



# USE, CONTROL AND VALUE OF CRAFT MATERIAL – *CYPERUS TEXTILIS*: PERSPECTIVES FROM A MPONDO VILLAGE, SOUTH AFRICA

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## ABSTRACT

This paper argues that craftwork, using non-timber plant species, is a crucial element of the livelihoods of poor rural people in South Africa. Yet not much is known about the social dynamics of this livelihood aspect. In particular, previous research has not fully explored the interface between ecological and social dynamics of availability of plant species used in craftwork. A case study of a village in Pondoland is presented, that shows how quasi-privatized resource tenure has emerged around one key resource used for crafting - *Cyperus textilis*. More specifically, the case study shows how marginalized women are able to capture a resource, and create tenure institutions around it to assure realized value, and how over time this has become accepted. It is suggested that land and natural resources policies should acknowledge the dynamic nature of craftwork as a livelihood aspect, particularly if the goal is to enhance realized value for the rural poor.

### Introduction

Non-timber, plant-based craft-making is practiced by women in most rural areas of Africa, and beyond. In South Africa, the contribution of craft-making to rural livelihoods, particularly as a source of cash, has been documented in several studies over the last two decades. These studies have mostly been conducted by botanists in KwaZulu/Natal (Cunningham, 1987; Heinsohn and Cunningham, 1991), the former Transkei (Cawe and Ntloko, 1997) and in the Bushbuckridge area (Shackleton and Shackleton, 2000), to mention a few. However, several gaps still exist on our knowledge about this livelihood aspect. Firstly, with the exception of the study by Shackleton and Shackleton (2000), the focus of studies dealing with rural craftwork in South Africa has mostly been on exotic material such as baskets, which are made for urban populations and tourists. Indeed, suggestions that rural craftwork has secondary employment potential (Rogerson and Sithole, 2001), and that it can make a major contribution to the fight against poverty (Marcus, 2000), are further testimony to the commercial bias which has been associated with craftwork for over a century (Rogerson and Sithole, 2001). Little work has been done to document the extent of craftwork production for local use, within rural areas. The second shortcoming in previous studies on craft making in South Africa has been the lack of in-depth analysis of resource tenure dynamics relating to use of craft resources.

Through a case study of at least one wild resource used in craftwork - *Cyperus textilis* – in Mkambati area, this paper aims to supplement these earlier studies by exploring the dynamics of value of craftwork in rural livelihoods, including the livelihood context and issues of access to and control over craft material. In the first of five sections that follow, a brief overview of the case study area, covering both biophysical and social aspects, is provided. A section dealing with the methodology used in the study follows next. The third section provides a contextual analysis on the use and importance of grass and sedge craftwork within rural livelihood systems. The fourth section focuses on institutions that mediate access to and control over these resources for different people. The concluding section draws out lessons for research and policy with regard to craft-making resources as a key to the livelihoods of rural people in Pondoland and beyond.

### The case study

This paper is based on a case study of Khanyayo area, which is situated in north-eastern Pondoland (31°13'–31°20'S and 29°55'–30°4'E), between two rivers, Mtentu and Msikaba, in the Eastern Cape Province (see Figure 1). The Eastern Cape is the poorest province in South Africa, with poor infrastructure and high levels of unemployment (Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, 2001). The area is inhabited by the Khanyayo people who speak a Xhosa dialect (IsiMpondo). The communal settlement comprises seven small sections or sub-villages, which make up Khanyayo Administrative Area. Each sub-village is headed by a sub-headman who reports to the headman of the Khanyayo Administrative Area. The inhabitants generate their livelihoods through a mixture of arable and livestock farming, the collection of a range of natural resources, and a range of off-farm sources, including remittances and pensions.

