Women's Work and Social Change: The Making of a Peasantry in the Goromonzi District of Southern Rhodesia, 1898-1934

by

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Abstract

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, an African peasantry emerged in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in the vicinity of towns, mines, and European farms. In these areas, many African households met their cash needs through increased agricultural production and the sale of produce, rather than through labor migration. As the primary agricultural producers, African women played a vital role in the emergence of this peasantry.

As political mechanisms employed by white settlers brought about a decline in peasant prosperity, women's labor was intensified. Countless women responded to their lives of increasing hardship by running away to the emerging towns, mining centers, and commercial farms. Although their objectives were different, and often at odds, African male elites collaborated with the colonial authorities in their efforts to regain control over the mobility and sexuality of African women.

About the Author

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WOMEN'S WORK AND SOCIAL CHANGE: THE MAKING OF A PEASANTRY IN THE GOROMONZI DISTRICT OF SOUTHERN RHODESIA, 1898-1934

Introduction: Making the Invisible Visible

In the 1970s, a number of important studies took a fresh look at Southern Africa from the bottom up. Although notable contributions to our understanding of African social history, these works are marred by their neglect of African women. While the authors rightly point out that it was the cheap labor power of African men that developed the regional industrial economy, they generally disregard the unremunerated labor of rural women and children, except insofar as it sheds light on the dynamics of capitalist development. Women's unpaid labor in the subsistence sector is considered noteworthy only because it subsidized the sub-economic wages of African men. On both the theoretical and historical levels, the effect of land alienation and male labor migration of African women's social and economic position is, for the most part, ignored (Arrighi 1970; Bundy 1972, 1979; Phimister 1977; Wolpe 1972).

While acknowledging my debt to these studies, I propose to move beyond them by considering three factors that have been widely overlooked.[1] First, I will demonstrate the critical role of women in the emergence of an African peasantry in Southern Rhodesia during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.[2] Second, I will explore the implications of intensified female labor and the decline in women's social and economic status as their productive base was undercut in subsequent years. Third, I will show that the subordinate status of African women was not solely the result of European impositions. Rather, indigenous and European structures of patriarchal control reinforced and transformed one another into new structures and forms of male domination.

Historical Background

In 1890 the Pioneer Column of the British South Africa Company marched into Mashonaland and occupied part of the territory later known first as Southern Rhodesia, then as Zimbabwe. Within a few years of the European occupation, an African peasantry began to emerge in the vicinity of towns, mines, and European farms. In order to meet tax obligations and buy European trade goods, many African households expanded their acreage under cultivation and sold their surplus crops to Europeans. As the primary agricultural producers, African women played a major role in household response to market opportunities, and ultimately, in the emergence of an African peasantry.

In areas distant from European markets, cash obligations could be met only through wage employment. For people from such areas, wage labor was virtually synonymous with migratory labor. While women and children tended the land at home, young men from the remote areas entered the migratory labor force. The causes of this phenomenon were complex. On the one hand, European authorities discouraged African women from settling in the towns and on the mines. On principle, they opposed the growth of a permanent, potentially explosive, African population in the urban areas. Moreover, they paid African men barely enough to support themselves, let alone their families, and counted on women and children to subsidize their meager wages through agricultural production

at the rural homesteads. Finally, European industrialists, mine owners, and administration officials expected rural-based women to bear the social costs of production, caring for sick, disabled, and retired workers and raising the next generation of labor. On the other hand, and of equal importance, African men were anxious for their wives to remain in the rural areas. So situated, women maintained kinship and community ties and provided a home for male laborers when they were no longer of use in the European-controlled economy. Furthermore, if women joined their husbands at the work location, their households would lose their right to village land, since the right of access was contingent upon continuous cultivation. Finally, given the "shortage" of women in the towns and on the mines, men feared that if their wives came to these areas, they would be enticed away by other more prosperous men.

Thus, for approximately two decades after European occupation, isolated parts of the territory were forced to export labor, while those close to European areas managed to stave off the disintegrating effects of male labor migration through the sale of agricultural produce. By 1910s, however, the massive alienation of African land, the growing burden of rent payments, government-imposed taxes and levies, state subsidization of European farming ventures, and the legislation of marketing arrangements favoring European over African producers had taken their toll. Increasingly, even those households in the vicinity of towns, mines, and farms could not fulfill their cash needs through the sale of produce and livestock alone; they, too, began to send male members into the labor market (Arrighi 1970; Palmer 1977; Phimister 1977).

