

# NAVIGATING THROUGH A LANDSCAPE OF POWERS OR GETTING LOST ON MOUNT GORONGOSA<sup>1</sup>

Carolien Jacobs

If you don't obey the rules of tradition there..., you will get lost;  
all trees will look the same to you and you will never find the  
track again. (A villager of Vunduzi)

## Introduction

Gorongosa is a district in central Mozambique that has a countrywide reputation of being the centre of tradition (cf. Bertelsen 2003). This reputation is based not only on the supposed strength of the abundant number of traditional healers, but also on the traditional rules that form the backbone of the organisation of society. Arriving in Gorongosa town, the district's capital, one is soon directed to adjacent Mount Gorongosa as the genuine core of tradition. Mount Gorongosa is the landmark of the district, a massive inselberg of 30 km in length and 20 km in width. The mountain is home to powerful territorial spirits and it is the place in the district where traditional rules are most strongly felt. For one to be allowed to set foot on certain parts of the mountain, the performance of specific ceremonies is required to appease the spirits. Talks about Mount Gorongosa often evolve around the power of the spirits present there and give expression to a great respect for the residing ancestral spirits. This respect is expressed by a wide range of people and

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not restricted to the group of people that are perceived as ‘in tradition’. Another topic related to the mountain that was widely discussed, was the interest of the adjacent National Park in the area. At the time field research on which this paper was based was carried out (2007-2008), it was widely rumoured that the management of the National Park wanted to extend the limits of the park to include the mountain in its territory. This was clearly of great concern to most of the mountain dwellers, who vehemently opposed the plans and strongly claimed their rights.

In this paper I will set out the ‘landscape of powers’ on mount Gorongosa (Hirsch 2003) and show how the different actors involved navigate through this landscape in order to defend their supposed rights over the territory.<sup>2</sup> Navigating through a landscape of powers and referring to different property regimes to claim rights, is not uncommon in the plural ‘landscape of justice’ in Mozambique (Santos and Trindade 2003; Santos 2006). With this legal pluralistic framework in mind, I will discuss the positions of the Park’s management, the government, the traditional authorities, the ‘spirits’, the population, and Christians respectively. I use the concept of landscape to give room to the various positions; landscape as ‘a view or prospect of natural inland scenery, such as can be taken in at a glance from one point of view’ (Oxford English Dictionary online). Different actors view different landscapes; they attach different meanings to them, have different interests in them, and refer to different repertoires of rules to claim their power over them. Attached to each view is a different ‘bundle of rights’ that gives the actors the feeling of being entitled to claim rights over the property (cf. von Benda-Beckmann et al. 2006). Albeit from various angles, all actors look at the same mountain. Landscape then is a ‘social construction’ that captures these different angles adequately (Luig and Von Oppen 1997). The various actors involved in the struggle over Mount Gorongosa all have their own ‘cognized model’ of the mountain. This is the model of the environment conceived by the people who act in it (Rappaport 1984: 238).<sup>3</sup> It is my contention that there is not just one cognized

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<sup>2</sup> I am aware of the ‘spatial’ metaphors employed by e.g. legal anthropologists (cf. von Benda-Beckmann et al. 2009). Here, I prefer to use the concept of ‘landscape’. In this concept the notion of plurality is already ingrained; different actors view the same ‘space’ or ‘place’ but perceive this differently. Both place and space are related to the concept of landscape however; place in the foreground, and space in the background (following Hirsch 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Rappaport contrasts the ‘cognized model’ to the ‘operational model’, i.e. the model constructed by the anthropologist through his research. I am here not using

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model, but that there is a number of different models, each of which contains its own legality.

The mountain landscape functions as the ‘social interface’ at which the spiritual, economic, political and ecological concerns meet and where each actor invokes its power to defend specific interests, rights, and rules. Besides, the mountain is itself the object of the interface. This ‘social interface’ is defined in Long’s terms as: “a critical point of intersection or linkage between different social systems, fields, or levels of social order where structural discontinuities, based upon differences of normative values and social interest, are most likely to be found” (Long 1989: 1-2; but see also N. Long and A. Long 1992). Considering the plural interests, it is hardly surprising that the ‘landscape of powers’ is both dynamic and contentious. Indeed, “[n]othing evokes more varied symbolic connotations or more intricate legal philosophies. Nothing excites deeper passions or gives rise to more bloodshed than do disagreements about territory, boundaries, or access to land resources” (Shipton 1994: 347). I will argue that the repertoire of rules based on the sacredness of the mountain is an important source of power and plays a crucial role in the relationship between people and nature, as is often common in ‘territorial cults’ (Ranger 1973; Schoffeleers 1979, 1992). In these cults, as I will illustrate later, the local ‘owners of the land’ are able to set the terms of access to the territory. Although the sacredness is based on the presence of the territorial spirits, the local dwellers are the actual ‘owners’ of the rules and therefore are able to adapt these rules when need arises. Successful navigation through the landscape of powers can elevate the power position of different actors involved, whereas a faulty turn can lead to the erosion of power. I will show how tradition pervades the landscape and how traditional rules are imposed outside the traditional realm and serve as a dynamic and powerful instrument in the hands of the local ‘owners of the land’. For one not to get lost, it is essential to navigate through the landscape of powers in a careful manner.

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the ‘cognized model’ in opposition to the ‘operational model’, but rather I want to emphasize the plurality of the ‘cognized model’.