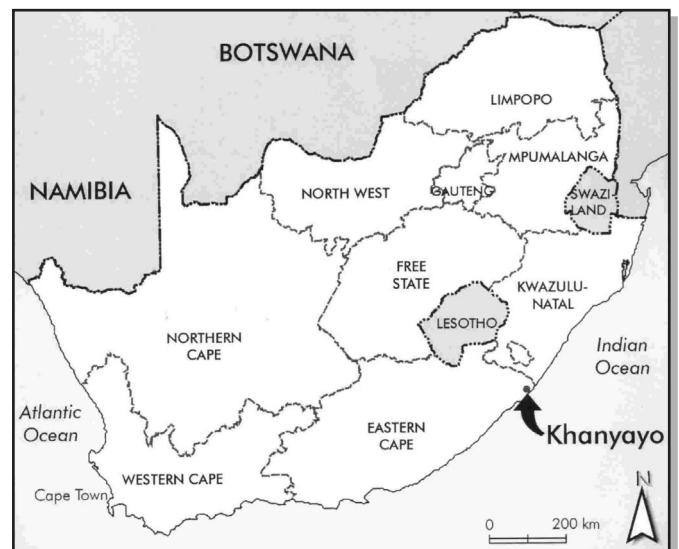


Figure 1: Location of study site

Khanyayo receives a mean annual rainfall of 1200 mm, peaking in summer. While the area is rated highly by botanists for its floristic diversity, it is largely sour grassland with small patches of subtropical, evergreen forest along river gorges or along the dune systems by the coast. The coastal soil type favours high biodiversity of plant species but, due to shallowness

and being nutrient poor, limits extensive crop production, especially the locally favoured maize.

### Methodology

A variety of methods were used to collect the data analyzed and presented in this paper. In addition to long-term observation of livelihood strategies over a five-year period (1996–2000) (including a nine-month full-time residence in the village), views of key informants from different households were obtained during numerous visits at different times of the day and seasons. In all, women of at least ten households, selected through a wealth ranking exercise (Grandin, 1988), were closely observed and interviewed on regular basis over the five-year period. Secondly, a range of participatory rural appraisal (PRA) (Chambers, 1997) techniques including transect walks, resource maps and seasonal calendars were used to learn about sites where, and times when, craft material is available to different households at different times of the year. Initial transect walks were done over a two-week period in May 1996. These entailed the author, accompanied by different groupings of villagers, walking along and recording key resources found in or on the banks of streams in the village. The data collected included what species were used for what purpose (see Table 1).

Table 1: Some important grass and sedge used in craftwork, and items made from them

Local name	Scientific name	Items made
<i>Umkhanzi</i>	<i>Typha capensis</i>	Pillows
<i>Uqhoka</i>	<i>Digitaria eriantha</i>	Rope, bangles, floor mats
<i>Inkonkoni</i>	<i>Aristida junciformis</i>	Brooms
<i>Imizi</i>	<i>Cyperus textilis</i>	Sitting and sleeping mats, food mat, food basket
<i>Irhwantsi</i>	<i>Cyperus sp</i>	Sitting and sleeping mats, food mat, food basket

### Livelihood context

In the Eastern Cape, including Pondoland, craftwork made from non-timber plants has been around for centuries. Beinart (1982) reports that during the nineteenth century most households in Pondoland were crafting their own material for building purposes. Hunter (1979), reporting on early twentieth century Pondoland, argues that, while not highly developed, craftwork amongst Mpondos was an essential part of their daily life. Indeed, other than basket-weaving for the tourist market in Port St Johns (see Cawe and Ntloko, 1997), most contemporary craftwork in rural Pondoland is a crucial element of day-to-day livelihoods.

#### Local uses of *Cyperus textilis*

In Khanyayo area, grass and sedge are used to make a variety of household items, most of which are used on a daily basis. Some of the most important grass and sedge species and regularly used items made from them are presented in Table 1. *Cyperus textilis* (*uluzi* - singular; *imizi* - plural) is by far the most used, as well as being the most important plant species in local craftwork. The four items made from *imizi*, all of which are made by women, are all crucial in the maintenance of certain aspects of the Mpondo way of life. The sitting mat (*ikhuko* or *icantsi*) is found in almost all the households. This mat is almost exclusively used by women for sitting on. The majority of households have between three and five sitting mats each. The use of *ikhuko* for sitting by women is so common and expected that both men and women frown at a woman who

chooses to sit on a chair when the mat is available. The only exception is when women have to take a seat in a modern brick house, or when they are visitors who are perceived to be educated (e.g. nurses and teachers). The other category of women that is exempted from sitting on the mat is that of women from urban areas. The rare occasions when men have to sit on *ikhuko* is when they are ordered to do so by a witch doctor or when there is a ritual being performed on them (e.g. cleansing ceremony after death in the family). During feasts and beer drinking these mats are used the most, with many households being forced to borrow more from their neighbours.

