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SONGS OF MOBILITY AND BELONGING

Gender, Spatiality and the Local in Southern Africa's
Transfrontier Conservation Development

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**biodiversity
conservation**

borderlands

gender

memory

walking songs

The combination of poverty, rural remoteness and exceptional ecological diversity in western Maputaland has long made the region a target of conservationists and development planners, locating it centrally within the Usuthu-Tembe-Futi Transfrontier Conservation Area. While driven by the rhetoric of 'participatory biodiversity management', which links environmental conservation with economic development, the fulfilment of the transboundary project remains dependent upon exogenous resources and authority, and conservation agencies are ambivalent towards local demands for self-determined development. This essay examines the politics of land in western Maputaland, its position in local memories and its foundation in spatial practices and cultural identities. Building on narratives accompanied by mouth-bows and the jews harp, once performed by young women as walking songs but remembered now by elderly women only, my analysis focuses on the ways in which mobilities and gender intersect in a changing landscape, and how meanings embedded in sound, song and performance inflect local experiences of belonging. The essay's aim is ultimately to provide witness to transboundary conservation planners of the need for a more culturally integrated and economically apposite reimagining of southern African borderlandscapes.

.....

Songs map the sound world as a spacetime of place, of connection, of exchange, of travel, of memory ... of longing and possibility. (Feld 2004: 237)

SONÇA International is a Swiss NGO whose mission is the utilization of the arts in support of economic development in southern Africa. One of its recent projects, entitled ‘Mozambique – Land of Contrast’, involves the promotion of ecotourism in Mozambique, and is manifest in a video production of Offenbach’s Barcarolle from ‘The Tales of Hoffmann’, shot on location in the National Park of Limpopo. Featuring the only two professional opera singers from Mozambique, Stella Mendonça and Sonia Mocumbi, and the French Symphony Orchestra of Pontarlier, the video builds on the apparently effortless harmonization between northern cultural sophistication and the African landscape, cutting to scenes of local terrestrial and marine wildlife – elephants, fish eagles, the elusive dugong – and enticing the audience into a pristine wilderness of spectacular sunsets and deserted beaches. This union is endorsed in the video press release, which states: ‘the spot promotes the new image of a rising country – rich in nature and hospitality connecting natives with international cultural values’ (SONÇA International 2008).

The National Park of Limpopo is located on the western boundary of Mozambique, where it is linked to a number of contiguous national parks in Zimbabwe and South Africa, and managed as a Transfrontier Conservation Area (TFCAs). SONÇA International is one of a conglomeration of African and international organizations that have invested in the establishment of an extensive network of bioregions across sub-Saharan African borders.¹ Under the TFCAs protocol, state fences are dropped to facilitate the restoration of migratory routes of wildlife, and, applying the rhetoric of ‘participatory management’ and a ‘rights-based approach’ (Jones 2004), regional initiatives are established to support both biodiversity preservation and the economic development of affected residents and indigenous communities.

The websites of participating NGOs proliferate with statements about the potential of TFCAs to operate as ‘peace parks’ that seek to foster regional cooperation, underwritten by utopian visions of ‘fluid boundaries’, ‘unlimited spaces’ and ‘infinite possibilities’.² However, while this transfrontier conservation-with-development paradigm may be celebrated by some as a radical departure from the previous colonial, military-style ‘fortress’ conservation model (Brockington 2002), increasing concern is being raised about the conspicuous absence in this scenario of local people and their development needs and visions (Draper and Wels 2002). Jennifer Jones (2005) maintains that Northern American and European epistemologies of natural resource management and the global commons have become the major drivers of transboundary paradigms and practices in southern Africa. Adding to this, Sian Sullivan and James Igoe (2008) argue that the mandate

1 To date, there are twelve TFCAs either established or proposed in southern Africa. The programme includes twelve countries and encompasses a landmass of over 120 million hectares. See <http://www.peace-parks.org/story.php?pid=100&mid=19> (accessed 27 March 2013).

