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**Review: From Enslavement to Environmentalism: Politics on a Southern African Frontier**

By David McDermott Hughes

Reviewed by [Bram Buscher](#)

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David McDermott Hughes. *From Enslavement to Environmentalism. Politics on a Southern African Frontier*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, May 2006. 288 pp. (hardbound) ISBN: 0-295-98590-9. (90% Recycled, Acid-free paper) US\$50.00.

Within the vast and burgeoning literature on community-based conservation in Africa, David Hughes' *From Enslavement to Environmentalism* is a welcome addition. With great care, Hughes narrates what life is like in and around two villages on the border between Zimbabwe and Mozambique and shows how outside interventions have over time greatly changed local power dynamics in relation to land and people. But these dynamics differed greatly between the two countries. Interestingly, the book challenges the assumption in much of the literature that African borders are "soft" -- not very meaningful to local people. Instead, the book argues that the border between Mozambique and Zimbabwe is "hard" in that "people cross it, but emigration strips at least some people of rights and securities they regularly enjoy at home" (p. 76). This especially concerned Mozambican refugees, crossing the border to flee from civil war, subsequently finding themselves as "pegs" in turf-wars over land between local headmen, the state and private owners in a country "steeped in cadastral culture" (p. 123).

In turn, however, the cadastral politics so characteristic of Zimbabwe increasingly started influencing local politics in Mozambique during the 1990s. Although traditionally more so in former British colonies, Hughes contends that due to conservation and private sector interventions even Mozambique has been making a "sea change" from "rule based on categories of people to rule based on the management of zones of land" (p. 145). And he states that this shift "from enslavement to environmentalism" has not brought more security or prospects for people living in rural Mozambique. In fact, the book suggests that neoliberal "community-based" conservation and tourism projects have made people worse off than they were before.

The strong point of the book is the ethnographic detail Hughes brings to bear to embed and "ground" the above two arguments. Yet, what the book wins in ethnographic detail, it seems to lose in theoretical rigor, especially when it concerns the operationalization of liberalism and politics. In itself

perhaps not a big problem, the book concludes that three liberal projects – individualization of rural Africans, their empowerment and their economic advancement – so far have failed, and actually should fail, in black lowlands. In order to make this statement, the author should have defined liberalism and embedded the arguments in wider political economic debates about the advancement of liberalism in Africa, including responses of African states and other actors. Although he does not exclude himself from his own critique, being part of World Bank assessment teams and community-based conservation projects must have given Hughes keen insights into the more structural elements that make the rise of neoliberalism in Africa so pervasive – and dangerous. Adding more of these insights might have nuanced the conclusion of the book somewhat, while making the arguments in fact stronger.

These critical points aside, *From Enslavement to Environmentalism* stands out in the debate on politics around community-based conservation in Africa and is very strong empirically. It is therefore highly recommended.

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