The sleeping mat, also known as *ikhuko*, but two or three times bigger than the sitting mat, is also found in almost all the households. Households who do not own a bed, use *ikhuko* for sleeping. In many households beds may be present for the household head, but children, and sometimes women, usually sleep on *ikhuko*. Even for households who have enough beds, a sleeping mat is still a necessity, as it makes them feel connected to the Mpondo traditional way of life, it is argued. Additionally, during most burials in the village, people are buried with an *ikhuko* being placed on the coffin, whether they were using a bed or not when they were still alive. The sleeping mat in the grave symbolizes resting (sleeping) in peace.

The food mat or *isithebe* is another item made from *Cyperus textilis*, and is found in almost all the households. The most common use of *isithebe* is to serve meat for different neighbourhood groupings during feasts. Hence the name *isithebe* is used to refer to these neighbouring groupings (See Hamond-Tooke, 1963). It is also not uncommon to find *isithebe* being used by households outside of these feasts, to serve meat or fairly dry vegetables such as boiled or roasted corn, sweet potatoes or *madumbes* (taro). A much bigger version of *isithebe* is used as a grinding mat. This particular mat is put underneath the grinding stone to ensure that whatever is being ground does not fall on the ground.

*Cyperus textilis* is also used to make collecting basket (*ingceke*). It is used mostly to harvest crops or to measure cooking portions for certain meals. *Ingceke* is also used as a measure for food items that are given to others as payment (e.g. for helping with harvesting) or as a mere charity to a neighbour or relative.

#### Local sources of *Cyperus* craft products

There are three ways in which Khanyayo households gain access to the mats and baskets made from *imizi*. Firstly, women from within the household make these items themselves. These are made by tying the *imizi* together with a string taken from different fibres. The most commonly used string is plastic from onion or orange bags. The mats are decorated by careful spacing and grouping of the seams down the length of the mat. The food basket is rarely decorated. Informants say that it used to take them two to three weeks to make one sleeping mat, investing three to five hours per day. But since they discovered the locally made weaving rack two decades or so ago, a sleeping mat can now be completed in three to five days, investing the same number of hours per day as before. *Ingceke* (collecting basket) and an *isithebe* (food mat) often take about a day each to make.

Secondly, households gain access to *imizi* craftwork through purchasing them from other villagers. The sleeping and sitting mats cost R30-R60, depending on the size and the amount of decorations made on them. This gives an average price of R45

per mat. *Isithebe* and *ingceke* each cost R10. Some collecting baskets can cost up to R30 if they are made into bigger sizes for harvesting maize.

Thirdly, and probably the most common way through which households gain access to *imizi* mats and baskets, is through receiving them as gifts during traditional ceremonies. The circulation of crafts as gifts is not new in Pondoland - Beinart (1982) mentions that this practice existed in the nineteenth century. The three main ceremonies where these gifts are exchanged are firstly during the release of a widow or widower from mourning (*ukukhulul'izila* or *ukwembula*). During this ceremony relatives and neighbours bring gifts to the person coming out of a year's mourning, to help him or her to start a new life. The second ceremony is known as *ibhaketi* (literally - bucket). This is when the relatives of a newly married woman bring household items such as beds, tables, buckets and so forth, to help their 'daughter' to start a new home. Gifts are also given to her in-laws as a way of strengthening the relationship between the two families. Amongst these gifts there are usually numerous items made from *imizi*. The third ceremony where the exchanges of such gifts take place is during a girl's initiation into womanhood (*Umgquzo*). Relatives and neighbours of the girl's parents bring many gifts that include *imizi* craftwork. People who bring these gifts have either made them, or bought them, or received them as gifts themselves.

Other than their usefulness in day-to-day life of each household, the mats and baskets made from *imizi* seem to have a special significance during these traditional ceremonies. In several ceremonies that were observed during fieldwork there was always a special time for *izitya zengca* (literally - grass utensils). In other words people would give other gifts first and then a special announcement would be made when they are about to reveal *izitya zengca*. These ceremonies serve as an opportunity to showcase both the skill and the generosity of the people who bring the gifts. At any one ceremony there could be between five and ten relatives and neighbours who give several items of *izitya zengca* each. The onlookers are always at hand to see who has given what and how much is comprised of craftwork. While other bigger items such as beds and so forth are usually admired, people often talk more about the craftwork afterwards. Informants report that so important is craftwork in these ceremonies that in preparation for this gift exchange, some people even go to an extent of giving a cow as a payment to have the best *izitya zengca* made for a particular ceremony.

With deaths resulting from HIV/AIDS increasing in the village in recent years, it is now not uncommon to have more than five 'release from mourning' ceremonies every month. This results in more mats and baskets being made for offering as gifts than before. The deaths also ensure that the food mats are used regularly. This is because cattle, sheep and goats are slaughtered during the funeral, as well as during other ceremonies connected to that death.