As political mechanisms employed by white settlers and the territorial administration brought about a decline in peasant prosperity, women's labor was intensified in a final attempt to forestall the necessity for male labor migration. Countless women reacted to their lives of increasing hardship by running away to the emerging towns, mining centers, and commercial farms, setting off another wave of social turbulence. In their efforts to regain control of their runaway daughters and wives, some African men found themselves collaborating with their erstwhile colonial adversaries.

The Emergence of an African Peasantry in Goromonzi, 1898-1908

When the Pioneer Column occupied Mashonaland in 1890, its members were not seeking prime agricultural land. Formed in the wake of the gold rush on the mineral-rich Witwatersrand of South Africa, the Pioneer Column was composed of adventurers and fortune hunters who were eager to join the northward trek in search of a "second rand." Although each of the 196 pioneers was granted a farm of 3,175 acres, few were interested in agricultural pursuits (Palmer 1977:26). Obsessed by the prospects of mineral wealth, most of the early Europeans had little desire to grow their own food. They found it cheaper to buy their supplies from African producers who, in any event, were more knowledgeable about local conditions and suitable agricultural practices (Palmer 1977:40).

In the Goromonzi District east of Salisbury, African agriculturalists were quick to respond to the market stimulus.[3] Conveniently located in the environs of Salisbury and in the vicinity of several mines, peasant producers were expanding their acreage under cultivation and selling food and beer to traders, urban dwellers, and migrant workers on the mines. Within eight years

after the occupation of Southern Rhodesia, they were already engaged in market production (AR 1899:10). By 1901 the native commissioner could report that the African harvest was "unusually heavy, the Natives being able to sell large quantities of grain" (AR 1901:1-2). Much more rice than usual had been planted since there was a ready market for it. Generally, the native commissioner noted,

> ...the cultivation of grain has greatly increased in this district. It is quite the usual thing for a Native to have three gardens. The first he will tell you is for his year's food; the second to make beer of; the third for trade. (AR 1901:1-2)

Writing in 1905 from Chishawasha, the Jesuit mission farm 12 miles east of Salisbury, Father Richartz remarked upon the thriving business conducted between his African neighbors and the local mines:

> The extensive crops of millet grown by the natives not only suffice abundantly for their own needs, but are sold in large quantities to the mine-owners, who send agents round every year in the season, to purchase this grain. It is almost the staple food of boys employed in the Mashonaland mines. (Richartz 1905:551)

As dependent as they were on African-produced food, the mine owners realized that the robust peasant economy was a mixed blessing. Because of their success in growing and marketing their crops, African men in the environs of Salisbury had little incentive to work for Europeans. By 1906 African labor was so scarce that work had virtually come to a standstill on several small mining properties (AR 1906:98-99). Despite the fact that the annual tax imposed on African men had been raised in 1904 from 10 shillings to one pound sterling, with an additional 10 shillings levied for each wife beyond the first, Africans in the Salisbury area were easily meeting their cash needs through the sale of grain and fowl (AR 1906:100; AR 1909:54; Palmer 1977:43, 54; Steele 1972:114). By 1909 it was evident that, rather than simply selling their normal surplus, Africans were expanding their production to meet the demand of the large number of traders and mining centers in the district (AR 1909:51).

The production of an agricultural surplus was the main bulwark against societal disintegration through the out-migration of African men. The primary producers of this surplus were African women. While both men and women were involved in agricultural production, women did most of the day-to-day work, thus contributing the greatest labor input throughout the growing season. Men generally cleared new fields, usually every five to six years, and prepared the land for planting. Thereafter, women were responsible for most of the planting, hoeing, weeding, reaping, and threshing. Men might help with some of these tasks when not otherwise engaged in such activities as hunting, preparing skins, tending cattle, weaving, and building (Raudzi interview; Arrighi 1970:228; Bourdillon 1982:69; Holleman 1952:211; Weinrich 1979:13). Since there had been no technological innovation, the "increased acreage under cultivation" noted by the native commissioner in 1909 most probably transpired through the intensification of female labor (AR 1909:31).

If women labored longer hours in the fields, they also devised more lucrative means of acquiring income. It was customary for women to brew millet beer which was provided to neighbors in exchange for labor at critical

points in the growing season. It was a small step to think of selling beer, as well as grain, to the mine laborers who had been imported into the area from Nyasaland. Mine wages were so low, and beer brewing so profitable, that women selling beer to the miners frequently earned more than the miners themselves (KB 1929).

