

Civil society in Zimbabwe

Seen through a non governmental organisation (NGO)

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Introduction

I want to argue that the subject of NGOs (Fisher 1997) are epoch-making within social anthropology, and maybe especially after the end of the Cold War. This might (not?) be a reckless statement that I will discuss more thoroughly later in this article, because I believe that both students and those on the social anthropological “payroll” will be more and more associated with NGOs in the years to come. I’m influenced by Jonathan Schwartz at the Department of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen, who writes that “...our fieldwork as anthropologists is best understood as participant-observation in civil society organizations. This is what I called NGOgraphy.” (Schwartz 2000: 2).

NGOgraphy will be my main concern in this paper. But since this article is written before I do my fieldwork, I have no empirical data to rely on. But I will nevertheless try to share some of my thoughts concerning my main subjects with you.

In my fieldwork, I set out on a quest to address the position of NGOs in Zimbabwe. Through the NGO I plan to follow during my fieldwork, I hope to be able to say something about the notion of civil society (Keane 1988, 1998). I do realize that my study cannot be generalized to say something about the subject in general, but I believe that this case-study can shed some light on the general (Gullestad 1996: 8).

I will first shortly describe the organisation I will study, and a few other relevant contexts.

Historical and contextual elements

My study will take its point of departure in the work of Manicaland Development Association (MDA). They are situated in the city of Mutare in the eastern parts of Zimbabwe. Manicaland is one of the seven provinces of

Zimbabwe.

Historically Zimbabwe is a relatively young nation. Zimbabwe declared themselves independent in 1980 after many years of struggle against Great Britain. In the period after 1980, there has been a situation with a more or less one-party state. After the election June 2000, President Mugabe's ruling party ZANU PF has only a slight majority in the Parliament. The opposition party Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) got a majority of votes in urban areas and therefore poses as a threat to ZANU PF. The Norwegian government has now put up a policy of support to the opposition in Zimbabwe, and in their national budget proposal in the fall of 2000, they removed all government-to-government economical help to Zimbabwe. But they maintain economical help through NGOs.

MDA is a membership organisation geared to promote development in the rural areas of Manicaland Province in Zimbabwe. They run a project called "Civic Education for Rural Communities Programme". The communities receives training in laws that impact on civic issues such as marriage, inheritance, and roles of local government and traditional authorities.

MDA receives economical support from Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) and Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD). NORAD administrates long-term government-to-government development cooperation and also channels a substantial portion of Norwegian development funds through Norwegian NGOs in other developing countries. It is in this picture that NPA enters. NPA is one of Norway's largest non-governmental organisations, founded in 1939 by the Norwegian labour movement. NPA's international activities include long term development assistance within agriculture, environmental activities, production, health-care, psycho-social assistance, self-organising, human rights etc.

There is a lot more that could be said to be fair to these organisations, but I now choose to focus upon some of the analytical elements of my fieldwork.

NGOs and NGOgraphy

My analysis will take its point of departure in an understanding of MDA as a non governmental organisation, placed on a level between the local communities on the one hand, and the state and NPA on the other (Barth 1994). I will try to identify these levels through my research, and at the same time look upon how these levels influence each other.

The number of NGOs has increased rapidly the last years, particularly in the third world, although the term "NGO" was first used by the UN in 1949. They have become the "favoured child" of official development agencies, hailed as the new panacea to cure the ills that have befallen the development process, and imagined as a "magic bullet" which will mysteriously

but effectively find its target (Fisher 1997: 442). This is by some seen as the evidence of a historical break from the conventional wisdom that social development is primarily the responsibility of the state and the markets (Fernando and Heston 1997: 8). What represents NGO success in the 1990s is the NGOs' claimed ability to be more efficient than the state, community involvement is cheap, and to have better ability to reach the target groups. It is also a fact that NGOs are capable of getting things done that state are not interested in, but for different reasons might tolerate anyway.