This section has highlighted the importance in local livelihoods, of craftwork made from *Cyperus textilis*. It has shown that items made from this sedge have both use and non-use values. The fact that households from different wealth backgrounds still make use of these items, presents a need to explore further, the availability to people of Khanyayo, of the resource for making these products. The next question that needs to be asked is how ecological and institutional factors affect the availability and the realized value of *Cyperus textilis*

products to different people and households. This is attempted in the next section. The first aspect of availability to be explored here is that of inventory (i.e. what is available in different ecological sites). The second aspect that is discussed is the institutional dynamics of access to and control over the resources.

### **Institutional dynamics of access to and control over *Cyperus textilis***

Whether made by a member of the household, given as a gift or purchased with cash, *Cyperus* species used as *imizi* come from the same ecological sites, and these are the local streams. Large amounts of *Cyperus textilis* are harvested from these streams every year. A bundle of between two and four kilograms of culms (stems) are normally needed to make one sleeping mat. Smaller bundles of one kilogram or less are required to make one *isithebe* (food mat) or *ingceke* (collecting basket). With the sitting or sleeping mats (*ikhuko*) lasting for periods of between three and five years in households where they are used on regular basis, and *isithebe* lasting much lesser, it is clear that the demand for this plant is fairly high. The naturally growing *C. textilis* is simply unable to meet this demand. According to local informants, this supply problem is not new, and villagers long ago found a way to solve it. For many decades villagers have responded to the problem by planting the sedges in the streams. Planting takes place at any time of the year. Following planting, the *imizi* take about a year to be ready for harvest. After that people can keep harvesting for many years without having to plant again.

However, the availability of planted *imizi* from the village's many streams is only one factor determining their value to individuals and households. The other factors have to do with resource tenure arrangements. Unlike other resources such as thatch grass, edible leaves and medicinal plants which can be grown or protected in privately held pieces of land, *imizi* only grow in the streams, where there is always an abundance of water. These areas also happen to be part of the village commons, which are supposed to be shared by village members. The questions then are: who has the right to plant *imizi*; in whom does ownership vest after planting and lastly, how does ownership change hands over time?

According to the informants, any person who lives in the village may plant *imizi* in one or more sections of any of the streams. However, because of the gendered division of labour, whereby only women collect and weave *imizi*, men are not involved in planting. Hence, ownership of *imizi* is vested in the women who planted them or those who inherit them afterwards. Likewise, decision making about when and how much to plant and, when to harvest, is exclusively in the hands of women. This makes *imizi* an exclusively women's crop. When women informants were asked why it is that men do not get involved in the decision making about *imizi*, they argue that 'men do not care about *imizi*, because they do not use mats for sitting.' This response may sound very simple, and perhaps misleading, as it considers only one of the functions of *imizi*. But in reality, it may be influenced by local men's tendency to have 'selective amnesia' when it comes to activities whose components are regarded as *izinto zabafazi* (women's stuff). As in the case of wild edible leaves (*imifino*) where men refer to it as a woman's food, but also eat it when it is prepared in certain way (see Kepe, 2002), men seem to forget that they also use *imizi* products for sleeping, eating and so forth.

Another reason men are excluded from the management of *imizi* is that this crop does not compete with other land uses, while other planted or protected resources often do. For example

wild edible leaves often compete with field crops such as maize, and are despised by men as weeds. Similarly, thatch grass that is planted in homestead gardens uses space that could potentially have been used to plant something else. Even when thatch grass grows in the common property area (e.g. grazing land), but is protected by women collectors, men see this protection as conflicting with their need to burn the grass to maintain young and palatable grass for their livestock. But in the ecological sites where *Cyperus textilis* grow, water, which is collected for domestic purposes by women, is the only other resource utilized, and it is in anyway important to all people, including men. In other words men do not feel threatened by the planting of *Cyperus* species. Next I consider the different ways in which people, other than the original owners, gain access to and control over *imizi*.

#### Access to *Cyperus textilis* by non-owners

There are at least four ways in which people or households can gain access to *imizi* they did not plant, and all these are negotiated by and amongst women only. Firstly, people can gain access to and control over *imizi* through inheritance. Again, as a woman's crop, inheritance of *imizi* is from woman to woman. More specifically, following the death of the woman who first planted *imizi*, one of her daughters (whether married or not) or daughters-in-law becomes the heir initially. If a daughter-in-law has occupied the *khayakhulu* (nuclear home of the husband), she becomes an automatic heir, and married daughters of the initial owner have to ask her for permission to cut *imizi*. In other words, daughters of the initial owner only inherit *imizi* if there is no daughter-in-law who has occupied the *khayakhulu*.