By 1909 such enterprising women had come under virulent attack from the Goromonzi native commissioner. Already the Company administration had embarked on a fruitless attempt to encourage African girls to enter domestic service with Europeans (AR 1909:54-55); however, in 1909 -- and for the next half century -- neither the girls nor their families showed any interest in the employment opportunities offered to them. In his annual report of that year the native commissioner complained,

> The women are yearly becoming more lazy and indolent and I do not know of a single case of a girl or woman entering service. The young women living in the vicinity of the mines spend their lives making and selling beer and in general immorality. Where in previous years the women had to do their share of tilling the lands, this work in many cases is now done by natives from other Districts employed by the fathers or husbands of the women who become richer by the earnings of the latter. (AR 1909:55)

Evident from the native commissioner's report is the fact that within two decades of the occupation of Mashonaland, African households in the environs of Salisbury were embarking upon highly sophisticated, profit-oriented labor strategies. Household members were assigned, not to their customary tasks, but to those that utilized their labor the most profitably. While women could sell beer at one shilling per cup, hired male labor was going for an average of 10 shillings per month plus food (Chigomo interviews; AR 1900:52; KB 1927). In other words, a woman needed to sell only 10 cups of beer per month in order to hire one man to work in her fields for the equivalent time. Similarly, if a woman sold a bag of millet to mine workers in the Salisbury area, she could obtain three to four pounds sterling; however, if she brewed beer from that same bag, she could produce 600 pints, which she could sell at one shilling each, making a substantial profit (AR 1911:43-44; KB 1927). Thus, it was evident to many households that female beer brewing was more lucrative than male or female wage labor, and was a more profitable use of female labor time than their involvement in field work. As a result, capitalist labor relations between Africans in the Salisbury area had begun at least by 1909—financed by the cash earnings of African women.

Agricultural Innovation: New Crops and Tools

Until 1904, African peasants in Mashonaland faced little competition from European farmers. During the 1903-1904 agricultural season, white farmers worked only five percent of the total acreage under cultivation and produced less than 10 percent of the total marketed output (Arrighi 1970:209). Thus, African peasants continued to supply the mines with the bulk of their foodstuffs, primarily grain, cattle, and beer. Meeting mine workers' and urban dwellers' demand for a healthier and more varied diet, they also sold green vegetables, potatoes, wheat, and groundnuts. Because it was a sellers' market, high prices were paid for African produce (Arrighi 1970:201, 207; AR

1920:2). Given the central role of female labor in agricultural production, women were key agents of African peasant prosperity in the early years of the 20th century.

In the Goromonzi District, peasant households responded to the demand of the local market by experimenting with new crops. Their substitution of the larger European mealies (maize) for the indigenous less marketable variety occurred fairly rapidly. By 1909 the native commissioner noted in his annual report, "there is a marked improvement in the quality of mealies grown by the natives and the small Mashona mealie is very rarely seen" (AR 1909:52). Two years later he indicated: "The small Mashona mealie has quite disappeared, and better grain is now sown everywhere" (AR 1911:45). In 1920, he remarked that Africans were growing rice "on a much larger scale than usual," as it had a consistently good market and they could "obtain a better price for this than any other grain" (AR 1920:2, 9; 1921:3). Similarly, as the mines switched the staple food of migrant workers from millet to maize, local peasants stepped up their production of the sought-after maize (AR 1910:44; 1920:2).

As long as the peasants continued to use hoes to prepare their lands for planting, further expansion of agricultural production would be limited. In 1910, the native commissioner noted that only two Africans in the Goromonzi District had adopted the use of the plow, the vast majority lacking trained oxen. Within six years, however, the picture had changed dramatically; 34 African-owned plows were then in use, their owners conducting "a flourishing trade in ploughing the lands for their neighbours" (AR 1909:52; 1910:45; 1916:87). By 1920, there were 57 African-owned plows, and Africans were asking for price reduction on these and other agricultural implements. Although many Africans were anxious to use the new equipment, the supply was extremely irregular and the prices so prohibitive that few could afford them (AR 1919:9; 1920:9). The following year the native commissioner wrote that it was only the "high price of implements" that forced the majority of Africans to continue cultivating by hand. He anticipated "a big demand" for plows as soon as the prices dropped, "as most Natives now possess trained oxen which they use in sledges for carting grain" (AR 1921:3). Ten years later, the native commissioner reported: "Ploughs are almost universally used and there are many hundreds in use" (AR 1931:3).

The rapid adoption of the plow had serious implications for female labor. Although promoted as a "labor-saving device," the plow conserved only male labor. The use of the plow allowed the amount of acreage under cultivation to be dramatically extended, and that increased acreage required more planting, hoeing, weeding, harvesting, threshing, and grinding--all predominantly female tasks. Without women conducting the follow-up work, plows, oxen, and the labor of the male handler were high-priced but value-less assets. Thus, while the plow permitted peasant households to sustain themselves in the face of market forces that were now turning against them, it did so through increased exploitation of female labor.