2 The organization Boundless Southern Africa has even commissioned a TFCAs song with the lyrics: ‘Africa! Africa! Southern Africa! Oceans, mountains, deserts,

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and plains /
Wherever we go /
Boundless and free /
Transfrontier,
together we work /
Tirelessly we keep
and conserve / The
wonders we have, for
them to come /
Boundless they roam,
protected and free'.
See http://www.boundlessa.com/en/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=172&Itemid=308 (accessed 27 March 2013).

for protected area expansion derives increasingly from neoliberal economics, which promotes eco-regionalism as a key revenue generator for international investment, aimed primarily at high-end ecotourism. Within this frame, local 'communities', which are conceptualized as depoliticized and undifferentiated entities, are recognized as the owners of their territories only in so far as they view themselves as service providers, and their terrain as reservoirs of capital (Sullivan 2005). SONÇA International's operatic anthem 'connecting natives with international values' pays stark homage to this utilitarian construction of the southern African borderlandscape. Accordingly, the video is sanitized of all reference to the 7,000 or so inhabitants who were removed in the making of the National Park of Limpopo (Milgroom and Spierenburg 2008: 435) and is apparently oblivious to the costs of implementation that have been borne locally through loss of land and resources.

This essay focuses on the politics of land, its position in memories, and its foundation in changing spatial practices in one such TFCA on the South African, Mozambique and Swaziland border, in an area known as western Mafutaland. More specifically, it is concerned with narratives of place invoked by walking songs once performed by young women, but remembered now by elderly women only. While the loss of land to conservation expansion in the 1950s forced men to leave the area in search of waged labour, women were forced to assume principal livelihood responsibilities in their capacity as farmers and collectors of edible and medicinal plants. I argue, therefore, that men's experiences of eviction were different to that of women's, whose musical narratives reflect a more consistent functional and affective relationship with place.

In relating ethnomusicological research to the themes of environmental development, forced migration and gender, I respond in particular to the lack of recognition given by international policymakers to the affective aspects of landscape and belonging, as is manifest in a rich metaphorical language of relationships, experiences and spatial conceptualizations. The essay explores ways in which sound and performance may provide witness to the local consequences of macro-level spatial development, and herein seeks a new trajectory for 'advocacy' ethnomusicology by using cultural information to illuminate disparities between development policy and practice.

Indigeneity and Cross-Border Identifications and Dislocations

A critique of the TFCA process is essentially a study of southern African borders. More than demarcations of sovereign states, borderlands are complex social spaces, typically characterized by economic marginalization, political vulnerability and social variability. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson have suggested that borderlands are places of 'incommensurable

contradictions'; rather than conceptualized as fixed topographical sites between two (or in this case, three) locales, borderlands are 'interstitial zones of displacement and deterritorialization that shape the identity of the hybridized subject' (Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 18). Homi Bhabha has similarly suggested that it is in this state of 'in-betweenness' that borderlands 'provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity' (Bhabha 1994: 4). This fluid identity unsettles the now somewhat dated notion of indigeneity as defined by fixed cultural traits and territoriality. So too is it distinct from the more current understanding of indigenous as identified through specific configurations of language, culture and economics within the more dynamic framework of international migration (Delugan 2010).

In western Maputland, conditions of indigeneity are historically contingent and institutionally transacted by the three countries in very different ways (Figure 1). In Swaziland some 97 per cent of the population belongs to