The second way in which other women can gain access to and control over *imizi* that they did not plant is through a 50:50 share (i.e. sharecropping), where labour is used as a payment. Some elderly women who had planted *imizi* while they were still capable, but are currently not able to do their own harvesting, allow other women to harvest for them, in exchange for a 50:50 share of the harvested amount. The third way in which non-owners can gain access to *imizi* is through an arrangement where they weave a mat, for the owner, for an agreed amount of harvested *imizi*. Most non-owners who make use of this strategy to gain access to planted *imizi* are people who weave and sell mats and other products from *C. textilis*. The fourth way for getting access to planted *imizi* is through buying them after they have been harvested. A bundle of about three kilograms, which is usually enough to make one sleeping mat (*ikhuko*) is sold for R10 (the price in 2001). It is normal to buy *imizi* for a mat initially, but have enough remaining to make either a food mat (*isithebe*) or a collecting basket (*ingceke*).

The fifth way of gaining access to *imizi* is through *ukucela* (asking for free). People who gain *imizi* through this strategy include close relatives and people who live close to the streams where *Cyperus textilis* is planted. Furthermore, another kind of arrangement for accessing *imizi*, which is structured by mutual aid (*ukuncedisana*) emerges from the fact that most of the streams that are used for planting *imizi* are fairly distant from the main settlement area, thus people who live on the periphery of the village are often asked to look after the *imizi*. In return these people are allowed to harvest *imizi* when they need to. But they are still expected to ask for permission from the owner of the garden.

However, while ownership of and marketing of *imizi* appear straightforward in theory, numerous conflicts exist in practice. Firstly, according to informants, since most nearby streams are

now almost fully occupied with peoples' *imizi* gardens, local rules stipulate that no one should plant in the immediate vicinity of another person's garden. Current gaps between gardens are between ten and hundred metres or more. However, numerous conflicts result from people not observing this rule or as a result of uncertainty in the tenure arrangements. There are cases where some women revive what appear to them to be an abandoned garden, but to later find out that there is somebody else who lays a claim to it. This confusion often arises in cases when a homestead is abandoned. However, the rule is that the abandonment of a homestead site does not necessarily mean the abandonment of an *imizi* garden. In this sense the *imizi* is unique - because residential sites and crop fields can be re-allocated by the headman, following many years of abandonment. *Imizi* on the other hand are further away from the allocated lands, and people who move their homesteads from one section of the village to another should still be able to maintain the use of their garden. Therefore women who lay claim to an *imizi* garden long after they abandoned their homesteads, feel justified. At the same time, however, women who revive a seemingly abandoned and badly degraded garden also feel justified to claim tenure rights.

Numerous stories are told about people who live close to the *imizi* gardens, who take over tenure after the owners pass away. This is mostly in cases where the owner did not have daughters to inherit the garden. If the owner dies before her sons get married, it is common that the son's wives would not know about the garden. People who live next to the gardens normally wait for several years before they assume ownership. In such cases, conflict only arises if a kin member informs the new wife of her inheritance. Such cases are usually resolved by bringing witnesses.

A third common problem is that of theft of *imizi* even when the owners are still alive. Again, it is people who live close to the gardens who are rumoured to be the culprits. With *imizi* increasingly becoming commercialized, many people seek opportunities to benefit from them. In all these cases men are not involved. Consequently, most cases are resolved amicably, that is without fines or other sanctions. Women see men's non-involvement in *imizi* affairs as a blessing. However, with the increasing commercialization of the *imizi*, it is hard to predict how long men will stay away from *imizi*.

These conflicts with regard to the use of *imizi* reveal much about the dichotomy between resource tenure "rules" (often implicit) and practice. Such a dichotomy is widespread, including with regard to common property rules in place in *Khanyayo* (within which *imizi* tenure is nested). What is perhaps interesting in the case of *imizi* is how practice, though not always pleasant to all, has thus far been unable to pull down the "wall that women have built" around this resource. Conflicts with regard to protected thatch grass patches or trees in common property areas, on the other hand, often lead to the destruction of the resource or escalation of conflict (see Kepe, 2001). While it would be unwise to speculate about what could happen to conflicts about *imizi* if men were involved, local women are convinced that the day they seek men's help to resolve their conflicts regarding this resource, it would be the end of the quasi privatized tenure that has been created around *imizi*.