The White Agricultural Policy of 1908

Although the prosperity of peasants in the Goromonzi District lasted roughly until the end of World War I, the seeds of destruction were sown ten years earlier. When the directors of the British South Africa Company toured Southern Rhodesia in 1907, they found its economy in shambles. The burgeoning

peasantry of Goromonzi notwithstanding, the territory as a whole was in dire economic straits. Even after recognizing that Southern Rhodesia was no "second rand," the administration had failed to compensate for its relative poverty in minerals by investing in non-mining sectors of the economy. In order to pull the territory out of its financial crisis, the directors determined that a commercial farming sector must be developed, but their plan called for the promotion of European settlement and training, rather than the development of an African commercial farming class.

The white agricultural policy of 1908 followed in the wake of the directors' visit. In order to woo potential settler farmers from Britain and South Africa, the administration offered them agricultural training and a variety of extension services. In 1912, a land bank was established to provide European farmers with loans up to 2,000 pounds sterling for the purchase of farms, livestock, and agricultural equipment, as well as for farm improvements such as irrigation and fencing (Palmer 1977:82,241). Fertilizers, seeds, and stock were made available to European farmers at subsidized costs. Roads and irrigation works were constructed in their vicinity (Gann 1965:112). Since only Europeans were eligible for these services, white settlers were placed, from the outset, in an advantageous position compared to their African competitors.

Within two years of the initiation of the white agricultural policy, Africans in the Goromonzi District were beginning to feel its effect. In his annual report for 1910, the native commissioner remarked that "a good supply of grain is still on hand." It was unusual for Africans to have so much unsold grain so late in the season, he continued, attributing the glut "to the fact that traders and others have not bought so much for cash as in past years." For the first time, the native commissioner made reference to the growing competition from European farmers who "have gone in largely for mealie growing." These farmers, with their large government subsidies, technologically more advanced methods, and economies of scale, were undercutting the prices asked by African peasants. Until 1910, Africans were able to get six to eight shillings per bag of mealies; that year, due to the surfeit of European-grown maize, traders were willing to give Africans only three to four shillings per bag (AR 1910:44). Throughout the country maize prices declined 30 to 50 percent between the growing seasons of 1903-1904 and 1911-1912 (Arrighi 1970:215).

A second problem faced by Goromonzi peasants was the change in market demand. Prior to 1910, millet was the staple food of both peasants and mine laborers. Consequently, the peasants simply expanded the production of their staple crop and sold the surplus to mine owners or intermediary traders. According to the annual report of 1910, however,"...the mines are now all feeding their boys on mealie meal." Although Africans had augmented maize production in response to buyers' demands, millet remained their dietary staple. In contrast to previous years, any surplus millet produced from 1910 was virtually unmarketable, at least in bulk. The native commissioner noted that peasants were finding it "difficult to dispose of their grain, except when ground, and then only in small quantities" (AR 1910:44).

Small amounts of pre-ground millet could still be peddled directly to individual mine workers for their private production of beer (AR 1911:43). However, because the workers wanted the grain ready-ground, the crop could be

sold only with the addition of a significant amount of female labor time to pound and grind the grain. Once the labor was done, the peasants could obtain an average of three to four pounds sterling per bag of millet — sold bit by bit — in contrast to the three to four shillings per bag of maize offered by local traders, and the even smaller sums offered for millet (AR 1910:44; 1911:44; 1912:42).

Their market having been uncontested for more than a dozen years, the peasants were not prepared to lose their foothold at the mines. In 1910, the Goromonzi native commissioner wrote that he had "no doubt that the native is making an effort to compete with the farmer in meeting the requirements of the mines." The large European farming population in the district gave peasants "an impetus to extend [their] lands...and so be in a position to sell at a lower figure" (AR 1910:45). The only way to extend their lands and undercut European prices, without benefit of subsidies and other advantages, was to intensify the exploitation of family labor, primarily that of women and children. However, even these efforts were of no avail. By 1912, most of the food requirements of the mines throughout Rhodesia were met by European farmers (Palmer 1977:91). In the Goromonzi District, the peasants turned their attention to the growing market in Salisbury and to migrant workers on neighboring European farms (AR 1934:4; 1937:7; 1939:3).

African markets were not the sole target of European attack after 1908. As the number of white farmers in Rhodesia grew from 545 in 1904 to 1,324 in 1911, they began to challenge African peasants for the best agricultural land (Palmer 1977:80, 91). The Native Reserves Commission, established in 1914, recommended not only a massive reduction in the acreage set aside for Africans, but also the removal from the reserves of most of the fertile, well-watered land in close proximity to markets and communication routes, as well as the substitution of impoverished, arid land in remote, tsetse fly infested areas (Palmer 1977:113-118). In 1920, the recommendations of the Commission were enshrined in law; the African reserves were reduced by one million acres, and the territory's best land was turned over to European use (Palmer 1977:111, 113).