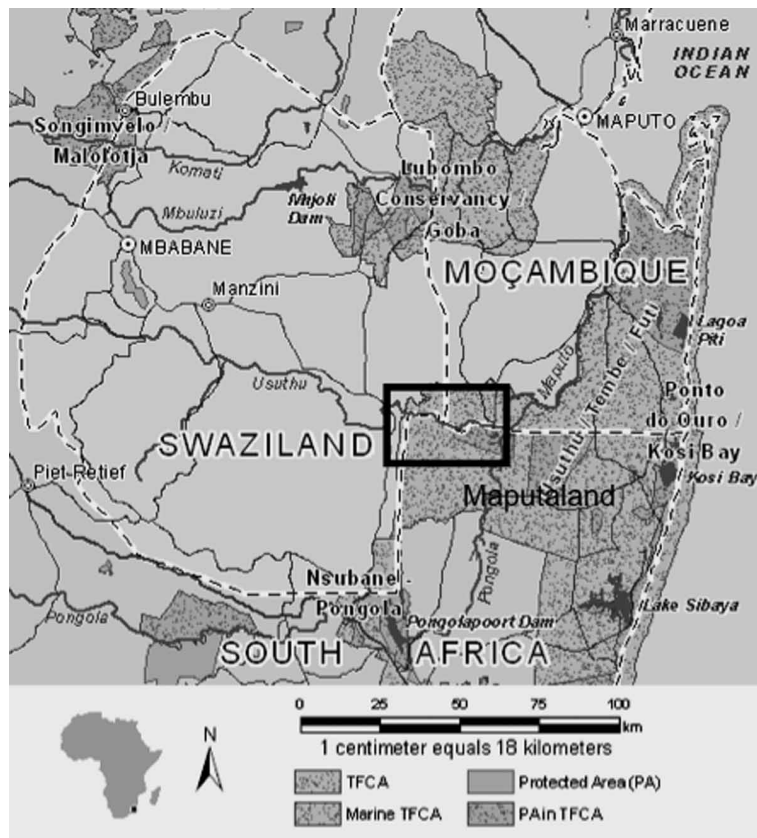


Figure 1 Map of study area.

Source: Peace Parks Foundation [www.peaceparks.org].

the Swazi cultural group, and sociopolitical differences are based on a hierarchy of clans and lineages and a rapidly expanding class system. In contrast, Mozambique is linguistically and culturally diverse; however, having obtained independence from the divisive Portuguese colonial system in 1975 through a Marxist-inspired revolution, the country is governed by an administration that remains constitutively 'in denial of diversity' (Meneses 2007: 2). In South Africa, however, debates about indigeneity are highly charged and come at a juncture in its history where citizenship and national institutions are themselves being negotiated and redefined. Post-apartheid politics are intensely shaped by self-representation based on ethnicity and language, which are invoked in particular by previously disenfranchised groups to reinforce their ongoing struggle for a place within the current economy (Guenther 2006: 17). Because Maputaland communities are simultaneously part of, and excluded from, three constitutionally dissimilar nation-states, they are constantly engaged in a struggle to navigate various 'pragmatic, entangled...forms of indigenous cultural politics' (Clifford 2001: 467) in order to maximize access to land, rights and state grants and benefits.

The border between South Africa and Mozambique was drawn up under an Anglo-Portuguese anti-slavery treaty in 1817. Following years of contestation, the lines of demarcation were settled in 1897, identifying the Great Usuthu River as a natural boundary between the two states (Harries 1994). Maputaland – meaning 'Land of Fire' in reference to the slash-and-burn agriculture practised in the area – is located south of the river, and is recognized as both a transitional ecological zone (renowned for its exceptional biodiversity) and a cultural buffer between Zululand in the south and what was then Portuguese East Africa. Swaziland, which was governed as a British Protectorate until 1968, is separated from Mozambique and South Africa at its southeastern boundary by the Lubombo mountain range. While apparently unyielding in their political and geographic form, however, these borders have always been spaces where Zulu, Swazi, Thembe-Tonga and Shangaan ethnicities have flowed into one another, and where the contemporary interchange between languages and cultural practices reflects a history of fissure and fusion (Harries 1994). While Maputaland communities share a deep sense of territoriality – which is promoted through patrilineal and patrilocal cultural formations – there is also a high incidence of in- and out-migration due to extreme flooding and drought. Survival was historically ensured by livelihood strategies that were not bound to one locality, therefore, but depended on a wide geographical distribution of kinship networks that could be invoked to manage environmental stresses on food production and disease (Harries 1994).

In 1924 a large portion of western Maputaland was declared a protected area by the South African government. By the 1960s, Ndumo Game Reserve, as it became known, had been cleared of all its inhabitants and duly refashioned into a pristine natural wilderness. Significantly, the evictions affected new patterns of mobilities and immobilities among displaced communities that cut across gender, forcing men to migrate to the cities to seek wage labour, and confining women to fixed tracts of land on the periphery of the park on which their survival became increasingly dependent.