To conclude, this section has shown that the nature of the ecological sites in which *imizi* grows, is closely intertwined with the tenure arrangements. Had *imizi* been able to grow in ecological sites other than streams (e.g. in homestead gardens), ownership could easily have been different. For example

women might have remained the workers, while men assumed overall control of the sites that include *imizi* gardens. Similarly, had the *imizi* gardens been competing with other land uses that men are responsible for (e.g. grazing), more conflicts, and perhaps the wrestling of decision making powers from women, would have characterized social dynamics around this resource.

### Discussion and conclusion

This paper has attempted to show that craftwork from grass and sedge, particularly from *Cyperus textilis*, is a significant component of the livelihoods of Mpondo people who live in Khanyayo village, because they have values ranging from direct use (e.g. mats, collecting baskets etc.) to indirect ones (e.g. as a symbol of sharing during traditional feasts). Generally high levels of poverty, combined with a tendency to cling to certain aspects of past tradition, appear to maintain high notional and realized values for *Cyperus* craftwork amongst Khanyayo households. Even with the high demand for *Cyperus* species for craftwork, their extensive planting all over the village appears to take care of concerns about over harvesting of sedge plant resources (including *Cyperus textilis*) to the point of extinction, as raised by some botanists (e.g. Heinsohn and Cunningham, 1991; Cawe and Ntloko, 1997).

Secondly, the central theme of this paper has to do with the gendered division of labour in relation to grass and sedge craftwork, and how it is key to determining the dynamics of value. This paper has shown that poor women were, in this case, successful in capturing a resource, and creating tenure institutions around it to assure realized value. It is also shown that over time this status quo has become accepted (by men). Beside the gendered division of labour with regard to *imizi*, one other factor that appears to have been responsible for these unique resource tenure dynamics is the ecological sites on which the sedges for making craftwork grow. With *imizi* being planted in streams, women's control over them is in part influenced by the fact that this land use does not conflict with land uses that men are responsible for (e.g. livestock rearing). Thus the degree of access to *imizi*, as determined by planting and tenure arrangements (in other words by women), and the ecological aspects relating to growth, determine what value different households derive. In spite of occasional conflicts over resource tenure, unlike with many other resources used by local people (e.g. medicinal plants, that grass etc.), resource conflicts in this case never end up in the headman or chief's court. In these courts, women argue, fines - which often go to the chief - are usually the end result. Women informants also argue that if men were involved in the *imizi* business, there would have been much unhappiness, sanctions and delays. For now, women are content with the quasi-private nature of *imizi* resource tenure.

If the state acknowledges the importance of land and natural resources to rural livelihoods, such as the case study presented in this paper, then it needs to back this up with the implementation of policies that enhance secure access to these resources. Firstly, government can do this by increasing rural peoples' access to land by redistributing land to, and securing rights of tenure for, people who previously had none or very little (Cousins, 1999; Eveleth, 2001). Secondly, policy makers can help enhance resource value in rural peoples' livelihoods by adopting a flexible and an informed approach with regard to natural resource legislation. Several authors (Peters, 1984; 1994; Berry, 1989; Goheen, 1993) have for some time now drawn our attention to what they call 'struggles over meaning',

as a way of understanding contestations over resource rights. In short, they argue that a concept (e.g. resource rights) 'may be defined and interpreted in a number of ways and in ways that contradict each other' (Peters, 1984: 29). It would appear, therefore, that as long as the state does not attempt to understand these 'meanings' in relation to peoples' use of natural resources, it might not be in a position to help enhance the value of resources to and protect resource rights of the poor and weaker members of rural communities. Furthermore, the state would be wise to seriously consider the emerging view of understanding of property (Berry, 1993; 1994; Vandergeest, 1997; Peters, 2000), if they wish to enhance resource value that can be realized by rural people. According to the emerging view it is more useful to view property as 'practice' rather than as rules. This conception of property as practice, Vandergeest argues, encourages us to see how property relations are ambiguous and negotiated, as they are shaped by gender, class, kin, political, legal and several other relationships. The *Cyperus Textilis (imizi)* case study is a good example of this. Acknowledging that such dynamics do exist is crucial for both the state and social researchers. For the state, understanding these dynamics could provide crucial direction during implementation of land tenure and other natural resource reforms.

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