## Mount Gorongosa: Locating a Landscape of Powers

Gorongosa district has been known throughout history as an area of wilderness, offering ‘some of the best wildlife viewing in Africa’ (Fisher 1972). In 1921 a large part of the district was officially turned into a Game Reserve (Order no. 4178). This reserve was in 1960 decreed to become Mozambique’s first National Park (Decree no. 1993). In its heyday the Park enjoyed the reputation of being the most attractive nature park in Southern Africa. Mount Gorongosa is indisputably the most important landmark of the district besides the park. The number of people living permanently on the slopes is limited but a larger group of people makes use of the favourable cool climate for agriculture. The district’s reputation of being the granary of the country is mainly based on the fertility of Mount Gorongosa, which provides the farmers with an abundant harvest that allows them to sell a large part of their produce and earn considerable amounts of money.<sup>4</sup>

Besides being valued for the fertility of the land, Mount Gorongosa is also widely valued for its sacredness. It is a place with a strong connection to the spiritual world in similar veins as other mountains across the world have been ascribed a spiritual status (cf. Grapard 1982; Fisiy 1997; Schnell 2007). A sacred mountain can be seen as “an *axis mundi* connecting earth with heaven” (Eliade 1987: 38). Human activity is concentrated more in the valley or on the plains, whereas the mountain is ‘untouched’ and an area ‘of nonactivity’ (Grapard 1982). Although people in Gorongosa do not generally refer to ‘heaven’, the mountain indeed constitutes an important connection to the spirit world, a world that is believed to control and condition many aspects of the material world. These beliefs are reinforced by heroic stories of the spirituality of the mountain that circulate widely. Many of these stories hold that foreigners who violated the rules of the spirits, either out of ignorance or out of disrespect, were beset by ill-luck and even death or generational curse. The oldest stories relate to the myth of origin of the name Gorongosa, which is said to be derived from ‘*Goro, ndi kuna ngozi*’. Locally, people translate this as ‘Goro, it is a disgrace here!’ This was said to be the exclamation of early conquerors who – faced with inexplicable but powerful forces on the mountain – fled the area.<sup>5</sup> Others however, have pointed out the Shona meaning of the word *ngozi* as ‘vengeful spirit’ in this context, emphasising

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<sup>4</sup> The higher part of the mountain is one of the few areas in Mozambique that is suitable for cultivation of potatoes (*batata reina*); a highly valued cash crop.

<sup>5</sup> ‘*Goro*’ refers to ‘mountain’ in neutral terms.

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the spiritual tradition (French 2009; Galli 2003; see also Lan 1995).<sup>6</sup> In both versions, the myth as a narrative of events has sacred quality and serves as an explanation for the current sacredness of the mountain (Cohen 1969). The myth does not clearly define who the actual conquerors were; various people mention various groups. For the mythical reputation of the narrative it does not seem to be of importance; in any version the strength of the first settlers and their spirits is highlighted. By claiming to be descendants of these early settlers, the relationship with the spirits becomes personalised (Tylor 1958) which allows current dwellers to claim ownership not only of the land, but as well of the discourse of sacredness. The more 'modern' stories narrate how angered spirits caused a helicopter to crash, cars to burn, and tourists to get lost and even devoured by a snake. These stories carry a similar moral to the myth of origin: foreigners who enter the mountain will suffer if they disrespect the rules of the spirits. Frequent recounting of the stories raises awareness of the traditional rules, which are said 'to carry much less weight for the people from the area than for outsiders'.

The natural richness of mount Gorongosa has attracted not only the local population, but also the management of adjacent National Park Gorongosa. Since an extensive study by an ecologist has shown that the waterways springing from the slopes are crucial for the balance of the greater Gorongosa ecosystem (Tinley 1977), the park management has become aware of the importance of conserving the natural montane habitat. A possible way to ensure this would be to include the mountain in the National Park and extend nature conservation programmes to the area (Tinley 1977). During the civil war these plans could not be elaborated but, backed by a US-based foundation, the Park's management is currently trying to breathe new life into these plans. A request for co-management was made to the government, but for a long time it was not made publicly known that an agreement had been signed already by the Mozambican government on the conservation of the mountain area.<sup>7</sup> Although I expected this to happen, based on avoiding answers

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<sup>6</sup> The early settlers in Gorongosa originated from what is today Zimbabwe and therefore it is not unlikely that this was the original meaning of the word. Chi-Gorongosi, the language that is spoken in the area today is generally classified as a dialect of the Chi-Sena language but there are clearly Shona influences.

<sup>7</sup> The agreement was, in fact, signed in January 2008 but not made public until June/July 2008. Before that time I heard a lot of rumours about it and people argued that the two parties would delay the announcement until after the municipal elections (the first ever for Gorongosa town). These elections were initially scheduled for that period but eventually took place in November 2008. The

during talks with the Park's staff members and with the director of the department of agriculture in Gorongosa, nothing was announced in public. Despite the official secrecy on both sides, most of the people were aware of the Park's interest in the mountain. The issue raised important concerns about freedom among the many people living on the slopes and cultivating the land there. As one resident of Vunduzi put it: "We thought we were liberated from war and that we could live free, but now we feel that we are again losing our freedom".

Gorongosa people are clearly unsettled by these developments. Older people recounted experiences of past forced displacements from the National Park. These recollections feed fears of imminent or future displacements in case of enlargement of the protected area (cf. Galli 2003; French 2009).<sup>8</sup>

In the following I will further explore the landscape of power by setting out the strategies employed by the different actors to defend their interests on the contested Mount Gorongosa. I will show how the different actors strategically navigate through the landscape of powers, searching for connections with other powers, and in doing so change their discourse to correspond better with their goals, interests or rights. My focus is mainly on the community at the (foot of the) eastern slope of the mountain: Vunduzi. This community is located in-between mountain and the National Park and should become a protected buffer-zone according to the plans of the Park

### The Park's Powerplay

For the Park management, the mountain is a landscape of interest mainly for its ecological value. In discourse, the management emphasises the alarming rate of

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intention of the Park authorities was to include the whole mountain within the National Park. According to that proposal, almost the whole district of Gorongosa would become part of either the National Park or the 'buffer zone'. During the time of research, the plans were shelved, as I set out later.

<sup>8</sup> A number of people living on the eastern slopes of the mountain originate from a chiefdom that was originally within the National Park. They were expelled from their home lands in 1948 by the Portuguese government and settled in the area of another chief but never felt they were really 'at home'. They fear having to leave another time. "If we move to another place, later the Park will come and chase us there as well".

