Good governance, corruption, and forest protection: critical insights from environmental anthropology

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Introduction

Since its rise in the 1990s, the idea of 'good governance' has become one of the leading paradigms in international development. Tropical forest conservation is no exception to this. 'Bad' governance – weak institutions, inefficiency, corruption and illegal activities – is now widely regarded as a major cause of deforestation; 'good' governance – institutional reform, the combat of corruption and crime and the promotion of efficiency, rule of law, transparency, accountability and participation – as the route towards forest protection. These principles have informed recent policy initiatives in tropical forest conservation in various ways. Advocated and supported by the World Bank, UN and other donors, there has been a widespread shift towards decentralised and participatory forms of forest management, as greater participation is believed to reduce opportunities for mismanagement and corruption. In addition, a series of Forest Law Enforcement and Governance (FLEG) initiatives have been formed since 2001, with the aim to 'mobilise international commitment from both producer, consumer and donor governments to increase efforts to combat illegal logging […] and corruption in the forest sector'.[1] Under the European Commission's Action Plan on Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) bilateral voluntary partnership agreements (VPAs) between the EU and selected wood-producing countries are being set up, supporting governance reform and the creation of licensing schemes to ensure that only legal timber could enter EU territory (Brown et al. 2008). Greenpeace, too, responsible for one of the first investigations into illegal logging in the 1990s, campaigns for the setting up and improvement of verification schemes. It argues that 'weak governance and corruption in timber producing countries and the failure of governments in consumer countries like the EU, US and Japan to ban the import of illegally and destructively logged timber, allows unscrupulous logging companies and timber traders worldwide to exploit ancient forests.'[2] The promotion of good governance is also a core component of the United Nations Collaborative Programme on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and

Forest Degradation (UN-REDD and REDD+), which aims to prevent deforestation by creating a financial value for the carbon stored in old growth high forest. REDD+ activities and funding, as well as those of the related Forest Carbon Partnership Facility, have so far focussed on helping producer governments to demonstrate their 'readiness' to participate, through democratic governance, anti-corruption initiatives and improving transparency.

However, despite its popularity and ubiquity the 'good governance' agenda has only partially, if at all, achieved its goals. Numerous studies have shown that community forest projects can be marred as much by elite capture, corruption and mismanagement as centralised forms of forest management, and do not necessarily improve forest protection (Charnley and Poe 2007; German et al. 2010). Timber verification schemes, too, are difficult to implement and have only had limited success so far (Brown et al. 2008). In international development in general, anti-corruption measures and governance restructuring undertaken under the banner of 'good governance' have, at best, had mixed results; in several African countries corruption has been on the increase since good governance reforms were introduced (Szeftel 1998; Blundo and Olivier de Sardan 2006; Anders 2010), and there is little evidence so far that good governance actually fosters economic development (see also Gray and Khan 2010; Grindle 2010).

In conjunction with empirical observations of its shortcomings, a number of powerful critiques of the good governance agenda in international development have emerged. Drawing on this larger critical literature, this chapter provides an overview of the ways in which environmental anthropology and related fields offer critical perspectives on good governance initiatives in forest conservation. Three main approaches, overlapping yet distinct, can be identified here. The first focuses on decentralised and participatory resource management projects and on their theoretical underpinnings, namely Common Pool Resources (CPR) theory. A second line of critique focuses more specifically on corruption and the way its role in deforestation is conceptualised. The third is provided by recent insights in ecology and historical ecology, which further problematize some key assumptions informing the good governance agenda in forestry. Before discussing each of these three approaches in detail, however, I begin with a brief account of the rise of the 'good governance'

agenda in international development generally and forest conservation specifically.