Since the early years of occupation, the Goromonzi District had been known for its fertile soil, plentiful streams, and prime location in the vicinity of Salisbury and several mines (ZMR May 1989:25; Oct. 1899:205). Not surprisingly, Africans in this district were not spared from the European land grab. According to the 1915 diary of A.H. Holland, secretary of the Native Reserves Commission, the Msana Reserve was to be reduced by one-half, as it "...would make ideal farming country, as there is plenty of water and rich red soil, also a good class of sand soil" (Quoted in Palmer 1977:118). Similarly, the Kunzwi Reserve was to be reduced by two-thirds, as it was "...excellent for grazing and well watered...[with] rich red chocolate soil...it was ideal farming land" (Quoted in Palmer 1977:118).

Along with the pressures of dwindling markets and dispossession of land were dramatically increased financial burdens. The upward climb of hut taxes, rents, grazing and dipping fees, and various other levies imposed by the settlers eroded whatever cash earnings the peasants had managed to acquire. Moreover, in order to compete with European farmers, Africans were investing in plows, wagons, scotch carts, and supplies. To make matters worse, prices for cattle and maize had fallen to rock bottom in the economic slump that

followed World War I. As fewer and fewer households could survive solely on the basis of produce and livestock sales, an increasing number of African men were forced to enter the wage labor market. European employers seized the opportunity to reduce African wages, which declined in real terms from the 1920s onward (Arrighi 1970:216; Gann 1965:15, 149, 194; Palmer 1977:145).

Production and Reproduction: Increased Pressures on Women

The decline of the Goromonzi peasantry accelerated during the 1920s. While a growing number of households could only meet their cash needs by releasing male members into the labor market, others continued to battle against the tide. In either case, the ongoing presence of women and girls at the homestead became even more critical to household survival strategy. Commenting on the unlikelihood of persuading girls to engage in domestic labor for Europeans, an observer in the early 1930s noted that the removal of women and girls "means less food grown for the family and one less pair of hands for the many tasks that native life involves" (Bazeley in FWI:25). During the same period, another commentator remarked:

> Up to the age of fifteen many girls are required to plough in the lands, and herd cattle....There is a growing tendency on the part of the male children to run away from home to work, thereby throwing a greater number of duties on the females.
>
> The wage paid to girls in employment [domestic service] hardly compensates their parents for the loss of their services. Generally speaking, therefore, natives are opposed to their daughters leaving home, apart from the consideration of 'lobola' [bridewealth] should they fail to return home to get married. (Thomas in FWI:50)

It was not only through their labor that women and girls enhanced the material well-being of their households. It was the receipt of their bridewealth, with its large cattle component, that bolstered the household herd. As the ox-drawn plow became more universally used and wagon and scotch cart transport assumed increasing importance, cattle began to play a greater productive, rather than predominantly social, role in African society. By the 1930s, cattle and plows had emerged as the most prominent forms of productive investment by Africans (Arrighi 1970:214). Consequently, the value of cattle rose, and with it the need to control the means of acquiring cattle, that is, women.

As the productive labor and cattle-acquiring potential of women increased in value, so, too, did the value of their reproductive capacities. As producers of children, women ensured the continuity of the lineage; they also bore the next generation of laborers, who would sustain their parents in old age. Since the payment of lobola entitled a man to control over his wife's reproductive capacity and to any children she might bear, it is not surprising that the cattle and cash components of bridewealth payments were rapidly inflating. Before the occupation of Mashonaland in 1890, lobola demands in the Goromonzi District included four to five head of cattle (CC 1900). Typical bridewealth transactions in 1896-1897 ranged from four head of cattle plus four hoes, two blankets, and 10 shillings, to four head of cattle and six baskets of grain, intended to represent a fifth beast (CC 1900-1901). In 1904, four to five head of cattle were still being demanded as lobola, but the

cash component had risen to an average of one pound sterling (CC 1903-1904). Thirty years later, however, the growing need for cash and cattle was evident; in the late 1920s and early 1930s, an average of eight to nine head of cattle and 15 to 19 pounds sterling were paid as lobola (NB 1932:9; NML 5 Sept. 1929).[4]

Prosperous men were able to acquire more wives, and hence, more children and total labor power. They compensated for their lack of land by employing extremely intensive labor processes, using family, rather than hired, labor. Often these men were members of an emergent "master farming" class, which was eagerly adopting the methods taught by agricultural demonstrators. The government's European agriculturalist remarked upon one such man in the Chihota Reserve a few dozen miles to the south of Salisbury:

> [In 1929 Vambe]...made his two wives submit their labours to a proper 4 course rotation on two acres each. By 1934, Vambe had three wives, each with crop rotations. He also had a farm cart, two ploughs, a harrow, a planter and a cultivator. (Quoted in Ranger 1985:71)

Wives in such circumstances were little more than farm laborers, working for room and board, rather than pay.