In March 2000 Ndumo Game Reserve and the surrounding vicinity was formally incorporated into the Usuthu-Tembe-Futi TFCA,³ linking a number of game reserves in the neighbouring countries through a series of corridors. The formerly displaced Ndumo communities lodged a land claim to restore formal ownership of the territory, but provision was made for financial restitution only, precluding physical reoccupation. Instead, the TFCA offered solutions to economic development problems through joint-venture arrangements between community based enterprises, local parks authorities and private sector investment, projected principally through high-end ecotourism. These assurances have done little over the past decade to shift oral narratives about place in Maputaland, which remain singularly located in a ‘state of trans-generational haunting’, rooted in the trauma of dispossession in the past, and transmitted across time through an insatiable yearning for justice (Rose 1996: 5). The following statement is typical of how the game reserve is remembered by women today:

There we were rich; we ate sweet potatoes, bananas, madumbe [root vegetable], cassava and pumpkins. We drank from the Usuthu River. Today that river is reserved for the hippos and crocodiles while our children die from drought. The wild fruits are left to fatten the monkeys, and the rhinos graze on the graves of our ancestors. (Interview: Shongani Sibiya, Usuthu Gorge, 26 August 2003)

Songs as Sociospatial Mapping

Over the past seven years, I have collected walking songs and oral narratives from the same twenty women (ranging in age from 40–80 years), whose families were forcibly evicted from the game reserve in the 1950s and 1960s. Known as *amaculo manihamba* (‘songs we sing while we walk’), these songs were associated with traversing great distances across the borderlands to the accompaniment of the jews harp and two mouth-bows. Jews harps (*isitweletwele*) were introduced into southern Africa in the early 1800s and later became available as cheap trinkets or ‘impulse buys’ in rural trading stores. Their adoption by young women in Maputaland has been attributed to the fact that they were similar to two mouth-bows already

3 The Usuthu-Tembe-Futi TFCA is 4,195 sq km in extent, of which 317 sq km (8 per cent) is in Swaziland, 2,783 sq km (66 per cent) is in Mozambique, and 1,095 sq km (26 per cent) is in South Africa. See <http://www.sntc.org.sz/programs/tfcas.asp> (accessed 27 March 2013).



played in the area: the *umqangala*, made from a length of a river reed and a single fibrous sinew (now nylon fishing line), and the *isizenze*, which comprised an arched wooden frame and a single ‘string’ made from a strip of palm leaf. A series of small corrugations incised into the centre of the frame are rasped with a wooden stick, causing the instrument to vibrate powerfully. As with the jews harp, these bows exploited the physical properties of the mouth to amplify a wide range of harmonics and thus produce discrete melodies.⁴ These melodies were conceptualized as ‘songs’, however, as they were shaped by tonal inflections of the languages spoken in the region. While often played solo, they were also performed in antiphonal format, the instrumental melody providing the ‘solo’ to which a group of women would respond with a chorus. They comprised short, repetitive phrases that supplied rhythmic impetus to sustain long-distance walking.

Extending the notion that the sonic qualities of physical spaces and the affective aspects of sounds influence how stories are remembered at particular historical and geographical junctures, I have used the notion of musical memory, transacted through motion, as a method to reconstruct the song-routes of the borderlandscape, analysing their changing course in relation to historical and more recent transboundary reconfigurations of place. This approach draws on Steven Feld’s concept of ‘acoustemology’, which asserts that sound, combined with an awareness of sonic presence, constitutes a powerful force in shaping how people interpret and remember their experiences. Accordingly, sound (hearing) and ‘sounding’ (performance) are considered embodied competencies that situate actors and their agency in a particular ‘spacetime of place’ (Feld 2004: 237). Feld’s notion of sound as poetic cartography is extended in Tim Ingold and Jo Lee Vergust’s (2008) considerations of walking as a form of place-making, in which they suggest that sounding in collaboration with the timings, rhythms and inflections of movement not only becomes expressive of spatial information, but also evokes ways of interacting, transacting and remembering place.