The emergence of the good governance agenda

Several factors combined in bringing about the focus on governance in forest conservation. The overall interest in governance in recent decades is linked to the emergence of neoliberalism and its advocacy of privatisation, deregulation, and scaling down of state government. In fact, whilst the term governance can be used quite broadly to describe 'a method of government or regulation' irrespective of historical context, as the *New Webster's International Dictionary,* for example, does (Weiss 2000: 795), it is also used specifically to describe only recent, neoliberal forms of governance that rely on a combination of public and private actors from the state, market, and civil society (Pierre and Peters 2000). The *good* governance agenda is rooted in this neoliberal understanding of governance, promoting as it does participation of civil society and the private sector in government. But it also presents a renewed recognition of the importance of institutions, emerging in response to the widespread failure of neoliberal structural adjustment programs in the Global South as well as the havoc caused by the unchecked eruption of capitalist market forces in the former Soviet bloc. 'Bringing the state back in', the good governance agenda is strongly informed by new institutional economics (Gray and Khan 2010; Grindle 2010).

In the promotion of good governance, the fight against corruption soon took center stage. This was epitomised by then World Bank President James Wolfensohn's famous 'Cancer of Corruption' speech at the World Bank's Annual Meeting in 1996, during which he identified corruption as a major hindrance to economic development. The 1990s also saw the establishment of the NGO Transparency International by Graf Lambsdorff (a former World Bank employee), which publishes the influential annual Corruption Perceptions Index. Initiatives such as these have helped to expose and draw attention to corruption to an unprecedented degree: anti-corruption initiatives are now not only a prerequisite for the receipt of development aid and loans, they have also become an integral part of domestic politics in many countries throughout the world (Werbner et al. 2014).

These trends coincided with a shift in the understanding of the causes of deforestation. Traditionally more focused on the destruction caused by small-scale farmers, the deforestation literature has begun to highlight the 'underlying' causes of deforestation (Contreras-Hermosila 2000; Geist and Lambin 2002), and to draw attention to deforestation caused by larger scale agricultural projects and industrial logging and the political processes behind these (Hecht and Cockburn 1990; Dauvergne 1993; Dove 1993; Klopp 2000; Rudel 2007). Much of this work is rooted in political ecology, the inter-disciplinary field concerned with the interaction between political economy and the environment (Peet and Watts 2004). Meanwhile environmental anthropologists have also long challenged the orthodoxy that small-scale farmers are the main agents of deforestation, by showing that many indigenous populations have sophisticated environmental knowledge and often manage their environments well, at times even contributing to forest increase and biodiversity (e.g. Conklin 1957; Posey 1985; Fairhead and Leach 1996; Guyer and Richards 1996).

There is thus a powerful (and remarkable) convergence between a diverse range of actors and voices supporting the principles of good governance in conservation: World Bank economists, anthropologists, environmental and human rights activists all largely agree that it is the 'underlying causes' of deforestation that need to be tackled and that local people should have more control over their own resources. However, this new found common language of participation, accountability, transparency and sustainability has not translated into unmitigated success for good governance inspired forest conservation initiatives, and by now an important critical scholarship on the good governance agenda as a whole and its specific manifestations in forest conservation has emerged. This rest of this chapter examines in detail three key critiques, deriving both from the broader literature on the good governance agenda and corruption and from the concern and insights of environmental anthropology.

Environmental governance beyond common pool resources theory

The first line of critique focuses on the theoretical underpinnings of the recent drive for decentralisation and participation in natural resource management, namely Common Pool Resources (CPR) theory. Rooted in new institutional economics, CPR

theory is most associated with the work of Elinor Ostrom (1990). On the basis of empirical research on pasture management in Kenya and irrigation systems in western Nepal, she showed that common pool resources could be successfully managed by locally developed common property regimes. Ostrom acknowledged that variability in human-ecosystem interaction meant there was no single institutional 'panacea', but identified eight 'design principles' that would ensure stable local common pool resource management. These principles include clearly defined boundaries, locally adapted rules, and the recognition of the community by higher-level authorities (ibid.).