New Options for Women: Farms, Mines, and Towns

Intensified pressure on women within the household was occurring at a time when alternative ways of living were also emerging. As legal minors without access to land or wage employment, women whose domestic situations had become intolerable needed to find new male patrons and protectors. A woman's options were few: she could run away with a lover who would become her new husband; she could seek refuge at a mission station, exchanging the patriarchal control of her father or husband for that of the European missionaries; or, she could flee to the towns, mines, or farming compounds. There she would most likely form an informal, often temporary, liaison or series of liaisons with a male worker, providing him with domestic and sexual services in exchange for shelter. Her own means of acquiring cash were few, and a woman who made money did so primarily through the sale of beer and through prostitution.[5]

A large number of young women who ran away were married to much older men, invariably polygynists, to whom they had been pledged in childhood.[6] Although the pledging of children was outlawed by the Native Marriage Ordinance of 1901, the chief native commissioner asserted that 27 years later, it was "still unabated in Mashonaland" (Peaden 1970:22; NML 2 June 1928). In 1933, the Southern Rhodesia Missionary Conference maintained that, in spite of 30 years of legislation, the custom of child pledging was still prevalent (NML 25 Jan. 1933). One observer in the early 1930s believed child pledging was actually on the increase, due to the enhanced buying power of wage-earning men (Jollie in FWI:65).

By the time girls pledged in childhood were old enough to join their husbands, these men had already paid substantial amounts of lobola. Since the pledging of children took place most frequently when families were in serious financial need, the cattle and cash so received had inevitably been consumed years before. Should the girls refuse to go to their husbands, their fathers

had no way of repaying the lobola. Hence, girls who protested their arranged marriages were often threatened and beaten into submission (Marwodzi interview; Peaden 1970:22, 25; NML 5 Jan. 1925; 8 April 1929; 9 April 1929; 17 April 1929; NMO 18 Jan. 1917).

Just as young women ran away to escape arranged marriages, junior wives, who were already established in polygynous households, sought refuge from oppressive domestic situations. Many of these were welcomed at mission stations, the missionaries having their own reasons for opposing polygyny (Peaden 1970:25, 26). Polygynists were predominantly older, relatively well-to-do men who acquired young wives to enhance their social status, productive capacities, and ability to acquire more children. Frequently the young wives had not freely consented to these marriages but instead had been pushed into them by their families, who were anxious to consolidate important social bonds and to acquire bridewealth.

Once at the homestead, junior wives often found their position intolerable. Co-wives were encouraged to compete for their husband's praise and affection through hard work and obedience (Chidamahiya, Gara, Jongwe, Joto, Mhindurwa interviews); they rivaled one another for the scarce resources controlled and distributed by their husband (England 1982:12). In the case of "master farmers," the senior wife frequently acted as the supervisor of homestead labor and the manager of homestead affairs in the absence of the husband, while the junior wives were mere laborers with little input into decision-making processes. Often they were assigned the most arduous and tedious agricultural tasks, supplying the bulk of the farm labor (England 1982:12, 96). During the 1920s and 1930s, when demands made on female labor were intensified, it is not surprising that junior wives constituted a significant proportion of the female runaways.

In their efforts to escape the adversities of rural life, women naturally sought patrons who could provide them with something better. If there was any group of men who threatened the proprietary rights of Shona men over their women, it was the migrant laborers from other territories who, by force of Rhodesian law, had left their own wives at home. Countless colonial documents note that these men were particularly attractive to Shona women because they earned much higher wages than local men, having been forced to enter wage employment at an earlier date (NA 8 May 1914; 12 May 1914). According to the native commissioners, married women living in the vicinity of towns and mining centers were enticed by

> ...the advantages offered them by natives in employment at mines and other places where they can get plenty of food and clothing and on the whole more pleasure and less hard work than they have at the kraals [homesteads]. (NA 14 May 1914)

There seemed to be a consensus among government officials that foreign men employed at the mines generally offered local women "better conditions of living" than their own husbands were able to provide (NA 12 May 1914). Their views of women who sought a better life, however, were unequivocally disparaging. Writing of the foreign workers, one native commissioner commented that