In linking the discursive with the ‘technical’ dimension of place,⁵ I draw on the work of indigenous land rights activists Hugh Brody (1981) and Nigel Crawhall (2001, 2008), whose constructions of cultural maps among the Inuit and Kalahari San, respectively, have sought to make tangible the intangible aspects of landscape use in an effort to influence land policy. ‘Countermapping’ by local people, they suggest, is an effective means of reclaiming territory through a process that appeals for legitimacy by employing global measurement tools to produce two-dimensional representations of land use. This process presents landscapes as both cultural and material domains of human experience, as conceptually and experientially constituted through embodied presences as opposed to being objectified through distanced measurement.

4 For more information on the musical properties of these instruments, see Impey (2006).

5 This notion of performativity in the marking and remembering of place invokes Michel de Certeau’s (1984) framing of everyday spatial practice, which distinguishes the imaginative uses of space by the pedestrian from the technical, two-dimensional grid of the city.

While walking songs in Maputaland may not have dealt explicitly with land and locality, narratives evoked by playing while walking provide highly situated ways of ‘seeing and gathering’ place, of recalling actions that comment on relationships between people and their world based on situatedness and involvement (Gray 2000: 127). Their relevance as socio-spatial data emanated from their reference to everyday experiences, set apart from conversation only by their abridged poetic form, elaborated by specific rhythms, melodies and performance contexts. Walking songs were journeyed across the open savannah, their commentary delivered not as dramatic pronouncements but rather as evocation, as presences passing through. Their performance nevertheless involved the movement of stories from the private realm to a wider social sphere, where they were given license through a culturally sanctioned poetic convention. While songs were composed individually, they were exchanged and redistributed freely, functioning as the ‘soundtracks’ of women’s migratory experiences, and producing micro-histories that describe the visceral realities of living in a disrupted, transnational space.

Spatiality is also implicit in the conceptualization of melody, harmony and rhythm in bow songs. Veit Erlmann and Bongani Mthethwa (1987) have described how their reliance on prosodic contour transforms the concept of ‘tune’ into one of a path (*indlela*). Likewise, harmony is defined in terms of intertwining parts or pathways and referred to as *isigubudu* in isiZulu, which describes the converging horns of a bull whose tips touch the body of the animal. Both melody and harmony are transacted by the body, whose production is experienced through analogous concepts of spatiality, such as in the tension between the inhalation and expulsion of air (controlled through the passage from diaphragm, oesophagus and mouth cavity); by the flow and curvature of sound; and in the relation between internal concealment and public disclosure. Finally, musical affect is literally ‘set in motion’ by the rhythmical propulsion of feet on the ground. Thus mobility, and its allusions to ways of moving through space, and its influence on feelings, perceptions and engagements with one’s social and natural environment, is mirrored in the conceptualization and production of sound, signifying how social meanings come to be encoded in the performative act.

Drawing on Susan Friedman’s premise that individuals develop a sense of self through acts of memory, reflexivity and engagement with others, and further, that ‘cultural narratives of domination, resistance and desire and their complex interplay constitute the intertextuality of asymmetrical power relations’ (Friedman 1998: 153), I explore in the following section how songs and song-routes, performed at three seminal moments in the political history of western Maputaland, provide evidence of how frontier communities have reflected on and narrativized their changing ‘conjunctural’ geopolitical identities (Clifford 2001). While mapping may imply the production of a

two-dimensional representation of points and coordinates, Ingold's (2000) notion of performativity or 'wayfaring' is adopted to suggest a more temporal, embodied and sensorial relation with the world, a movement along different trajectories as they are remembered in relation to increasingly restrictive power relations and their consequences on spatiality, livelihoods and gender.

The first map (Figure 2) represents song-routes taken prior to the 1950s, marking the period preceding the final removal of people from the Ndumo Game Reserve. These songs were inherited from grandmothers and aunts, and feature three main thematic concerns. First, they profile natural landmarks (e.g. rivers, mountains) and fauna (e.g. cattle, birds, locusts), which were used as metaphorical devices to communicate socioeconomic concerns. Secondly, they chronicle relationships and social events (e.g. greetings, sightings, proposals of love and songs of moral regulation). Thirdly, they comment on labour migrancy, lamenting the departure of their men (which remained voluntary at this time, seldom exceeding three months at a time) but celebrating also their return, which was inevitably complemented with gifts and food. Fambile Khumalo explains:

The men would return from Johannesburg with sweets and bread in cardboard boxes. We would cross the Usuthu River and visit our families in Mozambique. We used to eat very well! We ate meat and goats and chickens. We even ate rice and tea! I remember when they brought back the first gramophone; the one with the needle. [She sings a few lines from an old recording] Ah! That song really makes me remember! (Interview: Ez'phosheni, 2 July 2004)

Using as their points of departure and arrival homesteads, fields, trading stores and places of ritual significance, the song-routes are traced as a dense criss-crossing of paths across the state borders. As the principal location where songs were performed, these pathways were the threads and markers that linked people to one another and to places of cultural or economic value. The map reveals areas of dense inhabitation particularly in the vicinity of the Banzi and Nyamithi pans where the soil was fertile. We follow the song-routes taken across the mountains into Swaziland where the women were able to purchase sugar, beads, cloth and jews harps, or to the trading stores at Catuane in Mozambique, where Portuguese and Goan merchants stocked rice, salt and European alcohol. Many women had fields on the other side of the river and crossed daily to work them; most had relatives in distant localities that they would visit periodically, particularly during periods of excessive flooding and drought.

The songs comprise fragmentary reenactments of experiences or memorable encounters from prior journeys and provide sociospatial direction to those who follow the same paths. Some deal with moral issues: 'Indaba

zophela eMalawini' ('All stories end in the home'). Others invoke courtship interactions: for instance, 'Deda endleleni Nkolombela' ('Move off the pathway, Nkolombela') refers to the rejection of a young man who once attempted to proposition a girl as she walked to the river to collect water. Others still employ onomatopoeic inferences whose sources and meanings have long since been forgotten: 'Sawubona Mayoyo, Sawubona Uthembebebebe' ('Hello Mayoyo, hello' [reference not remembered]), or another version of the same song, 'Ngambona uMayoyo; Ngamthola uthenkwantsha-kwantsha' ('I saw Mayoyo; I found him' [reference not remembered]).

The 'meshwork of interwoven trails' (Ingold 2006) that is enacted on this map indicates a clear disregard for the borders as administrative or physical barriers. Rather, locality is performed as an in-between state; the song-routes identify the flow of movements predominantly north and west from the main sites of inhabitation and reveal sociality based on socioeconomic interdependency rather than on ethnicity or nationality.

Following the final removal of communities from the Ndumo Game Reserve in the early 1960s, families were split up and forced to live within an alien grid of boundaries (Figure 3). The loss of land and resources led to a dramatic increase in men's migration out of the area, facilitated largely by the Employment Bureau of Africa (TEBA) labour recruitment agency,⁶ which built the first roads to transport the men to distant work locations by bus. Many of the songs from this period were composed by the women with whom I worked and lament the absence of lovers and husbands, which at this time often extended for many years at a time. Examples include 'Ujaha lami uhamba no uTeba' ('My lover has left on the Teba bus') and 'Kubuhlungu inhliziyu' ('My heart is full of pain'). There is indication in these songs of a growing rupture between men's and women's spatial practices, depicted in lyrics that employ landscape imagery to represent a new world traversed by men that is unknown to women as, for example, in 'Kulomuzi kaBaba noMama, kukhanyis'ubani lomlilo ovutha entabeni? Kukhanyis'ubani?' ('In the house of my father and mother, who is burning a fire on the mountain? Who is burning?').

During this period we see in the women's performances new routes taken to circumvent the Ndumo Game Reserve, focusing mobilities principally south and west. The songs engage new concerns that stress rupture, encounter and escape, fuelled by a stable of laws that were introduced by the newly instituted apartheid government. One of the most poignant songs that emanates from this period describes the final removal of resident families from the park. It is necessarily oversimplified, the lyrics so unspecific that its significance was only revealed in explanations provided in subsequent interviews. Yet its short repetitive phrases vividly portray the intensity of that final encounter, and the defencelessness of the people against the force of the state: 'Balekani nonke, kukhona okuzayo! Gijimani

6 TEBA was the official recruitment agency established by the South African Chamber of Mines in the 1920s to secure migrant labour from various localities in southern Africa.