CPR theory has played a crucial role in challenging the 'tragedy of the commons' (Hardin 1968) hypothesis and its policy implications, namely that common pool resources require either state or private property regimes, and has given much impetus to the global drive towards decentralisation and participation in natural resource management, including tropical forest conservation. In Latin America and India community forestry already emerged in the 1970s and 80s, linked to indigenous rights and environmental movements as well as frustration with the shortcomings of centralised forest administration (Rival 2003; Charnley and Poe 2007). But World Bank and other donor support for such programmes under the banner of good governance, informed by CPR theory, has taken decentralisation much further in recent decades. In many parts of Africa, for example, forest decentralisation and the promotion of community participation is directly linked to donor conditionalities (Charnley and Poe 2007; German et al. 2010) .

However, in view of the limited tangible success of many recent participatory initiatives, a growing body of work has begun in turn to critique the simplistic application of CPR theory, focusing in particular on the rigidity with which it distinguishes between formal and informal institutions, its ahistorical, apolitical and decontextualized understanding of institutions, and its valorisation of 'the community' (Mehta et al. 2001; Arts and Visseren-Hamakers 2012). Informed by historical, sociological, anthropological and political ecology approaches, a number of authors have put forward alternative, more nuanced understandings of how environmental governance actually works in practice, focusing on the 'messy middle' (Mehta et al. 2001) between formal and informal

arrangements. Thus, Cleaver suggests that 'real governance' (Cleaver et al. 2013) is best understood as 'institutional bricolage', the uneven patching together of old practices and accepted norms with new arrangements (Cleaver 2001; Cleaver 2012). Steins (2001) draws on Actor Network Theory (ANT) to explore how individuals interact with human and non-human 'actors' in natural resource management, whilst Li (2007) uses the analytic of 'assemblages' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) to capture the complex dynamics of practices involved in community forestry. Others employ Bourdieu's (1990) theory of practice to analyse contemporary practices in natural resource management (e.g. Zimmer and Sakdapolrak 2012; Caine 2013).

As well as conceptualising environmental governance in processual, practice-based terms, such critical works also draw attention to power relations. Power is often remarkably absent in official 'good governance' programmes and policy statements, including forest-related ones; in fact, Li (2007) identifies 'anti-politics' (Ferguson 1990) as one of her key 'practices' in contemporary community forestry. In general interventions under the banner of 'good governance' are presented as technical, bureaucratic measures, thereby providing something of a 'figleaf' (Grindle 2010) for what are often heavily political interferences (Brown and Cloke 2004). Cloaked in the language of participation, devolution, and civil society involvement, good governance actually presents ever more pervasive forms of power (Orlandini 2003). This line of analysis draws theoretically on Foucault's concepts of governmentality and biopower, the idea that government is about letting subjects govern themselves, 'the conduct of conduct' (Foucault 2000; Arts and Visseren-Hamakers 2012). Foucauldian approaches have also been important in critical analyses of decentralisation in natural resource management. Thus Agrawal (2005a; 2005b) uses the term 'environmentality' to describe how villagers develop environmental consciousness through their involvement in community forest councils, and how through this consciousness they become willing agents of government forest conservation policies; how 'technologies of self and power are involved in the creation of new subjects concerned about the environment' (Agrawal 2005b: 166).

The anti-politics of the good governance agenda are not just about disguising global forms of power with technocratic language, they are also manifest in a lack of appreciation by policy-makers of local politics and power relations. Leftwich argues

that good governance proponents are politically naïve to believe that a few measures can address governance problems, since 'good governance is not simply available on order, but requires a particular kind of politics both to institute and sustain it' (Leftwich 1993: 607; cited in Corbridge 2005: 186), a politics that is, almost by definition, absent in the places where good governance programmes are being implemented (see also Szeftel 1998). The same critique applies to the idealised conceptualisation of 'the community' that informs the promotion of participatory projects and mainstream CPR theory itself (Sharpe 1998; Agrawal and Gibson 1999; Charnley and Poe 2007). Local communities, in forest areas like anywhere else, are difficult to define, heterogeneous, conflict-ridden, and shaped by uneven power relations. Working with 'the community' in forest conservation in practice often means working with powerful men, thus effectively reinforcing existing inequalities. New work on environmental governance therefore seeks to provide ways of taking account of local politics and power relations (e.g. Zimmerer and Sakdapolrak; Mehta et al. 2001; Agrawal 2003).

