistance as well as to present and negotiate their rights to land in the area. The study explores the continued intense resentments over the location of the boundaries of community land, most particularly in relation to a neighbouring protected area. Discussing the relationship between formal, juridical regulations and local perceptions of land – an interface between diverging traditions of knowledge – this study offers a critique of the application of contemporary development discourses of land reform in rural Africa. These discourses, and the interventions they support, prioritise the formalisation of landholding through titling, demarcation and registration in order to facilitate marketisation in land.

The study reflects on the social embeddedness of rights and discusses how narratives represent a significant way of grasping local knowledge of rights and negotiations of rights. Property is not only socially embedded and vested with power. It is also vested with knowledge. This becomes particularly clear in the Mozambican context where local participation is encouraged for the registration of community land and oral testimony recognised alongside formal legal proof. Recognising how power permeates knowledge, seeking to define what counts as knowledge, this thesis argues for increased reflexivity among the parties involved concerning both relations of power and knowledge in so-called participatory processes which focus on local involvement and use of local knowledge.