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nonke, kukhona okuzayo!’ (‘Run away everyone, something is coming! Run away everyone, something is coming!’). Famible Khumalo explains the song through her family’s experience:

7 KwaNyamazane means ‘the place of the antelope’ and refers to the Ndumo Game Reserve.

8 Umthanathana, translated as ‘the one who speaks contemptuously and we shut our ears’, was the name given to the Park’s official responsible for the removal of the communities from the game reserve.

9 The Ndumo Wilderness Camp has since closed due to low occupancy rates.

We were running away from the white man from KwaNyamazane⁷ called Umthanathana.⁸ We were not removed at once. My father had two homesteads. They started by moving the cattle to this side. Then we moved to another homestead. Others were left on that side. They were later arrested and forced out. They were arrested if they were found with an antelope. If you were found fishing in the river, they would arrest you. They chased everyone then. They said they didn’t need them there. They chased us from our land. We were drinking from the big river they called uBanzi. Today, that’s where they have built a big hotel for the tourists. We just took our belongings and ran. (Interview: Eziphosheni, 1 September 2003)⁹

Songs from this period also reveal resistance by women towards the police, and refer specifically to new work practices, such as the illegal brewing of beer and prostitution, undertaken by them to survive rising levels of poverty: ‘Ingwala ilala estolo’ (‘The prostitute is sleeping at the store’) and ‘Naliveni bakithi naliveni! Lizonibopha!’ (‘There is the [police] van, my people! They will arrest you! [They will tie you up!]’).

In the 1970s the practice of walking songs came to an end. Among the many reasons for their demise is the establishment of the first schools in the region by the KwaZulu Natal Homeland government, which employed Zulu teachers from the south of the province who introduced new songs, dances and cultural practices into the region. In addition, the civil war in Mozambique led to the intense militarization of the border, severely inhibiting mobility by women through the electrification of state fences. The songs simply lost their social and spatial moorings.

When I returned to Maputaland in the summer of 2009, I was surprised to discover that the narrative of dispossession had gathered new force. The paradise lost, which the women wore as a ‘protective fiction’ (Rose 1996: 5), had assumed such authority in the local imagination that even those who were not personally affected by land removals seemed to mobilize the story of disenfranchisement as their own. Drought, HIV infection and rising unemployment were exacerbating factors, but the overriding cause for the women’s anguish was land. For the past six years I had worked with the same group of elderly women who had always welcomed our annual musical reminiscences, but this time they were not in the mood to sing.

The final map (Figure 4) describes women’s current agricultural, trading and social mobilities. A new extension to the west of Ndumo, constructed as a conservation corridor under the TFCA, had finally been fenced, cutting people off from their last access routes to Mozambique. Catuane, which had