There is also a growing recognition of the need for a more historically contextualised understanding of current forest reform than CPR inspired mainstream resource management analyses provide (Mehta et al. 2001; Agrawal 2003; Batterbury and Fernando 2006). In fact, the existing historical and political ecology literature on scientific forestry and its adoption in colonial Asia and Africa can provide pertinent insights into contemporary reform efforts. For one, it shows that scientific forestry was an integral part of the rise of the modern state; a key arena of new forms of governmentality emerging in 17th and 18th century Europe. For this reason James Scott begins *Seeing Like a State*, his seminal study of large (and failed) state-led projects of rural and urban transformation, with a chapter on scientific forestry, using it as 'something of a model' for the processes he is concerned with (Scott 1998: 11). In a similar vein colonial forestry, built on French and German principles of scientific forestry, has been examined as a form of colonial 'statemaking' (Sivaramakrishnan 1999) and territorialisation (Vandergeest and Peluso 2006b; 2006a). Bryant discusses colonial forestry in Burma as an example of the kind of 'formal rationalisation' Weber is concerned with, as 'this process of enhanced control over nature and people through non-revolutionary change is nowhere more evident than in the doctrine of scientific forestry'(Bryant 1998: 829).

These reminders of the roots of forestry in modern state practice are important because despite the recent shift towards more participatory approaches, several of its key principles actually remain unchanged. For example, even if by now many former government-run forest reserves have been put under community control, the principle of reservation itself, that an area of forest is demarcated and rights of access are heavily curtailed, largely remains integral to forest protection, both in biodiversity conservation and timber production oriented forest management. In this context, it is important to remember that government reserves were first and foremost necessary for the practice of scientific forestry, which required complete control over forest tracts. As will be discussed in more detail below, the actual ecological benefits of reservation, both in terms of ensuring a regular timber supply and of preserving biodiversity, cannot always be taken for granted.

Historical studies also show that, despite forestry's centrist origins and orientation, decentralisation is in fact not new. In parts of West Africa, local authorities were put in charge of forest administration from the 1920s onwards (Wardell and Lund 2006; von Hellermann and Usuanlele 2009). It would, however, be misleading to assume that these early decentralisation initiatives presented actual community engagement; in the Benin Division in southern Nigeria, the native authority put in charge of forestry was the *Oba* (king) of Benin, whose urban based administration did not include local communities living in or near forests (von Hellermann and Usuanlele 2009). It is nevertheless illuminating to study these early decentralisation policies. The limits of actual power devolved, the struggles over revenue and labour, and the motivation and tactics of colonial administration as well as native authorities in many ways anticipate contemporary dynamics and problems with decentralisation efforts. Bose, Arts and van Dijk (2012) explore a different aspect of the historical roots of contemporary decentralisation efforts, by showing how they employ wider social categories created in the colonial period, namely those of 'scheduled tribes' in India.

Finally, wider political economic and ecological context, too, shapes the trajectory and outcomes of institutional reforms, a wider context that is often missed in the

narrow focus on 'design principles' in mainstream CPR approaches. Thus Mehta et al (2001) stress that the contemporary world is characterised by fundamental ecological, economic and political uncertainty, and that this uncertainty needs to be taken into account in natural resource management analyses. In her contribution to their volume, Li (2001), for example, discusses how agrarian change in the context of the global cocoa boom of the 1990s had a far more profound effect on rural livelihoods and land management practices than institutional reform in the forest sector. Environmental changes, too, can shape policy outcome far more than institutional design itself (Agrawal 2007; Charnley and Poe 2007). I will discuss in the last section how new insights in ecology and historical ecology can further help to understand current governance reforms in their wider ecological context.

