

Foreword

Disputing the Floodplains: Institutional Change and the Politics of Resource Management in African Wetlands

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Tobias Haller and his colleagues address an important set of questions facing contemporary social scientists trying to understand patterns of institutional change particularly in Africa. Many social scientists have written important work based on static analyses of the problems facing the users of resources. Static analyses, using frameworks, theories, and models, will continue to be an important way to understand how current the structure of a resource problem affects behavior of individuals in that situation. Will the situation involve high levels of conflict, be destructive of the resource, or involve cooperative efforts to find ways of sustaining a resource?

Trying to develop and utilize over-time analysis has turned out to be more difficult for the social sciences than using static theories. We do not have the physical markers that natural scientists can use to enable them to obtain reliable measures of key variables and study very long-term processes. Archaeologists have been extremely helpful in giving the social scientists a sense of the important traces that exist of earlier civilizations. What we lack, however, is a good method for doing careful research about changes in structure and outcomes in more recent historical times.

Anthropologists and historians have written individual case studies that are of considerable value. Without serious efforts to *compare* historical case studies, however, it is hard to obtain theoretical results that can then be tested by other scholars. The collection of

papers in this book helps us understand resource management processes over time in five African countries and multiple villages within them. The focus is primarily on floodplain resources but includes parallel resource problems related to fisheries and open pastures. Each of the chapters is well worth a serious read.

The ninth Chapter is a particularly valuable contribution to the study of institutional change. Haller provides an excellent synthesis of the work of the eight scholars who have contributed chapters in this book. While he draws on existing theory, he also extends our theoretical understanding of how diverse communities at multiple levels cope with resource problems over time. Haller reinforces earlier findings that no abstract form of governance works in all circumstances. Instead of adopting panaceas, we need to understand the complexity of different social-ecological systems and of importance of developing governance systems to fit particular multi-scale settings.