



Gender and power contestations over water use in irrigation schemes: Lessons from the lake Chilwa basin



Bryson Nkhoma^a, Gift Kayira^{b,*}

^a History Department, Mzuzu University, P/Bag 201, Mzuzu, Malawi

^b History Department, Chancellor College, P.O. Box 280, Zomba, Malawi

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 24 March 2015

Received in revised form

28 September 2015

Accepted 1 October 2015

Available online 9 October 2015

Keywords:

Malawi

Irrigation scheme

Gender

Power contestations

Water

ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades, Malawi has been adversely hit by climatic variability and changes, and irrigation schemes which rely mostly on water from rivers have been negatively affected. In the face of dwindling quantities of water, distribution and sharing of water for irrigation has been a source of contestations and conflicts. Women who constitute a significant section of irrigation farmers in schemes have been major culprits. The study seeks to analyze gender contestations and conflicts over the use of water in the schemes developed in the Lake Chilwa basin, in southern Malawi. Using oral and written sources as well as drawing evidence from participatory and field observations conducted at Likangala and Domasi irrigation schemes, the largest schemes in the basin, the study observes that women are not passive victims of male domination over the use of dwindling waters for irrigation farming. They have often used existing political and traditional structures developed in the management of water in the schemes to competitively gain monopoly over water. They have sometimes expressed their agency by engaging in irrigation activities that fall beyond the control of formal rules and regulations of irrigation agriculture. Other than being losers, women are winning the battle for water and land resources in the basin.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Malawi has an agro-based economy that is predominantly smallholder oriented and relies heavily on rain-fed technologies for its sustenance (Kydd and Christiansen, 1982; Mhone, 1987; Peters and Kambewa, 2007). Since the 1940s, irrigation technologies have been adopted to increase food crop production and modernize peasant productivity in the face of rapid population growth and declining levels of soil fertility (Kettlewell, 1955, 1965; Nkhoma, 2005). However, recurrences of drought and climatic variability as well as multiplicity of uses of water sources have affected water supply for irrigation farming in most parts of the country (Syroka and Nucifora, 2010). Under these conditions, the distribution of water has increasingly become a source of conflicts and contestations among different stakeholders (Mulwafu and Nkhoma, 2002).

This paper seeks to analyze how water scarcity has affected the relationship between different stakeholders in the irrigation schemes of Lake Chilwa basin in Southern Malawi. In particular, it

raises question on the manner in which climate variability and changes affected relations between men and women in the Domasi and Likangala Irrigation schemes of the basin. After describing the methodology by which data for the study was collected, the paper unveils the geographical, ecological and ethnographic context of Lake Chilwa basin as a potential arena for gender and power contestations over productive resources. The paper observes that despite the many challenges they faced in irrigation, women have not degenerated into victims of male domination in their struggle for access to land and water for irrigation in the Lake Chilwa basin. Using the existing political and traditional structures in the management and use of water, women have competitively managed to gain monopoly over water, and sometimes outdone their male counterparts.

The paper discusses conflicts over water within the framework of a gendered analysis to small scale irrigation farming. A gendered analysis to irrigation agriculture is desirable for a number of reasons. First, it helps one go beyond a 'household' as a unit of analysis while not completely dismissing it. Prior to the 1970s, it was assumed that much agriculture was organized on the basis of a family such that the household was mostly used as a unit of analysis

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: kayiragift@gmail.com (G. Kayira).

(Zwarteveen, 1996:6). This tended to obscure rather than reveal the composite nature of a household because in the context of patriarchy, the male farmer was usually depicted as representing it. It is however clear from literature on a gendered analysis that the different members of a household perform varied labor roles on family farms (Christine, 1987; Zwarteveen, 1996; Johnson, 1998). Again, women may not only provide labor, they equally have the capacity to manage cropping enterprises that provide them with separate income streams (Christine, 1987). Similarly, in the context of irrigation agriculture, women and men may grow different crops whose demand for irrigation water may differ tremendously (Mehra and Esim, 1997; Johnson, 1998). What this means is that women and men are likely to be affected differently in times of water scarcity.

Secondly, a gendered analysis pays special attention to the agency of each of the members of a given household (Johnson, 1998). It shows that women are not just subjected to men as leaders of households. They are rational actors who will attempt to use their labor optimally. They can bargain for the allocation of their labor deploying it to its highest valued uses (Mehra and Esim, 1997; Merrey and Baviskar, 1997; Singh, 2006). This agency can even operate beyond the household and can sometimes conflict with established rules of production.