Corruption

With the fight against corruption high on the agenda in policy circles and the media in the 1990s there came a marked increase in academic interest in corruption. Anthropologists, too, traditionally shying away from the subject (Haller and Shore 2005: 7), began to discuss corruption. There is now a distinct anthropology of corruption (for overviews, see Pardo 2004; Haller and Shore 2005; Blundo and Olivier de Sardan 2006; Nuijten and Anders 2007). Methodologically and theoretically, anthropology can make a very valuable contribution not only to our understanding of corruption as a whole, but also to critically assessing the current focus on the combat of corruption in forest conservation.

Thus, a prominent theme in the anthropology of corruption is the analysis of corruption discourses and their political uses (Haller and Shore 2005). Here, an important body of work analyses global corruption discourses, in particular the good governance agenda and recent anti-corruption campaigns. Elizabeth Harrison points out that the focus on corruption 'provides a neat explanation for the ills of both countries and continents that leaves moral culpability entirely with the supposedly corrupt' (Harrison 2007: 676). Similarly, the current focus on 'bad governance' as a key cause of deforestation continues to blame locals, no longer poor farmers but corrupt forest officials and politicians. Just as powerful environmental crisis

narratives served to justify colonial and post-colonial conservation intervention (Leach and Mearns 1996), so, arguably, the identification of corruption as a key cause of deforestation presents the combination of both environmental and political crisis narratives, again used to justify political and environmental intervention (von Hellermann 2007). (see als Fortmann 2005)

A second key contribution of anthropology has been in exploring the links between social norms, culture, moral economy, and corruption. Overall, anthropologists have been at pains to disassociate themselves from the idea that corruption in Africa, for example, is rooted in a 'culture of corruption', and only few have tackled this topic directly (Smith 2007). Instead of evoking a 'culture of corruption', Olivier de Sardan (1999) argues that the moral economy of Africa, in particular the logics of gift giving, brokerage, solidarity networks, predatory authority and redistributive accumulation, serve to banalise and generalise corruption. Generally anthropologists have helped to point out that corruption, and indeed good governance, are not understood by all people in the same way, but that such ideas are socially embedded (Poluha and Rosendahl 2002; Orlandini 2003; Haller and Shore 2005; Siegel 2011). Such approaches are also relevant for understanding 'corrupt' practices in forestry. In southern Nigeria, my own research showed how social relations between forest staff, loggers and farmers are deeply embedded in local social and political practices. The allocation of Taungua land, for example, is often accompanied by the eating of kola nut and a drink of 'hot' (local gin) to facilitate and seal the deal. Logging allocations are strengthened by the regular exchange of large greeting cards and calendars, prominently displayed in offices of loggers and forest staff alike, as well as the less overt but even more important flow of 'gifts' from loggers to forest staff, and they are generally shaped by and an integral part of patrimonial relations rooted in the Benin Kingdom (von Hellermann 2013). Legal pluralism in access to land, such as it exists in many parts of Africa, can also facilitate licensing ambiguity and therefore illegal logging practices (Siebert and Elwert 2004).

As well as bringing out how 'corrupt' practices may be socially embedded, ethnographic work also, thirdly, helps to achieve a more nuanced, differentiated, and sector specific understanding of corruption, showing that even in one locality, there is never just one moral economy shaping everyone's behaviour. Anders (2004) explores

how civil servants in Malawi have different moral reference points shaping their practices and perceptions, with considerable variation between different individuals, and indeed, within individuals in different situations. Similarly, my research in southern Nigeria showed that forest officers do not all have the same attitudes and do not participate in corrupt practices in the same way: some are far more committed to forest conservation and correct procedures than others. There is also considerable condemnation of corrupt and illegal practices amongst villagers, which sometimes results in active obstruction and resistance to illegal loggers (von Hellermann 2013: 120-121).