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deforestation that – without intervention – it is said will reach the point of no return within a couple of years (Beilfuss 2006). It is argued that people are rapidly destroying the forest and inhabiting the area in far greater numbers than in previous times, which is contested by the local population. Concerning protection of the forest, the Park finds support in the Forest Law of 1999 and its regulations that were issued in 2002 (Law no.10/99, *Lei de Florestas e Fauna Bravia*; Decree no. 12/2002). The law provides legal tools to enforce rules of conservation. Being a forested area, exploitation of the mountain has to follow a number of criteria. The most important practical implications are that it is prohibited to log trees along its waterways and that cultivation for agriculture is not allowed above the 700-metres line. Besides, it is explicitly stated in the law that burning down fields, forest, bush or shrubs is a crime that can lead to imprisonment of offenders for up to one year plus a fine (Law 10/99, art. 40). In viewing the landscape, the Park's staff focuses on nature conservation. This view is difficult to combine with the view of the farming population. Nevertheless, the staff always showed great confidence that there would not be any problems with the population, even when all other parties I spoke to were convinced that there would be problems. One of the Park managers stated:

The Serra [i.e. the mountain] has been mythologised. There is no problem with the Serra. The problem is something others make of it. In the '40s, during the colonial time, there were also big companies at the Serra which used the land but it did not create big problems.

Apart from the focus on nature conservation, reality shows that there is a more powerful unexpressed view: the view of the landscape as an attractive economic resource with tourist potential. Should nature conservation be prioritised, the prime focus of the Park's projects would be on the eastern side of the mountain where problems of deforestation and erosion seem to be most persistent and alarming. The waterways that are thought to be of importance for the ecosystem of the Gorongosa National Park spring from this side. For tourists, the west side of the mountain is more attractive; the forest is denser and it is the side of the waterfalls and home to an endemic bird species (the green-headed oriole). Conservation and educational programmes of the park thus far focus mainly on the west side of the mountain. To this end, a nursery, with seedlings of indigenous plant and tree species that will be replanted on the mountain, has been set up; a fiscal committee has been constituted charged with the control of agricultural and logging activities on the mountain; and an agreement has been signed between the

local *régulo*<sup>9</sup> and the Park management that assures the community on the west side of a certain amount of money for every tourist that visits the area. At the time of my fieldwork, no activity was undertaken on the east side of the mountain.

The campaign to convince local level authorities and institutions of their programmes seemed to be quite intense; at all local level government premises I came across calendars of the National Park. Moreover, I often encountered local traditional leaders wearing t-shirts or caps with the Park's emblem. Asked where they got these items from, they would enthusiastically tell stories about trips to the National Park they had been offered. The aim of offering these outings was twofold. First, it helped to get the local leaders on the side of the Park, so that they would be more cooperative in preserving nature and receiving tourists. Secondly, via the community authorities, the Park management hoped to have better access to the population that had to be sensitised on nature conservation. To preserve the larger Gorongosa ecosystem, it is said to be essential that people no longer log wood along the waterways at the mountain, and do not practise slash-and-burn agriculture at the higher slopes. Showing the traditional leaders educational movies on the effects of deforestation and erosion was supposed to convince them of the importance of the message so that subsequently they would convey this to the population. The concerns of the population were trivialised by the Park management. One of the managers told me that the people had always been living as nomads so that resettlement would not be a problem for them; they should be able to just leave and go to another place. Moreover he argued that it did not make sense to compensate the people for the loss they would suffer as a result of not being able to cultivate their lands. Because of the short-term perspective, giving money would just be a waste. Besides, he continued, the people were not interested in material property because it would just prevent them from moving.

#### *The Government*

The agreement that empowered the Park to manage the mountain area was signed by national government officials, although local-level community consultations had *pro forma* taken place at an earlier stage. Decisions on the concession had to be taken at the level of the council of ministers. Nevertheless, the local government had its interests in this decision as well. For a long time the district's government

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<sup>9</sup> A *régulo* (or *nyakuaua*) is a paramount chief; the highest level of traditional authority. Below him are the *chefe de população* (chief) and the *mfumu* (sub-chief).



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officials did not take a clear position. A not-so-impartial map hanging on the wall of the district administration gave some indications however: the map showed the proposed borders of the National Park and its buffer zones. By using almost the same colour for the planned boundaries as for the current boundaries the impression was given that a decision had been made, although the map just showed suggestions made by the Park management. Despite this map, the administrator of Gorongosa district argued that until then he had not yet taken a position but had mostly been listening.

The mountain revealed different landscapes to the government. Since each view called for different forces to be mobilised, the government remained for a long time in doubt on which position to take. To the administrator, the interests of the Park management corresponded quite well with the interests of the government and extension of the boundaries would be beneficial. At the same time he realised he had to take the interests of the people into account as well and could not simply “put them in misery, because it would cause a lot of problems with the people”. At the district service for economic affairs (mainly charged with agriculture), a similar ambivalent stance was taken but here expectations of conflicts in the future were more clearly expressed by the government official:

Between the Park and the population there will be a conflict in the future but there is no conflict yet. There will be a conflict at the moment the Park forces the people to leave the Serra. If the people there at the mountain get angry, ‘*não vale a pena*’.<sup>10</sup>

Another dimension that was not mentioned by the government officials but was publicly known was that many of the higher officials exploited agricultural land on the mountain as well. Although they did not till the soils themselves but rather used contract labourers, they obtained considerable profits from these fertile lands. If the mountain was turned into a National Park, this would no longer be possible.

Descending further to the local government level, awareness of the proposal to include the Serra in the National Park was restricted. In Vunduzi, on the east side

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<sup>10</sup> Literally, ‘it’s not worth it’. It was used to indicate that it is not worth discussing with them because the people are very stubborn. People from Gorongosa and especially from the mountain are often described as ‘*não vale a pena*’ by others in the region.

of the mountain, I talked to the *chefe de posto*.<sup>11</sup> He told me that a Park representative had indeed informed him about some programmes they intended to set up at the mountain but, according to him, these programmes were mainly aimed at nature conservation, like decreasing the logging of trees on the mountain. He showed confidence that the Park would not take the whole mountain and remove people, “because there had been community consultations and all communities rejected the programme”.