Fisher (1997) describes the field of NGOs within anthropology as vague, claiming that there are relatively few detailed studies of what is happening in particular places or within specific organisations, few analyses of the impact of NGOs practices on relations of power among individuals, communities, and the state, and little attention to the discourse within which NGOs are presented as the solution to problems of welfare service delivery, development, and democratization. I will explore whether MDA as a NGO can be said to be apolitical, and try to explore their power and ability to influence both the state, the donor organisations and the local communities where they work. And also explore to what degree they are influenced themselves. It could be possible to have as a working hypothesis that MDA have another image of civil society that is in opposition or addition to the one that the Zimbabwean state and the donor organisations have.

In the paper written by Jonathan Schwartz that I referred to in the beginning of this article, he discusses the increasing association of anthropological fieldwork and projects of the civil society. He argues that most anthropologists work both within NGO's and ride with them into the field, and claims that we are no longer solo performers in isolated villages, but that we are likely to play second fiddle (Schwartz 2000: 3). Schwartz argues that NGOgraphy should follow the projects of the NGOs into the field where it is intended. There must be some result of the project that can be observed, described and analysed in its wider context. This is based upon a critique of anthropologist's who work for NGO's during day-time, and then write their anthropology after working hours, when he can ironize the day's events in the offices and lunch meetings (Schwartz 2000: 6).

It should not be to precipitate to say that it is a fact that many in the West considers the many NGO-projects supported from the West as "system-export" (Sampson 1996: 125); that is to say that there is a transfer of western models to e.g. the Third World or the Balkans. Like Schwartz argues in his paper (Schwartz 2000: 5), this transfer is no more than a a quasi-sexual act, where both love and dominance is involved.

Maybe for economical reasons (less bureaucracy and so on), but many NGO-projects are now controlled by the locals. I believe this is the way to

go, but there are still many obstacles to manage.

A question concerning these obstacles is e.g.; are non governmental organisations always completely “non governmental”? The idealisation of NGOs as disinterested apolitical participants in a field of otherwise implicated players has led some theorists and practitioners alike to expect much of them (Fisher 1997: 442). But NGOs with foreign connections have sometimes been seen as antinationalist agents of capitalism and Western political and empirical values (Fisher 1997: 454). I will seek to explore how these issues may be part of MDA. I seek to explore the role of foreign donors in Zimbabwe’s civil society.

All of this leads me to another element of my project; the notion of civil society. Could it be possible to claim that there is just a “system-export” of a Western notion of civil society in the field I’m going to?

Civil society

The term “civil society” has become a prominent subject of anthropology during the last decade. The term has been widely debated (e.g. Keane 1988, 1998). Social scientists in many countries have enthusiastically endorsed it as an ideal model of social organisation, but from an anthropological point of view this seems odd. How can an elusive idea that is clearly European in origin (Ferguson 1977(1995)), and which on closer scrutiny, throws little light even on the current social realities in Europe, gain the status of a universal prescriptive model (Hann & Dunn 1996: ii)?

Hann describes the standard definitions of civil society as “a space between families and kin groups on the one hand, and the modern state on the other” (Hann & Dunn 1996: 5-6). He continues “A ‘civil society’ exists when individuals and groups are free to form organizations that function independently of the state, and that can mediate between the citizens and the state” (Hann and Dunn 1996: 2).

Comaroff and Comaroff (1999: 4) describe the concept of civil society historically through a cycle of four movements. *First*, the concept is transported from enlightened Scotland to Europe. Thereafter, *second*, it falls into a period of quiescence, to be revitalized, *third*, during the late 1970s and 1980s by dissident intellectuals in the struggle against totalitarianism in eastern and central Europe, initially, in Poland. From here, *fourth*, it is borne back to its original home in the West, where the Enlightenment values it enshrined had long been part of the unremarked fabric of society itself; hence the notion that we Occidentals have lived in “it” without being aware of it.