Moreover, ethnographic work helps to distinguish between grand and petty forms of corruption, a distinction that is often curiously absent from good governance discourses (Walton 2013). Yet it is important to make distinctions: an Edo farmer providing the visiting forest officer with kola nut, 'hot' and a 'dash' in order to obtain 2 ha instead of the 1 ha of Taungya land he is officially allowed, is not the same, in nature and scale, as state ministers awarding many square miles of reserve land to political cronies (von Hellermann 2007). Finally, sector-specific ethnographic research helps to show how particular practices are rooted as much in sector-specific policies and institutions as in local moral economy, if not more. Timber logging, for example, is regulated by a system of on the ground 'stamping' by forest officers to mark legally felled trees, a system which has been subject to abuse throughout its history, in 18th century France (Rochel 2005) as much as in contemporary Nigeria. Equally the widely used concession system, whereby loggers gain a license for logging a particular piece of forest for a particular piece of time, is intrinsically prone to patronage as well as informal, additional uses (see also Hardin 2011).

In this respect, a fourth point raised by the anthropology of corruption is particularly pertinent, namely the need to understand contemporary practices in historical context. There is a general tendency to associate corrupt practices with recent, post-independence governments in Africa, but in fact colonial administrations, generally run on a shoe string, were often governed in a slap dash, arbitrary manner and saw widespread corruption and illegal activities (Chabal and Daloz 1999; Blundo and Olivier de Sardan 2006). In Nigeria, there were regular incursions by farmers into reserved land throughout the colonial period and the 1950s saw a huge rise in illegal

logging, just when the colonial forest department had finally succeeded in putting all reserves under highly detailed 'working plans' regulating all logging and forest regeneration activities (von Hellermann 2013). But as already discussed above, logging regulations have been prone to abuse throughout the world for as long as they have existed (e.g. Rochel 2005). An appreciation of the long term history of corruption in forestry also adds new perspectives on a well-entrenched but limiting debate about the roots of corruption in post-colonial countries, whether it is 'the modern state [that] is corrupted by traditional culture or traditional culture [that] is corrupted by the advent of the modern state' (Blundo and Olivier de Sardan 2006: 29). As an examination of forestry shows it may be neither, because contemporary practices have even deeper, sector-specific roots.

Finally, again mirroring critiques of CPR theory, my research in southern Nigeria also highlighted the need for understanding 'corrupt' practices in their wider economic and political context. Since the 1980s and 1990s, economic decline and widespread 'entrenchment' and financial shortages in the public sector have brought with them a drastic drop in employment opportunities and pensions, forcing many people to return to farming 'for survival', creating a huge demand for farmland. Local demand for timber, too – for years fostered by the colonial forest department – is now huge, Edo state's economy is also heavily dependent on the timber industry, with over 200 saw mills and countless carpenters and furniture makers working in Benin City.

Yet whilst southern Nigeria has seen significant economic and demographic shifts over the last few decades – with Nigeria's population more than tripling between 1963 and 2013 – official policies and procedures in forestry have largely remained unchanged, a phenomenon also observed by Anders (2004) in his study of the civil service in Malawi. Moreover, there are generally few democratic channels available for ordinary citizens to influence or change policy. In this context, the only way in which citizens can effectively change policy is through informal, 'corrupt' alterations of official policy on the ground. This point was already made much earlier by James Scott (1969), who suggested that, where interest structures and institutionalised forms through which demands can be made are weak or non-existent, a sizeable number of demands reach the political system after laws are passed, at the enforcement stage.

Thus since the 1980s, the Taungya system in Edo State has not been practiced as originally designed by colonial foresters: whilst it continues to flourish as a system of land allocation, no trees are planted, more land is allocated to farmers than officially allowed, and farms are re-allocated every three years. Its transformation is often described as one of forestry's biggest failures in Edo State. However, this new form of Taungya has played a significant role in meeting the large rise in demand for subsistence farmland, in a remarkably peaceful and straightforward way (von Hellermann 2007). Similarly, the many cocoa and plantain farms that have sprung up in Okomu reserve in recent decades are indeed 'illegal', but they provide a vital source of livelihood for the many small scale farmers and traders involved, with the plantain farms (largely unknown by higher up forest officers), transporting thousands of tons of plantain to Lagos every week. Some of these important functions of informal 'corrupt' and 'illegal' practices that have emerged on the ground have been belatedly recognised in policy: a 1994 edict allowed Taungya farmers to return to the same piece of land, and in 2006 the Edo State department started granting licenses to cocoa farmers in Okomu reserves (von Hellermann 2013). These developments are reminiscent of Mosse's analysis that development policy changes are in practice often made from below, rather than top-down (Mosse 2004).

