



Still networking

By Robin Palmer

I couldn't have been more delighted that Rachael Knight's May Day Mokoro seminar on community land rights in Africa was such an unqualified success. Why so?

Well, it goes back to my early links with Mokoro. These came largely through Martin Adams while I was working as a land rights adviser in Africa for Oxfam. The job principally involved supporting civil society organisations (CSOs) in their responses to new land laws and policies being introduced largely as a result of pressures from the World Bank. This meant CSOs needed to engage with their national governments and with relevant donors. On my part it also meant identifying key individuals, such as the late Professors [H.W.O Okoth-Ogendo](#) and [Patrick McAuslan](#), who could help them in the struggle for pro-poor land reform. Establishing and sustaining such relationships was absolutely key to my work with Oxfam.

The [Land Rights in Africa](#) website, which I set up in Oxfam space in January 2000 and which has been housed in Mokoro space since 2012, I saw as offering a place for African CSOs to offer alternative arguments to the often simplistic World Bank / Hernando de Soto 'solutions' – privatise everything.

I was delighted to find that Mokoro ran seminars, occasionally on land, and I have participated and been involved in many of these, especially after I retired from Oxfam in 2007. As someone personally committed to land rights, even more so in today's world of global land grabbing and massive land corruption by national and local elites in Africa, I have sought to inspire a similar interest, and hopefully a passion, among the young staff which Mokoro has been recruiting to its office.

Hence the seminars on celebrating the work on land of the late Kaori Izumi (2013), on women's land rights (2014 and 2015), on land advocacy coupled with a showing of the stunning Kurt Langbein documentary film [Land Grabbing](#) (2017), the invitation to an informal gathering in the Mokoro office to the Zimbabwean academic and activist Patience Mutopo (2017), and last year's Chatham House rules seminar by Odenda Lumumba, CEO of the Kenya Land Alliance, and others.

I first came across Rachael Knight in 2002 when I posted her article, [Camponeses' Realities: Their Experiences and Perceptions of the 1977 Land Law](#) on the land rights website. Since then I think it fair to say that we have indulged in a mutual admiration society in which she has admired the things I had written as an academic and done as a land advocate for Oxfam, and I have admired her quite extraordinary work in defining and defending community land rights in Africa. We have met on a few occasions in the intervening years and have corresponded regularly on a variety of issues of common concern. I always knew that I would get really sound advice when I turned to Rachael.

So when, at Mokoro's AGM in January earlier this year, Chris Tanner told me that he had just received an email from Rachael (also copied to Liz Daley and myself) saying that she was coming to England for five months in effect to recharge her batteries, I immediately grabbed (metaphorically) Susie Prince and Stephen Lister, told them that Rachael was a very special person and please, please could I invite her to give a seminar at Mokoro before her five months were up. They took my word for it and said go ahead. Next morning I asked Rachael if she might be willing to talk about her work at a Mokoro seminar. Absolutely no pressure I said, and I really meant that, adding that I was pretty sure that she would be an inspirational figure for some of my younger Mokoro colleagues. She replied that she would be absolutely honoured and delighted to come and give a seminar for Mokoro. I immediately emailed Chris Tanner and Liz Daley to give them the good news – they had both worked with Rachael in the past. They were as delighted as I was. So, on May Day Chris drove from Wales, Liz from Sussex and Stephen Turner took a train from Manchester to come to listen to Rachael.

We 'land 4' and many others from Mokoro formed part of a varied and hugely attentive audience. We were treated to something very special.

I have chaired many seminars in my three score years and plenty, but Rachael's May Day talk was certainly one of the most memorable. So, thank you Rachael and please come again!

A full write-up of Rachael's seminar at Mokoro can be viewed [here](#).



Rachael Knight and Robin Palmer at Mokoro's seminar on May 1 2019. Photo by Mokoro