On the other hand, a household equally stands significant as a unit of analysis in understanding contestations over access and control of resources. This is because women and men have separate but interdependent responsibilities whose aim is to support the livelihood of the household. Given the fact that decisions about agricultural production are made at a household level, analyses that take on board the composite nature of a household would help to shed light on who gains or losses out from the benefits accrued from farming. Even in cases where resources have been obtained independently, access to them may well depend on who has the power in the household.

A gendered analysis is also desirable because it does not consider men or women as homogenous categories (Zwarteveen, 1996). It takes into cognizance the differences existing between and also within sexes. Women, just like men, do not fall into the same category. While some are married others are not. Again we have some who are widowed. Such groups are likely to be affected differently by water scarcity in irrigation farming. It is through this conceptualization that the paper shows how different groups of women were affected by water scarcity in the Domasi and Likangala schemes of Lake Chilwa basin.

2. Research methodology

In order to understand gender and power relations in irrigation in Lake Chilwa basin, the study adopted a qualitative approach of data collection and analyses. Using such methods as oral interviews, key informant interviews, focus group discussions, participant and field observations as well as document reviews, the study captured opinions, perceptions and ideologies that governed gender related conflicts in irrigation farming. The study used the case studies of Likangala and Domasi irrigation schemes which are the largest schemes in the Lake Chilwa basin. Some of the data used was collected from the BASIS project based in the History Department at Chancellor College between 2000 and 2004 in which the researchers were part. During this study, baseline surveys, community profiles, field observations, key informant interviews and focus group interviews were conducted with irrigation farmers from inside and outside the irrigation schemes constructed in the Lake Chilwa basin. Respondents included government officials from Zomba and Machinga ADD, irrigation department in Lilongwe, extension officers from the schemes, ex-MYPs, irrigation farmers,

executive members of water user associations, and local leaders from the research sites. Field assistants were located at Domasi and Likangala irrigation schemes to make daily observations and attend meetings on irrigation farming. The idea here was to understand gender and power contestations from a broader ethnographical and ecological context of irrigation farmers within and between the schemes as well as those between formal and informal schemes. Between January and June 2014, additional data was collected through interviews at the irrigation schemes to get an updated version of the issues found during the BASIS study between 2000 and 2004. During this time, thirty respondents were interviewed, fifteen from each scheme. Ten of the respondents from each scheme were female.

3. Lake Chilwa basin and its potential for gender and power contestations

The Lake Chilwa basin is particularly suited for studying gender and power contestations over water and land uses for irrigation farming in Malawi. This can be understood from its unique geographical, ethnographical and historical features. Geographically, the basin covers a low-lying plain of nearly 8,349 km² around Lake Chilwa, an inland drainage lake in southern Malawi. Rivers such as Domasi, Phalombe, Songani, Likangala, Naisi, Thondwe and Namadzi drain their waters into this lake. With over 2,300 km² of its land, the plain forms the largest wetland in Malawi recognized by the Ramsar Convention of 1997, and together with the network of the rivers above, Lake Chilwa basin has been a haven for the development of irrigation farming (Malawi Government, 2001).

However, it is important to note that the climate of the area has been problematic for the development of irrigation. According to Nkhoma (2005), the basin has witnessed a long history of drought which left Lake Chilwa dry in years like 1903, 1913, 1922, 1934, 1948, 1967, 1973, and 1995. And most recently, the lake dried in 2012. These recurrences of drought affected irrigation in the area, and since agriculture is the major source of income in addition to fishing, the use of the wetlands and the existing waters has been contentious among different classes of people in the basin, women being one of them (Mulwafu, 2014, 2000).

Ethnographically, the Lake Chilwa basin is predominantly a home for such tribes as Mang'anja, Yao and Lomwe who located themselves in the basin between 16th and 19th centuries (Phiri, 1984). In the pre-colonial period, relations between these tribes were characterized by conflicts as the Yaos who established themselves as slave traders in the area endeavored to make slaves out of the Mang'anjans (Phiri, 1984). This long history of tribal conflicts left an indelible mark of hatredness which were to affect production relations over the use of such resources as land and water (Peters and Kambewa, 2007).

The basin is predominantly occupied by people who follow matrilineal social practices. Under this practice, ownership of productive resources (water and land) belongs to the matrilineage, and thus, right of access to these resources is through wives and their brothers who head the matrilineage. This set up grants women in the basin power and exclusive rights over customary land (Chilivumbo, 1971).

However, capitalist developments that were introduced in the basin disrupted this long history of women control over water and land, especially from the time the country came under British Protectorate in 1891 (Peters and Kambewa, 2007). Some of these developments included the establishment of a colonial capital in Zomba as well as opening of estates such as Sakata, Mgodhi, Mtengeranjiru, Kachulu, Rathdrum and Chimpeni (Nkhoma, 2005). In the post-colonial period, other developments followed such as

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/4720850>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/4720850>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)