This kind of pragmatic interpretation of corruption is somewhat unfashionable at the moment. In contrast to the 1960s, when there was a debate between 'functionalist' and 'moralistic' analyses of corruption (Farrales 2005), there is a nearly universal consensus now that the effects of corruption are detrimental. Yet ethnographic work in the forest sector shows that this is not always the case; some 'corrupt' practices can be viewed in a different light. In addition to the social and economic effects just discussed, an in-depth examination of the ecological outcomes of corruption further challenges received wisdom on the effects of corruption.

New ecologies and forest governance

The overall aim of the good governance agenda in forestry is, of course, to improve forest protection. Mismanagement and corruption result in deforestation, so combating corruption and establishing rule of law, it is reasoned, will protect forests.

True, there is no doubt that uncontrolled logging and especially the large-scale conversion of forests to agricultural uses do significantly contribute to deforestation. Nevertheless, the connections between 'bad governance' and deforestation, and 'good governance' and forest protection, are not always as self-evident as they seem. On the ground observations by foresters and anthropologists as well as conceptual shifts in ecology as a whole unsettle some of the key assumptions informing the 'good governance' agenda, and suggest that, from an ecological point of view, too, a more nuanced and differentiated understanding of what constitutes 'good' and 'bad' forest governance is required.

Modern forestry is based on the assumption that forests are stable environments, which through the application of scientific methods can be managed in such a way so as to ensure long-term sustainable yields. A key condition for this is that forests are protected from all human disturbances other than expert treatment methods and carefully regulated logging. For much of the 20th century, the idea that forests are stable, 'climax' ecosystems was also core to the discipline of ecology, rooted as it was in a fundamental belief in the balance of nature. Since the 1970s, however, something of a paradigm shift has occurred amongst ecologists; now disequilibrium and instability are increasingly seen as the defining characteristics of 'nature' (Botkin 1990; Sprugel 1991).

At the same time the subfield of historical ecology emerged, like political ecology, as a critical response to cultural ecology, but also as a critique of ecology's traditional focus on environments undisturbed by humans. Thinking about ecology historically and bringing together environmental anthropologists, ecologists and archaeologists, historical ecology research has powerfully shown just how fundamentally all environments, including all forests, are shaped by humans and how the impact of humans on forest growth and biodiversity can be positive as well as negative (Balée 2006).

Informed by these insights, localised historical and ethnographic studies can further unsettle established ideas of what constitutes good and bad forest management. In Nigeria's Edo State, forests were seemingly managed well in the colonial period: over 64% of land was under reservation by the 1930s, and from the 1940s onwards

carefully drawn up working plans regulated logging activities and prescribed timber regeneration methods. In recent decades, however, reserves have officially shrunk to less than 20%, and there is widespread illegal farming and logging in what remains. It is not surprising, therefore, that the *Conservation Atlas of Tropical Forests* states that Nigeria's 'natural forests were carefully managed in the early part of the century, [but] they have since been severely over-exploited' (Lowe et al. 1992: 230; see also Oates 1999). This view is widely shared by conservationists, foresters and local people alike, who all participate in this particular version of the much repeated Nigerian 'things fall apart' narrative: that forests were managed well in the colonial period and that political decline in recent decades has caused environmental destruction. But this is not, in fact, correct.