> ...they are always in possession of ready cash [which] counts greatly in their favour with the local women, who are fond of presents, clothes, etc. These women, finding that the life in mine compounds is one of laziness and luxury, are easily enticed to remain and encourage their friends to do likewise. (NA 8 May 1914)

Another native commissioner, referring to the inordinate number of marital disputes in his docket of civil cases, wrote,

> In seven tenths of the hundreds of cases which have come before me, [the woman] has left her husband, not because she does not get on with him, but because the idle, licentious, pretty clothes, beer drinking, and meat food life among hundreds of grass widows or bachelors on a mine appeals to her more. (NA 15 May 1914)

The native comissioners were unanimous in their condemnation of African women who, they maintained, "only aim at lives of sloth and luxury under the protection of foreign natives at the mines or elsewhere" (NA 2 Feb. 1915). It was certainly not of concern to them that the growing poverty of peasant homesteads and the presence of thousands of "unmarried" men from other territories was a direct consequence of administration policy.

Reassertion of Control: The Unholy Alliance

Native commissioners were not the only ones who felt that African women had gotten out of hand. An African man, for example, expressed concern that because his runaway wives had had a "taste of the easy life in the compound they would not be likely to remain with him in his kraal." Nonetheless, he asked the magistrate to severely punish them:

> I want them to be put in gaol, and I want them to be put to real hard labour. Washing clothes and such like light work they laugh at. I want them to feel the pain of the prison. (NA 30 April 1923)

This man's complaint was not an isolated one. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, chiefs, headmen, and elders constantly complained to the government that their women were running away. Since government policies had created the situation, they felt that it was the government's duty to rectify it (NA 12 March 1923).

In the early 1930s, the administration established district-level "native boards" as safety valves for increasing African grievances. Composed of chiefs, headmen, and other "respectable" males, the boards were a popular forum for airing complaints against wayward women. In the Goromonzi District, a large proportion of every meeting was devoted to the problems created by women and methods for their control. Chiefs and other elders urged the government to inflict corporal punishment on runaway wives who refused to return to their husbands (NB 2 July 1931; 24 April 1934:45-46; 25 April 1934). They asked that policemen be charged with rounding up women in town locations, mining compounds, and on European farms; if these women could not produce marriage registration certificates, they should be sent back to the rural areas. Marriage certificates, in other words, should serve as a form of "pass document" for African women (England 1982:53; Ranger 1981:13; AOH/44:36; AR 1939:11; NB 4 Feb. 1932:10; 5 May 1933; 12 Oct. 1933:7; 24 April 1934:44).

While chiefs and elders charged that the government was responsible for their women's aberrant behavior, the native commissioners cast the blame on African men. They claimed that the fathers were not disciplining their daughters, nor husbands their wives. According to the native commissioner of Goromonzi,

> When your children are naughty hit them with little sticks. It is your duty to punish your daughters. No one will interfere with you if you apply a reasonable punishment. But you must not take huge sticks and hit them hard on their heads. (NB 24 April 1934:45)

This sort of punishment, he wrote later, would cure the girls of the "obvious lack of respect shown to parents and elders" (NB 25 April 1934:2). On another occasion he claimed that the men's wives ran away, "because [they] did not make them work hard." It was his contention that "idle women will get into mischief." Rather than spending cash to buy store-ground meal, the men must make their wives grind the maize by hand, as they had always done in the past. Rather than complain that they had no wagons to transport their maize to Goromonzi for sale, they should make their wives and children carry the maize on their heads (NB 12 June 1934:53, 18 June 1934:1).

Conclusion: the Great Depression and Beyond

The 1930s brought even greater strains to the peasant economy. With the onset of the Great Depression, wages fell, mines and factories closed, and men were put out of work. Grain prices also nose-dived, and white farmers, fearing African competition, pressed for the passage of protective legislation. Perhaps the most discriminatory of the ensuing laws was the Maize Control Act of 1931, which heavily favored European over African producers.

Although remuneration was small and employment difficult to obtain, wage earnings by the 1930s had surpassed the sale of agricultural produce as the most important factor in household survival.[7] Consequently, women's work diminished in social as well as economic importance, even as their work load grew. The deterioration of the reserves, as a result of over-population and hence, over-use of the land, meant that women worked harder for ever diminishing returns. Moreover, they were assuming the tasks of absent men as well as their own.

All of these factors gave further impetus to the female exodus from the rural areas. During the 1930s and the decades that followed, African women continued to seek new lives in the towns, on the mines, and on the farms. As their numbers grew slowly but steadily, African men and colonial officials embarked on new, ultimately unsuccessful strategies to stem the town-ward flow.