The clear ties the population observes between Park and government take away their trust in the capacities of government leaders to successfully negotiate their interest. Clearly also, local people take notice of the Park’s maps and calendars hanging prominently in different government premises.<sup>12</sup> There is a widespread notion that whenever the government takes the side of the Park, the population has to obey, although threats of resistance remain. One of the villagers of Vunduzi expressed it this way:

The park can tell us to leave, but government has more influence. If government decides that we have to leave, we will have to leave, but not really because we want to leave ourselves. In the future, when there will be real war, we can leave. If it is not the government that tells us to leave but the park, we will not leave. To convince us, they [the Park] will have to prepare for war.

Government is thus seen as a powerful actor and there is a widespread notion among the people that ‘if government orders, we have to obey’. Nevertheless, dissatisfaction is ventilated as well and people note ways to protest:

The population does not agree. It is our task now to mobilise the people. The *chefe do posto* also has come to a meeting at the mountain to talk with the people but the people were just angry and told him that next time they won’t vote for Guebuza [Mozambique’s president]. (*Chefe de população* in Vunduzi)

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<sup>11</sup> Literally, ‘chief of the post’. Title used for the local level government officials that steer the administrative posts at the sub-level of the district. The administrator – who I mentioned above as well – is responsible for the whole district.

<sup>12</sup> I noticed calendars of the Park at the local police office, the district court, district administration, and local administration.

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Traditional authorities took similar positions to the population and expressed their respect for the government. A *mfumu* in Vunduzi expressed this as follows: “When we were taken for that meeting [between Park and traditional authorities], we also saw government cars and that was where we lost our power and could not do much any more, because the government has power”.

*The Traditional Authorities: Multiple Interests, Divided Loyalties*

As I have argued above, management of the Park put a lot of effort into convincing the local chiefs of their programmes. Considering the views the chiefs gave of the landscape, this has been quite effective. On most occasions when I raised the topic of the National Park in conversations with traditional leaders, their discourse clearly seemed to be influenced by the Park. They would start to say that in the past they were just cultivating land but that now the Park had explained to them that they should not log trees and clear land along the waterways because such actions would lead to erosion. Further enquiries often revealed that their perceptions were based mainly on having received goods from the Park and having been invited to join pleasant excursions. One *mfumu* in Vunduzi told me: “We were taken to the [National] Park to be shown how the animals live there, not with the intention to show us how we have to leave the mountain”.

In more general terms, people from the area relate the high compliance with external non-state actors, like the Park or development agencies, to the aftermath of Mozambique’s civil war. During this period the country was invaded by humanitarian aid and development organisations, which resulted in a ‘cargo cult’ in which people were simply waiting for development to be brought to them (Hanlon 2004). Since Gorongosa district was one of the most severely war-torn areas in the country, it received the bulk of this assistance. Some of my informants gave this as an explanation for the comportment of many citizens and the perception they have of external actors as providers of benefits. In the case of the mountain especially, the higher ranking traditional authorities reaped the early benefits of the Park’s involvement in the landscape and as a result they were the ones who expressed predominantly positive sentiments about the Park. When *régulo* Sadjundjira (the *régulo* on the east side of the mountain, the area to which benefits were not going) explained the situation around the mountain to me, he showed that he had picked up the Park’s message well, adopting almost word-for-word some of the official discourse of the managers:

I went to the mountain in a helicopter with the people of the

Park, together with the *chefe do posto*. [...] They invited us there to show how the mountain was being destroyed. We saw the trees, the rivers, the fields...and they told us that for the rain to fall, clouds are needed and that otherwise the rivers would dry up. The logging of trees causes drought and that is a problem, for us – for the people and for the animals. So now, we [traditional leaders] are mobilising the community, the people living on the mountain...

Initially, it seemed mainly that the local authorities were safe in their adoption of the Park's programme and the hoped-for accompanying personal benefits. But it is beginning to appear that the local people are losing trust in their leaders. *Régulo* Sadjundjira expressed this in the following way:

Things are changing now. People are against me now. They reproach me for negotiating with the Park and surrendering the mountain to the Park. [...] People no longer respect the limits [of where they were traditionally allowed to settle and cultivate], because they no longer respect the traditional authorities and also because they go to church and they don't respect the ancestors. [...] There is a parable amongst the people about a man who was getting married. When he came in the house of the girl, he first said that he was not a bad person. It was only when it was accepted that he could marry the girl, he showed his vengeance. This is the story the people are telling about the park; the park will do bad in the future as well.

The loss of legitimacy of *régulo* Sadjundjira is not an isolated case.<sup>13</sup> The *régulo* on the west side of the mountain faced a similar fate. Although he himself was much less in favour of the plans and was hesitant of taking a position, several of his sons got employed by the Park. To the population this was a sign that their *régulo* was on the side of the Park. At a certain point, his family even suggested to him to resign from his position because of the complicated situation he had got into. The first time this *régulo* received money from the Park management for tourists that had climbed the mountain, he organised a party for the population,

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<sup>13</sup> Other issues were at stake as well that reduced the *régulo* Sadjundjira's legitimacy but these are outside the scope of this paper.

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providing them their share of the profit by way of drinks and food.<sup>14</sup> It is indicative for the *régulo*'s legitimacy crisis that none of the local people turned up at that party (communication from Christy Schuetze).

Having started diplomacy at the highest level of the traditional authority structure, the management of the Park subsequently descended to the level below the *régulo*. Dressed in a National Park t-shirt and a cap, one *chefe de população* told me:

I wonder why we should not accept? We are lower than the authorities and it is better that we accept [the Park proposal] and ask for more education because the Park tells us that our wealth will stop, the rain will stop and the soil will be bad.

The diplomatic efforts clearly had been less focused on the lowest level authorities; the *mfumus* generally expressed greater concerns:

I regret the situation around the Serra. We are all with tears because of what is happening there. The Park intimidates people and it is a great sadness [...]. Consider my age! My parents and grandparents were already living here. If we are not allowed to live here, they should have told that right in the beginning.

Taking into account the differences in positions taken by the higher and lower traditional authorities, diplomacy changed perceptions at least on the higher levels of authority. It is questionable however whether these perceptions were based on the conviction that the area should be indeed managed in a different way, or whether it was based simply on the 'cargo cult'. In the first case, the Park's management might count on the higher authorities to convince the lower authorities and subsequently the population. In the latter case, diplomacy will have to be extended to the lower level and the population as well in order to reach the intended aims of nature conservation (i.e. not logging trees along the waterways, not cultivating land above the 700 meter line).

