



Tree planting under customary tenure systems in malawi: impacts of marriage and inheritance patterns

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Abstract

Debates about land tenure throughout Africa, and in Malawi in particular, are central to development strategies. Marriage and inheritance patterns are important aspects of tenure that influence how individuals acquire land and trees thereon. Accordingly, such patterns may influence the management of natural resources, such as trees. Along these lines, policy makers in Malawi have been suggesting that uxori-local marriage, where the man resides in the woman's village upon marriage, discourages tree planting. In this study we investigate how marriage and inheritance patterns affect tree-planting behavior by gender in two villages. Results show that tree planting by men may indeed be dissuaded by uxori-local marriage patterns. Furthermore, tree planting by married women is not necessarily promoted under uxori-local patterns. Rather, a high incidence of non-married women appears to be associated with increased tree planting by women.

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1. Introduction

Within the context of Africa's rapid population growth and the need for increased productivity of land, there remains a debate about whether customary tenure systems are a constraint on resource development. In this paper, we follow common usage of the term "customary" to refer to tenure systems that are administered by local non-governmental institutions. However, Bruce (1988) notes that "indigenous" may be a more appropriate description since local institutions may exhibit "modern" as well as "traditional" tendencies. Early literature often portrayed such systems as static constraints on agricultural development (e.g., Dorner, 1972). Subsequent studies, such as Cohen (1980), Boserup (1981), Noronha (1985), and Bruce (1988), have more carefully documented the dynamic nature of customary systems and their response to changes in factor prices. In particular, it is argued that there is a spontaneous individualization of land rights over time, whereby farm households acquire a broader and more powerful set of transfer and exclusion rights over their land as population pressure and agricultural commercialization proceed. This is not to say that customary property rights systems are optimal and there remains concern over rights of women managers (e.g., Quisumbing and Otsuka, 2001), the ability to collateralize assets (Economist, 2001), and overlapping rights and interests in resources in certain cases (e.g., free grazing, Phillips et al., 1989). These are not just academic issues; policy makers and advocacy groups continue to grapple with land policies and their role in economic development and poverty reduction.

In Malawi, the dynamics of customary social systems are believed to be central components of tenure evolution and resource management. Kinship ties are important to resource management because they provide the basis on which individuals claim land and the trees thereon (Nankumba, 1988). The kinship group is traceable through either the male (patrilineal) or female (matrilineal) line. Historically, in patrilineal societies the man would take his bride to the homestead or village of his father (forming a virilocal household) and in matrilineal societies the man would go to stay at his wife's homestead or village (forming a uxori-local household). However, in recent years, matrilineal social systems in Malawi have begun to change, likely in response to land shortages and changes in migration opportunities (e.g., to the mines in South Africa), causing historical patterns of movement of men and women to be altered. For example, while the matrilineal Chewa ethnic group were once strictly uxori-local, there is a large switch to virilocal patterns (Nankumba, 1988). As marriage patterns have changed so have associated inheritance customs. Traditionally, assets of an uxori-local household were passed down to the wife's nieces and nephews. However, as marriage practices switch from uxori-local to virilocal, some households adopt traditional virilocal inheritance patterns, in which children, nieces, and nephews of the husband become heirs.

This study looks at the mix of marriage and inheritance patterns among the Chewa ethnic group. The aim is to investigate the impact that these different social and tenure arrangements have on tree management, thus providing an understanding of the implication of evolving traditions. Literature portrays men in uxori-local house-

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