Célestin Monga also problematise this question, and states that one of the first problems with term civil society is to determine exactly what it means (Monga 1996: 145). He talks especially about the African context, and ar-

gues that civil society in Africa is formed by all those who are able to manage and steer communal anger. Monga argues that his formulation of the concept differs significantly from the eighteenth-century European definition, but that it has the advantage of clearly emphasising the significance of historicity and the capacity of African societies to evolve within their own trajectory (Monga 1996: 149).

I want to look closer upon the question whether civil society can be said to be in opposition to a strongly centralized state. That is, civil society as a normative concept, a distinctive vision of a desirable order. I will also question whether civil society in the Zimbabwean context (confined mostly to Mutare) can be said to include change, or continuity? This, I think, can only be answered on a continuous line, not as an absolute answer, but still I find it important to explore it.

Continuation and change

Could it be possible that a specific notion of civil society (as a normative concept, a distinctive vision of a desirable order) is really continuity “disguised” as the “promise” of change? What are the visions of civil society in Zimbabwe?

I hope that my empirical findings can explore whether old power-structures are maintained through the relationship between MDA and the local communities, or whether there is a change in these. Most contemporary studies of civil society do not include systematic analyses of power relationships within the groups and associations of civil society and the forms and channels of participation that effect power relationships (Fisher 1997: 456).

I want to put forward this question influenced by David Lan’s book called “Guns & Rain. Guerillas & Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe” from 1985. Lan looked upon the relationship between traditional (decentralized and based on the authority of chiefs and spirits) and modern political organization (bureaucratic and based on Marxism) during the guerilla war to liberate Zimbabwe. The two modes of political organisation seemed incompatible. But Lan’s main thesis is that the traditional political structure played a major role in supporting the guerilla. The relationship between the guerilla and the spirit-mediums was determining. Locally the soldiers became viewed upon as earthly representatives for the spiritual world. Mugabe and the most powerful spiritual mediums became metaphors for chiefs and local mediums. Lan therefor emphasizes continuity to explain the support for the modern state in his book. But at the same time, there was a bureaucratization and modernization of the spiritual institution.

I will therefor seek to explore what kind of power structures that exist.

Summary

Through the analytical elements I have discussed here, I want to discuss the notion of civil society and NGOs' position in the Zimbabwean society. The point of this article is to show the importance of doing so "in the light of NGOgraphy".

Throughout the whole of my article, Schwartz's notion of NGOgraphy are present. Why is it that NGOs and civil society has become such "favoured children" the latest years? I have as my working hypothesis that the main reasons are because the NGOs are believed to be "magic bullets", not so expensive as cooperation with the state might be, and being (more or less) local, better suitable to reach target groups. And being non governmental, these organisations are believed to be apolitical. But is this really so?

What about the anthropologist's position? As a staff member of an NGO, how is it possible to work for the NGO at daytime, and then conduct research in the evening, being a very important actor in the field? Entering the field "hand-in-hand" with the "moneybag-NGO", to put it a bit edgewise. What can we learn from this? What kind of methodical and ethical questions do this raise?

I agree with Schwartz when he argues that NGOgraphy should literally follow the tracks of "the project" into the field where it is intended. There must be some result of the project that can be observed, described, and analysed in its wider context: the project's consequences, where do they end up? Not only focus upon the organizational spaces in which the marketing of projects take place (Schwartz 2000: 6).

This will make it of great importance to map how much of the interpretation of civil society that is done in connection with the local context, and what influence different relations and power structures have? E.g. the influence of the Zimbabwean state.

I also want to discuss some issues that Célestin Monga discusses (Monga 1996: 151); to what degree are the MDA linked with the opposition, and to what degree do they compromise their critical stance regarding e.g. civic rights, if they (more or less openly) actively support the opposition in the struggle against an authoritarian power? And like Monga discusses as a continuation of this (Monga 1996: 154); is the form of civil society being constituted in Africa democratic? Are its leaders motivated by ethical ambitions or by a desire for revenge against the state and those elements of society that oppose their interests?

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