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<sup>14</sup> An agreement had been signed by the *régulo* (on behalf of the population) and the Park. The Park was to pay a fixed amount of money to the community for every tourist that climbed the mountain.

*Listening to the Spirits*

In its efforts to obtain better access to the mountain, the Park management from the beginning had seemingly overlooked an important aspect: the sacredness of the mountain. As Eliade argues “for religious man, nature is never only ‘natural’, it is always fraught with a religious value” (Eliade 1987: 116). Geographically reaching out to the heavenly other world, high mountains are ascribed magical or spiritual forces in many cultures. The spiritual forces can support ‘the owners of the land’ in positive ways; providing strength, protection, and rainfall alike. Nevertheless, people believe that the presence of ancestral spirits on the mountain can be felt in negative ways as well, especially for those who do not respect the rules set by the spirits. For ‘outsiders’, these rules are said to be stricter than for the ‘owners of the land’.<sup>15</sup> The sacredness of the mountain is thus not restricted to the local population, but, in the form of the rules, it is imposed on others as well. As a result, spirituality pervades the whole landscape and has to be considered by all actors, regardless of their interests. The position of the spirits in the landscape corresponds with that of a ‘territorial cult’: “an institution of spirit veneration which relates to a land area, or territory, rather than to kinship or lineage groupings” (Ranger 1973; Schoffeleers 1979, 1992).<sup>16</sup> The main function of the spirits is to ensure the moral and material well-being of the population of the territory (Ranger 1973). The ‘autochthonous’ owners of the land communicate

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<sup>15</sup> Port. ‘*donos*’, refers to the ‘traditional owners’ of the land, not necessarily the legal owners. All land in Mozambique is owned by the state according to the Mozambican land law (Law 19/97, art.3). Mozambicans can only have rights of use and usufruct (DUAT: *direito de uso e aproveitamento da terra*). For communities, there is the possibility to have their land delimited as a community, which is the case for the community on the west slope of the mountain but not for Vunduzi. Community delimitation provides more security in case of requests for land by external parties like commercial investors (Land Law, Law 19/97, cf. Tanner 2002 for an excellent analysis of the land law).

<sup>16</sup> Territorial cults roughly overlap with Victor Turner’s ‘earth and fertility cults’ (Turner 1974). I am aware of the alternative classification of land in ‘places of power’ and ‘land shrines’ as suggested by a.o. Vansina (1990) and Colson (1997), but prefer to use the term ‘territorial cult’. It is my contention that characteristics of both ‘places of power’ and ‘land shrines’ can be noted in relation to Mount Gorongosa. ‘Territorial cult’ gives better expression to the combination of spiritual and political power engrained in the land for the local dwellers.

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directly with the ancestral spirits of the land, and at the moment another party invades the land, that party is tied to the rules that are imposed on the landscape by the spirits through communication with their offspring in the visible world (Schoffeleers 1992; cf. Unruh 1998; Spierenburg 2004).

The traditional authorities that have been the focus of the Park's diplomacy do not figure centrally in the discourse on the sacredness of the mountain. The performance of this role is for the highly-respected spirit medium, Samatenge, who can be seen as the 'cult principal' (Schoffeleers 1992: 10).<sup>17</sup> Werbner – employing the term 'regional cult' – has argued in this sense that mediums act in the first place as representatives of their people in a non-differentiated society, whereas the political power holders, i.e. the chiefs, have a stronger interest in asserting social differentiation (Werbner 1977: xiv).<sup>18</sup> Chiefs rank high in political hierarchy and it is almost evident that the chiefs benefit more from the Park than their subjects in this phase. Although it is said that Samatenge today has less spiritual clout than the original Samatenge, he still commands a lot of power and respect by the part of the population that is strongly oriented towards tradition. The mountain dwellers always argued that Samatenge was on their side and this is indeed what he himself has always claimed as well. Not only is he responsible for the rain ceremony, he also acts as a crucial gatekeeper to certain parts of the mountain on the eastern slope. Upon arrival in his zone, visitors are expected to fulfil a ceremony for the spirits.

Initially, the Park's staff was clearly not aware of the strategic importance of the spirit medium and had not targeted him in the strategies of 'winning the hearts and minds' of the population via their leaders. Only later did the staff make a trip to the zone of Samatenge to discuss the programme with him. A crucial mistake in the managers' strategy had been to enter the area in a red-coloured helicopter. The spirits in Samatenge's zone are believed to loathe the colour red because it is the colour of blood and, hence, also war-related. The first encounter with Samatenge

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<sup>17</sup> Just as different generations of *régulos* bear the same name as their ancestral predecessor, the name of Samatenge does not change over generations.

<sup>18</sup> To Werbner, 'regional cults' are

cults of the middle-range – more far-reaching than any parochial cult of the little community, yet less inclusive in belief and membership than a world religion in its most universal form (Werbner 1977: ix).

and his ancestral spirits resulted in a clear triumph for the spirits, judging from the glorious stories that are circulating widely among the population. These stories again contributed to the maintenance of the narrative of the mountain as a place where spirits are strong. In the past, the only allowed ‘colours’ had been black and white and although today this has become less strict, visitors are still not supposed to wear any red item of clothing when entering the area. The unfortunate choice of a red helicopter was taken as a sign of disrespect for the ancestral spirits. Yet another setback was soon to show its face. One of the curious onlookers that had quickly gathered around the helicopter noticed a snake. Many of the local people believed it was not a normal snake,<sup>19</sup> but an ancestral snake that had come as a messenger to signal that the spirits would not accept the ceremony and that the visitors were not welcome. No ceremony took place that day and the team had to return at a later stage, after having invited the spirit medium for an excursion in the National Park and a helicopter flight over the mountain. Although the management became convinced that Samatenge was then on their side, the people felt assured that their spirit medium, in contrast to their traditional leaders, did not take the side of the Park.