The colonial forest department not only experienced financial and staff shortages, numerous delays, internal conflict, illegal logging and corruption: my archival research showed that even in its most successful periods, colonial forest management did not result in actual forest protection. It was widespread shifting cultivation in the pre-colonial period that had created the conditions for the abundant growth of mahogany and many other timber species, which are light-demanding in their early stages and grow best in opened areas. In this context, forest reservation effectively curtailed the conditions that had facilitated the regeneration of timber species. Inside reserves, now no longer farmed, timber species could not regenerate well under the closed forest canopy, whilst outside reserves farming necessarily intensified, shortening fallow periods and reducing opportunities for timber species to fully regenerate here, too. The separation of forests and farmland that forest reservation created thus protected forest tracts but not trees overall, and particularly not timber species, the very ones colonial foresters were interested in.

Working plans, too, did not constitute successful environmental stewardship: the extensive application of arborial treatment did not improve regeneration inside reserves (see also Plumptre 1996). Moreover, the cooperation of logging companies in these restrictive plans was only gained by the introduction of 'salvage felling', completely unregulated felling outside reserves. The staggeringly large volume of trees subsequently felled outside reserves – supplying the vast majority of timber exported during the 1950s 'timber boom' – strongly suggest that this was not so much

'salvage' as the rapid large scale removal of all the timber trees in the countless small forest plots on community land. Upon close inspection, therefore, colonial forest management, well organised and orderly as it might have been, did not in any way present sustainable management.

The environmentally destructive effects of mismanagement and corruption in more recent decades, meanwhile, are not a given, either. For example, one needs to differentiate between different forms of forest conversion. Illegal small scale cocoa and plantain farmers in Okomu Reserve in Western Edo State, frequently condemned as a major source of forest destruction, compare rather well to the oil palm and rubber monocultures established on large scale plantations, in that both cocoa and plantain farmers leave a substantial amount of original trees and plants, and are much more biodiverse (Schroth and Harvey 2007). Actual oil palm and rubber plantations in turn are still better, in terms of biomass, than forest areas that were cleared but never planted; these wastelands, of which there are quite a few in Edo State, are a far cry from 'illegal' plantain farms inside effectively still high forest. Moreover, indirect ecological effects outside reserves need to be considered too. Thus Taungya farming as it is practiced today does result in forest clearance inside reserves, but it also allows farmers to prolong fallow periods on community land, resulting in quite substantial forest regeneration. Informal Taungya arrangements on the ground therefore provide opportunities for community-based conservation practices that would otherwise not exist.

Of course, not all instances of corruption can be reinterpreted in this way: if a political crony of a State minister is given a large area of reserved forest land, clears and then abandons it, or if more and more trees of smaller and smaller girth sizes are felled for timber, there are few environmental and indeed social benefits. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that the links between corruption and environmental destruction are not inevitable. Indeed, there is a growing recognition of the need for more empirical research into the actual outcomes of corruption in natural resource management (Robbins 2000; Corbridge and Kumar 2002; Robbins et al. 2006; Robbins et al. 2009).

Conclusion

The three critical perspectives presented here do not challenge the overall validity of the good governance agenda in forest management: accountability, participation, transparency, rule of law and sustainability all remain worth striving for. Rather, they highlight shortcomings in the ways in which these goals are currently conceptualised and approached by policy makers. The critical scholarship on CPR theory shows how disappointing outcomes of its practical applications are linked to a preoccupation with institutional design, without sufficient appreciation of historical, politico-economic and indeed ecological context. Anthropological approaches to corruption challenge us to think more carefully about the different ways in which forest policies and laws are subverted, again highlighting the need for a historically contextualised understanding of contemporary 'corrupt' practices. Historical ecology research and new approaches in ecology, finally, raise questions about the ecological assumptions underlying the good governance agenda.

Each of these three approaches is quite distinct in its intellectual roots, concerns and affiliations, and therefore offers quite different insights. Yet all three are firmly situated within environmental anthropology, indeed testament to the field's breadth and versatility. It is through its ability to draw on such different approaches – from within anthropology but also many other social and natural sciences – that environmental anthropology is perhaps particularly well equipped to provide us with a critical, holistic understanding of the shortcomings of the good governance agenda in tropical forest conservation. At the same time, the good governance agenda presents a fruitful focus for thinking through different strands of environmental anthropology and exploring their effective combination.

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