In conclusion, it should be noted that the reconsideration of Southern African history from the grassroots is still in its incipient stages. Yet, it is already clear that an accurate understanding of the historical process will not be possible as long as African women are ignored. Women are central to the historical mainstream, not a sideshow to it. In the case of the Goromonzi District of Southern Rhodesia, they played a vital role in the emergence of an African peasantry and enabled their households to resist, at least

temporarily, the disintegrating effects of male labor migration. The interests of household members, however, were not uniform. As the burdens shouldered by women increased and their lives became more arduous, many rejected rural life and sought new opportunities elsewhere. Far from the shadowy figures that adorn some history texts or the passive victims that languish in others, African women in the Goromonzi District were creative actors who helped shape the historical process in Southern Rhodesia.

Notes

1. The research for this paper was conducted in Zimbabwe during 1985-86 under the auspices of Fulbright-Hays and Woodrow Wilson doctoral dissertation fellowships. Unless otherwise indicated, all documents cited are housed in the National Archives of Zimbabwe. Apart from archival research, interviews were conducted in the Goromonzi and Marandellas Districts with approximately 75 elderly women and men living on Jesuit and Wesleyan Methodist mission stations and on neighboring communal lands. Most of the informants were born during the first two decades of the 20th century. An earlier version of this paper was presented to the annual meeting of the African Studies Association, held in Madison, Wisconsin, on October 30, 1986.

2. In this paper, the term "peasantry" is used according to the definition of Saul and Woods. Thus, peasants are rural people "whose ultimate security and subsistence lies in their having certain rights in land and in the labor of family members on the land but who are involved, through rights and obligations, in a wider [political and] economic system...." Accordingly, peasants may have rights and obligations in relation to a state and engage in market activities with individuals who are not characterized by the above criteria (Saul and Woods 1973:407-408).

3. Between 1899 and 1949, the district in question passed through several name changes, alternating between "Salisbury" and "Goromonzi." Even when the district as a whole was called "Salisbury," the rural areas outside the capital, in which the African reserves were located, were treated as a subdistrict (Goromonzi) under the control of an assistant native commissioner. For convenience sake, and because the African peasants lived in the Goromonzi subdistrict, the area will be referred to as "Goromonzi" throughout.

4. Commenting on the importance of lobola as a means of acquiring much-needed cash, the assistant native commissioner of Goromonzi remarked in 1932:

> One point stands out--the undoubted fact that lobola has come to be looked upon as a fair means of making money by native fathers and guardians, and the naive speeches of members of the [Native] Board to the effect that their daughters used to wear skins but now want dresses and thus cause more expense, and also that fathers rely on lobola as a means of meeting their liabilities and taxes are illuminating. (NML 10 Feb. 1932)

5. Commenting on the limited number of options open to women and the fact that many resort to temporary liaisons by sheer force of circumstances, the assistant magistrate of Shabani wrote in 1923:

> It is a fact that many native women have discovered that whereas adultery with one man is punishable, prostitution with a number of men offers a safe means of escape from an irksome marriage. (NA 21 Feb. 1923)

In a similar vein, the native commissioner of Marandellas raised the case of a woman who had been granted a divorce some years earlier, "owing to the continued cruelty of her husband." Having no other means to support herself and her children (of whom she had been given "temporary" custody), she had worked as a prostitute in various labor centers and mining compounds. She explained that she had been driven into prostitution because her ex-husband was "an idle drunkard" who had not contributed anything toward the children's maintenance. Desiring a better life for her children, she had sent all of them, both boys and girls, to prestigious mission schools, financing their education through her prostitution. (NE 13 March 1924)

6. Referring to the misuse of the Natives Adultery Punishment Ordinance in cases of young girls pledged to old men against their will, one government official wrote:

> ...the nuisance was not that adultery was rampant, but it was really that wives were breaking away from their husbands and choosing fresh ones. They were breaking away from husbands--who had perhaps half a dozen other wives--and going to younger men.
>
> This Ordinance has not been touching adultery, as the word is generally understood, but the woman who is dissatisfied with her husband whom she has been mated to against her will. (Drew 1924:55-56)

7. Arrighi notes that the relative importance of African wage earnings and produce sales as a source of cash income was reversed between the early 1900s and the late 1920s. At the turn of the century, the sale of produce accounted for some 70 percent of the total cash earnings of the African population. By 1932, produce sales accounted for less than 20 percent of their total cash income (1970:216).

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FWI Federation of Women's Institutes of Southern Rhodesia, "Report of the Standing Committee on Domestic Service, July 1930." Testimony of W. Selwyn Bazeley, E. Tawse Jollie, T.M. Thomas (CNC S235/475).

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