The population feels even more confident that the spirits are on its side. One of the villagers argued: “The spirits are annoyed already because they live close with us and will follow us wherever we go”. The sacredness of the mountain was often a central issue in the objections raised against the conservation proposals. Germinating conflicts were described much more in terms of a conflict of men (the Park) versus the spirits and much less as a conflict between the population and the Park. This was strongly rooted in the population’s belief that the spirits would not like the presence of the Park, a belief shared even by the less traditional Christian part of the population, as proved by the following words of a pastor:

Certain things are not accepted there. The park has some rights, but not all. There will be war between men [the Park] and spirits, but men will be conquered by the spirits... Dhlakama<sup>20</sup> fled from this area to go to Casa Banana, not out of fear of Frelimo, but out of fear of the spirits.

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<sup>19</sup> In some versions of the story the snake was two-headed.

<sup>20</sup> Dhlakama, the leader of opposition movement Renamo, for some years during the civil war, had his base in Casa Banana, on the verges of the National Park.



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The omnipresence of the spirits in the landscape is clearly used as a source of power for the population and helps them to claim their rights against other parties. The ceremonies restrict access to the mountain, which is a clear advantage for nature conservation. Allegedly other traditional taboos served similar aims in the past in relation to the logging of trees, hunting, or making use of the rivers on the mountain (French 2009). Other studies on nature conservation in Africa have shown as well that the positive role of tradition should not be downplayed (Schoffeleers 1979; Fairhead and Leach 1996; Byers et al. 2001). Nevertheless, the Park managers seem to view tradition mainly as a complicating factor that they have to be sensitive to. At the same time however, the spirituality of the mountain provides an interesting extra characteristic of this tourist attraction. The mountain is portrayed not only as a place of nature and wilderness, but also as a place of untamed and unspoilt tradition, an exotic place where rules are not defined by legal-rational human beings but by ancestral spirits. On the Park's website it reads: 'Reaching the summit of the *mystical* Mount Gorongosa is like stepping through a portal into a hidden world' ([www.gorongosa.net](http://www.gorongosa.net), italics added). Tourists that were guided by the Park's employees on day trips to the west side of the mountain had to carry out ceremonies for the spirits before climbing up. Whereas the sacredness of the mountain constitutes a hindrance to smooth access, the same sacredness is also exploited by the Park to attract tourists to this 'magical mountain'.

*The Local Population: Ambivalent Feelings, Shared Interests*

The traditional authorities were evidently easy to get on the Park's side, but the local people, apart from some of the younger people interested in possible employment opportunities were not.<sup>21</sup> Among the younger generation, it was more common to shift position and take the side of the Park. They attached less value to the sacredness of the mountain but viewed the landscape especially as a place from which economic benefits could be derived, especially in the tourist industry.<sup>22</sup> In general however, there was a widespread fear among the population of being forced to move from their homes and lands. Some people were arguing that they

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<sup>21</sup> In public discourse, the Park portrays itself as a provider of local employment opportunities. 'Local' however, seems to be defined rather widely: many Mozambicans in the staff of the Park originate from cities like Beira and Maputo, and so are not considered as locals by people in Gorongosa.

<sup>22</sup> See Fisiy (1997) on Mount Oku, Cameroon for a similar process in which traditions get rather easily abandoned to make room for economic activities.

would prepare for war again if the people of the Park were to extend their sphere of influence to the mountain. The people's recognition of the power of the Park's management – backed by central government – led them to strengthen their ties with their ancestral lands, which is not uncommon in many African cultures. As Luig and Von Oppen argue: "rural African people cannot be seen as just living 'inside' nature, but instead are related to nature in different ways, both physically and symbolically" (Luig and Von Oppen 1997: 21; cf. Schoffeleers 1978; Colson 1997; on Mozambique see Unruh 1998; Virtanen 2005). In this sense, it is evident that the meanings attached to a place are not static, but rather change over time and place (Luig and Von Oppen 1997).

Indeed, the discourse on the mountain shows significant changes over time and the landscape of powers proves to be dynamic (cf. Magaddelela and Hebinck 1995). In relation to this, different myths of origin were narrated about the mountain in which spirits were ascribed different positions of importance. Some people argued that there had always been people living on the mountain because of the fertility of the soils. Others argued that the mountain had served as a refuge during Mozambique's civil war because 'the zone of the spirits was a safe zone' and that afterwards people did not return to their homesteads on the foot of the mountain. Different voices argued that people began to occupy the higher parts of the mountain only after the war. From these narratives, it is difficult to tell when settling on the higher parts of the mountain began. An explanation for the differences in the narratives can be found in Malinowski's writings. He argues that individuals or groups tell those narratives of origin that can best help them to claim their rights (Malinowski 1992; see also Schoffeleers 1992).<sup>23</sup> Not surprisingly in this regard, the spirituality of the mountain was most strongly emphasised by the most fervent opponents of the Park, whereas others were willing to treat the sacredness mainly as part of a bygone past (cf. Virtanen, 2005).

Turning back to the relationship between the spirits and the 'owners of the land', there is another aspect that needs elucidation, namely 'the human freedom to shape this relationship according to their needs' (Luig and Von Oppen 1997: 21). In regard to sacred traditions, Malinowski has argued that "a society which makes its tradition sacred has gained by it an inestimable advantage of power and permanence" (Malinowski 1992: 40). In the case of the mountain, the power of the

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<sup>23</sup> According to the land law, rights of use and usufruct can be acquired based on customary norms and practices (Art.12a, Law 19/97) or when land is occupied in good faith for at least 10 years (Art.12b, law 19/97).

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population lies especially in possessing the keys to define – and when necessary even change – the tradition. To critics though, this shaping could easily be taken as an ‘invention of tradition’, a manipulation of rules to suit one’s personal interests and defend special rights. As was argued by one of the more critical family members of the *régulo* on the west side:

Nowadays they require ceremonies for which 5 litres of wine and a package of tobacco have to be offered to satisfy the spirits. That is not what the spirits are asking for. These spirits are ancestral spirits and they don’t know these products from the period in which they were living. The ancestors used to make a kind of liquor made of millet, called *pombe*. Wine was introduced here first in the ‘60s, so it’s not true that the spirits are asking for this. Tobacco also did not exist. Before the Portuguese time, people used opium. The people are just profiting by setting these rules but they don’t understand the past. They are still young [he refers to the *régulo* who is his cousin] and they will learn and understand later but things are not the way they should be and are not in the way the spirits would ask.