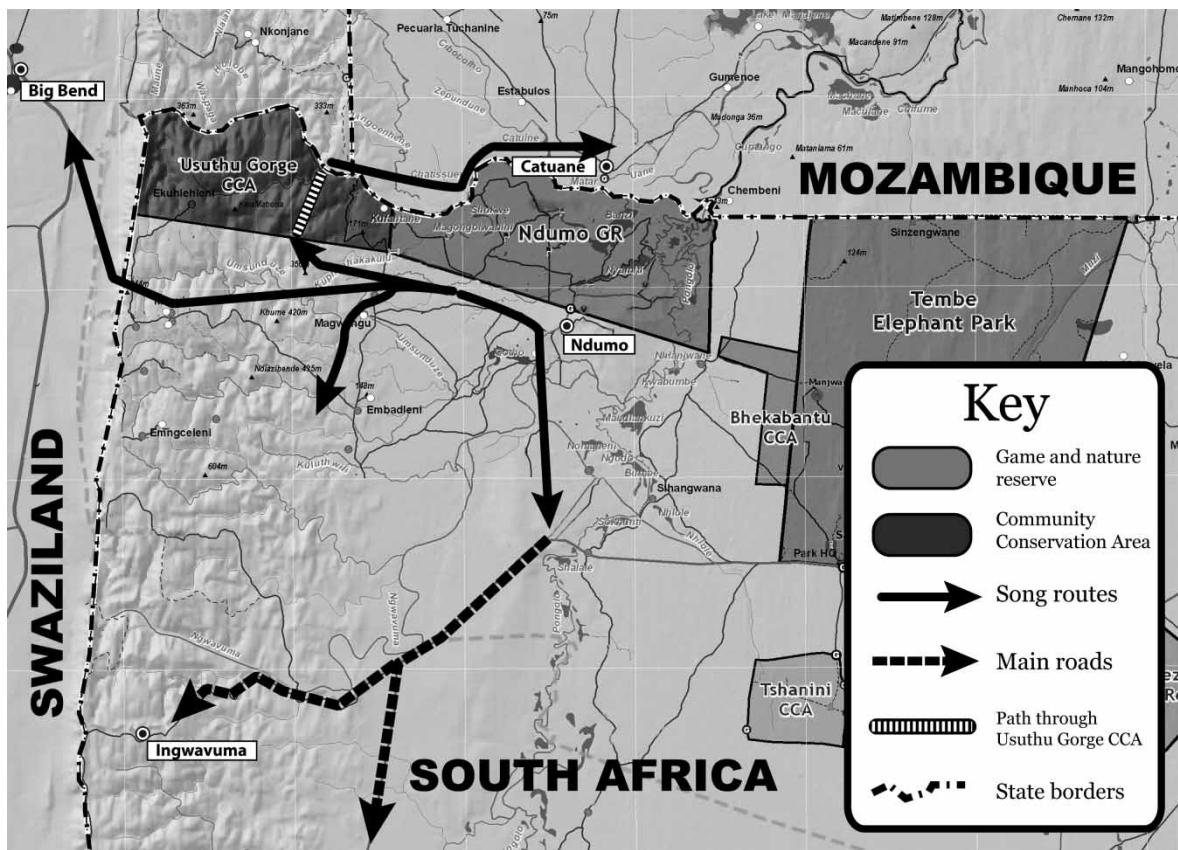


Figure 4 Map of women's current mobilities in western Maputaland, 2009.

functioned as a particularly vigorous trading centre for women, is today accessible only with special permits provided by parks officials. The women have lost their fields alongside the Usuthu River, which they had inherited from mothers-in-law and aunts and had stretched out as genealogies inscribed in the land. They are now prohibited from harvesting thatching grasses along the riverbanks to roof their houses, and have lost access to the medicinal plants and wild honey on which they remain dependent for their health and livelihood, respectively. The list goes on. The ‘unlimited spaces’ and ‘infinite opportunities’ created through this now ‘boundless’ borderland clearly do not extend to the people who live within it.

This essay has represented in two-dimensional format the ‘soundtracks’ of women over the last five or more decades, thereby linking spatial and temporal land-use patterns to a cultural and experiential map of the borderlands. Where the first map indicates that mobility had offered a lifeline to borderland communities in this challenging environment, and had defined their identities and sociality, the last map demonstrates the extent to which these practices have been disregarded by eco-regional expansion. It makes particularly clear that one set of fences has simply been replaced by another, and that the utopian concept of transnational fluidity functions as the very paradigm that today constrains the movements and livelihood opportunities of resident communities. The rhetoric of ‘community participation’, which headlines the websites of granting agencies and tourist brochures, remains empty, as in reality the area has been transformed into a new political entity, now financed and controlled by exogenous agencies (Sullivan and Igoe 2008: 3). Local communities have no political leverage against the fads and fashions of global development agencies, particularly where local rights over land and resources are affirmed only by ‘presencing’ memories in performance rather than staking one’s claim with a fence.

The power of ethnography lies in our being able to produce evidence of how people both collectively and differentially interrogate and experience their socioeconomic conditions. This essay has utilized performance as its entry point – as a way of seeing and gathering – to convey the socio-economic dilemmas facing borderland people more broadly. By demonstrating that development processes are essentially cultural processes, and by revealing how musical performance within this frame provides visceral testimony to the affective, spatial and economic dimensions of place, it argues for a more equitable alignment between macro-level planning and local needs and practices, striving in particular to raise the level of women’s voices in the effort to reach a more culturally apposite approach towards land, livelihoods and biodiversity conservation in the southern African borderlands.

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