Reference to the spirits is perceived here as a pragmatic strategy rather than as a sincere belief. The sacrifices however, have to be seen not so much as reflecting the tastes of the spirits, but have to be taken as symbolic acts to show respect (Appiah 1992). This respect is shown by offering something that is seen as valuable – in this case wine and tobacco. Appiah argues that the ‘element of ceremonial is not what is essential; what is essential is the ontology of invisible beings’ (Appiah 1992: 112). It is exactly the strongly-felt presence of the spirits on the mountain that is decisive for the population in claiming their rights over the territory. The presence of the spirits allows the population to claim that ceremonies are necessary for entering the mountain. As ‘owners’ of both the land and the spiritual discourse, the population is able to define the terms of the access ceremonies and to set the rules of the game with which the Park has to reckon. A major advantage of the presence of the spirits is that responsibility can be transferred from the population to the spirits, by referring to them or by invoking them. A spirit medium of the Samatenge family pointed out:

For us, we are still following the traditions of the mountain, but others are not obeying and that causes problems with the land...If the government allows the Park, we can allow them as well. We

will not do anything. We won't be guilty, but we are people and we can understand. What the spirits will do, that is their case...We will not carry any responsibility for what will be happening there. People might disappear. Long ago that happened with others that disobeyed as well.

Most people on the mountain clearly do not want any involvement of the Park and some even threaten that they will 'prepare for war again'. Yet the general feeling is that the spirits will take up their responsibility and act in support of the population to prevent the Park from taking over the mountain. Confidence in the spirits even leads some people to take a rather indifferent position. As a villager recounted:

People now are saying that they don't care if the Park is bringing animals here.<sup>24</sup> They are just saying that they will be happy with the nice *caril*<sup>25</sup> they can make from the meat.

This feeling of 'not having to take care' that exists among the population seems to be based mainly on the confidence that the spirits will take care of them. The 'ontology of invisible beings' (Appiah 1992) is thus a crucial 'weapon of the weak' in their resistance to the Park.

### *Christians*

Locally, the landscape of the present is no longer mainly viewed through a traditional spiritual lens that defines the rules of access. Today many church denominations have founded a church in the area of the mountain as well. Because of the belief in the presence of strong spirits, many of the Christian denominations were initially reluctant to set up branches of their churches in the zone that is most sacred. Nevertheless, even the zone of Samatenge now has a church, "but it was difficult because tradition was occupying all space there and there was no room for church", as a pastor explained. The spirits in the area are said to be different from

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<sup>24</sup> One of the assumptions people have about the Park getting involved in the mountain. The re-introduction of ferocious animals on the mountain, it is argued by some, will lead to the forced re-settlement of people.

<sup>25</sup> Literally: curry. Generally means the sauce/relish people eat with their daily porridge.

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the spirits of God, and some of the pastors suppose these might be spirits sent by the devil.

One of the Park's staff members argued that churches had been unhelpful to the cause of managing the natural resources on the mountain because:

Churches disrupted the customs of the people. First, people did not log trees for instance out of a fear that the spirits would get angry. Then the church came and the priests told the people not to be afraid of these spirits as nothing would happen to them. That is when people started to log trees.<sup>26</sup>

People generally argued that there had indeed been some changes in the ceremonies carried out on the mountain, but only to some extent were they caused by the churches. For converts to Christianity, the ceremonies were not as important as they were for the people 'living in tradition' and the spirituality has become less loaded, which could also be argued to facilitate access to the mountain for the Park. However, the zone of Samatenge remains different in that respect and tradition is still obeyed in his area, even by church members. It is commonly agreed that 'on certain ceremonial places, the churches can never come'. By influencing the 'owners' of the spirituality on the mountain, the churches have proven to be more successful in changing the rules of the game than the Park has proven thus far. Churches did not only focus on the traditional leaders but also on the regular citizens, which has led to a reduction in spirituality on the mountain. But the 'people in tradition' are still trying to impose their ceremonies on everybody and are succeeding in this at least in the most sacred zones.

Although the entrance of the churches to Mount Gorongosa facilitated access to the area for a number of people (including people of the Park), the Park's staff members did not express a very positive opinion about the churches, as is shown

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<sup>26</sup> I felt that his view was not really rooted in actual observations of the situation on the mountain but rather on a general idea that traditions got lost because of Christianity. Whereas in many other contexts I have been confronted with a clear 'opposition' between church and tradition, people did not express this in relation to the forest management at the mountain. When referred to in oppositional terms, the opposition here was more one of 'those that are in tradition' and those that have lost tradition. In my view, the loss of tradition was partly due to the churches, but partly as well due to general changes.

above. Apart from the reason mentioned above (disrupting custom), another reason can be found in the institutional ties of the local churches with other branches of their church. Most notably in this case was the affiliation of the local Catholic Church with the commission of *JustiçaPaz* (Justice and Peace Commission). *JustiçaPaz* is the department within the Catholic Church that provides training in matters of social justice and peace. This training is not only meant for church members but reaches a wider audience. Alarmed by complaints from Catholics living on the mountain, the provincial *JustiçaPaz* Commission decided to provide training in the mountain communities to inform people about the rights they have over their lands. One of the Commission members expressed their task as follows:

It is the work of the Commission to listen to the population and prepare them for the things that might happen. They [population on the mountain] have to be informed about possible scenarios that might occur. As a Commission it is our task to fight against injustice and what is happening there is injustice. It is not that we are simply against the Park.

Coincidentally the Commission happened to be around in Vunduzi exactly on the day the Park had planned a community consultation. At this point, the Park must have realised that the Church was not an obvious ally. Indeed, when discussing the situation at the mountain with local people in Vunduzi and surroundings, it struck me that they often made reference to training provided by *JustiçaPaz*. A villager in Vunduzi told me: “Because the people from the Catholic Church told us, we now know that we have rights over the land and that the Park cannot just tell us to leave”. Negotiating with people who are aware of their rights is obviously more laborious. But the Commission did more than divulging the land law. The traditional authorities told me that logging trees was no longer permitted because the Park management had told them to stop. The villagers however, argued that they were no longer logging trees because the Commission had explained logging would lead to erosion and harm their soils, which would entail negative consequences in the longer term. Whereas staff members of the Park had not reached the local level, *JustiçaPaz* clearly had managed to do so. Both the Commission and the Park oppose extensive tree logging along the waterways of the mountain. An essential difference however is that the Commission is against it because it takes into consideration the consequences for the farming population, whereas for the Park the management of the mountain is of importance because of the impact on the greater Gorongosa ecosystem. The church, although not directly involved in the dispute, is thus an important actor in defining the landscape, partly

striving on the side of the Park and partly on the side of the population.

### Conclusion: Getting Lost or Finding the Way?

In early 2008 developments all seemed to be in favour of the Park. A co-management agreement was signed between the Park and the Mozambican government, committees of ‘fiscals’ were set up to control the ban on logging trees, and tourist excursions to the mountain were promoted by the Park. Everything indicated that the Park was increasingly taking over power on the mountain and imposing its view of the landscape on others; a view in which tourism benefits and nature conservation were prioritised. Nevertheless, whenever the Park’s staff was guiding tourists on the mountain, the ceremonies of access always had to be obeyed, which was already an indication of the enduring power of tradition. Some months later however, at the start of the new tourist season, the Park started informing interested tourists that excursions to the mountain were adjourned and that “the mountain was closed because of the confusion”.<sup>27</sup> The mountain no longer figured on the website of the Park as a possible excursion, but was only presented as a target for nature conservation.

Although at a glance it seems that the Park management is the most powerful actor in the landscape, the resistance of the local population appeared to be powerful enough to adjourn the tourist activities on the mountain at least for a certain period of time. This was achieved by an effective use of the alleged power of the spirits. What should be noted here is that the claims of spirituality are not based on a commonly-shared perception. Christians generally tend to reject tradition, but observing the advantages of tradition in regard to their rights over the land, leads them to defend the traditional landscape as well, not so much out of sincere belief, but more for strategic reasons.<sup>28</sup> As the ‘owners’ of the spiritual rules, local people have the power to impose these rules on the wider landscape and bear the fruits of these rules. Not coincidentally, the sacrifices that had to be made to the spirits in the ceremony of access corresponded well with the needs of the local population.

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<sup>27</sup> This happened at the start of the tourist season 2008 (April/May). The Portuguese word ‘*confusão*’ is used in Mozambique to indicate a wide range of conflict cases, from a small quarrel about the price of three tomatoes to civil war.

<sup>28</sup> Obviously, many Christians hold syncretistic beliefs in which there is also room for tradition. This does not necessarily indicate a contradiction, nor is tradition always based on pragmatism.

Referring to the spirits was an indirect way for the population to set its rules and conditions of access, and – as argued by some critics – became increasingly used as a powerful discourse. Revitalising tradition was a clear response to the powers of external actors (cf. von Benda-Beckmann et al. 2003). The rules of tradition on the mountain, that reflect the relationship between spirits and people are dynamic and can be remoulded to correspond better to people's needs and defend their rights. This is also underlined by the changes in discourse after *JustiçaPaz* provided training on land rights and nature conservation.

Has the Park completely annulled its mountain projects? This seems unlikely. It seems more likely that the management is just suspending its interventions to 'cool down the hearts' of the local dwellers. But also to be successful in the future, the strategy of the Park will have to consider the vitality of tradition and respect the ritual rules that are inscribed in the landscape by the local population with the assistance of the ancestral spirits. Schoffeleers' reflections on territorial cults are helpful in this regard. Elaborating on Clyde Mitchell, Schoffeleers argues that in the case of 'invasion' by a group of conquerors, the political and ritual power over a territory can be separated; the conqueror taking over the political leadership, the invaded party as 'owner of the land' remaining responsible for ceremonial tasks (Schoffeleers 1992). Taking the term 'invader' loosely, the Park can be seen as a modern invader, who – supported by formal arrangements with government – might be able to take over political control. Religion, by way of the territorial cult, is a pervasive factor also in nature conservation and agriculture in Gorongosa – as elsewhere in many parts of Africa – and should therefore be considered seriously to avoid a 'misreading of the landscape' (Fairhead and Leach 1996). Without taking the traditional prescriptions into consideration, the Park management might have a hard time finding cooperation with the population. Mutually respectful cohabitation between the Park and the population requires that the ritual domain of the landscape remains under the control of the local population.

What seems to be at risk with such a division of power is the position of the *régulos*. Taking too explicitly the side of the Park might provide them certain (material) benefits but at the same time weakens their position vis-à-vis the population. In order not to get lost, they will have to find their own way in navigating through the newly constellated landscape of powers. Developments show that the traditional rules of the territorial cult are unlikely to disappear. Therefore, the *régulos* should consider not only the Park as a strategic partner. Tradition deserves to be considered as a source of power as well in the mountainous landscape of Gorongosa. Although this might seem to be self-evident,



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the strategy of the Park's management shows that the persisting role of tradition is not always assessed at its right value.

## Epilogue

July 20, 2010, the spokesperson of Mozambique's Ministerial Council announced that the government decided to extend the protection of its natural resources by changing the limits of the Gorongosa National Park. The new boundaries will include the parts of the mountain higher than 700 metres. Additionally, the buffer zone that was suggested by the Park management will be installed. Explaining the reasons for its decision, the government's spokesperson echoed the Park management, emphasising that without any significant changes irreparable harm would be done to the ecosystem within less than five years.<sup>29</sup> At present, it seems unlikely that people will be able to continue cultivating their rich lands on the mountain and it seems equally unlikely that people will be able to find land that will provide comparable yields. Empowered by the spirits, people will not easily be seduced to give up and abandon their lands.

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<sup>29</sup> Jornal Notícias, 21.07.2010, <http://www.jornalnoticias.co.mz/pls/notimz2/getxml/pt/contentx/1054109>.

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