

CHANGES IN THE BRIDEWEALTH RELATIONSHIPS IN GWELO DISTRICT (SOUTHERN RHODESIA)
1894-1925

by

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The European conquest of Southern Rhodesia was much more than the "last of a series of invasions" of the central plateau lying between the Zambesi and the Limpopo. The first eight years of Rhodes' "Great Adventure" saw uneasy cohabitation between pioneer and African, punctuated by the invasion and defeat of Lobengula's nation and culminating in the decisive European victory of 1897 which ended two years of war against the combined forces of Shona and Ndebele and consolidated white control of the area. The period of conquest was followed by efforts to reconstruct African-European relations on a more peaceful, if less equitable, basis. The conquerors were there to stay, and presented the newly christened "Rhodesia" as a "white man's country" - a reference primarily to its climate, but influenced by the British South Africa Co's need to attract settlers to offset its mining losses. The Africans' role in all this was ambiguous, but Darwinism was cited - fashionably, if somewhat inaccurately - to support the demand that Africans should adapt if they expected to survive in this new environment.¹ They did both, with far greater success than the settlers probably anticipated, but at the expense of significant dislocation and upheaval in established political and social institutions. It was not simply a matter of chiefly power waning before the arrogantly assured control of the BSACo bureaucracy, nor of young men taking up opportunities for work in white areas beyond their chiefs' influence. The creation of a new market for African produce upset established labour patterns, even in rural areas not settled by whites, while different value-systems and mores were partly imposed by Europeans, partly adopted by Africans, as contact between these groups increased. Gender relationships, too, were caught up in this social upheaval. The ways men and women perceived their social roles, the pressures imposed on their sexual behaviour and the opportunities provided for defying gender controls were all shaken up by the changing economic conditions, the imposition of European ideology, and the creation of new social environments (especially towns and compounds) which provided the chance to migrate beyond direct paternal control. A "sexual revolution" was under way.² One of the major upheavals was the transformation of the practice of bridewealth³, which had been central to production relations prior to the European invasion.

The persistence of the practice of bridewealth exchange decades after the invasion seemed to many commentators to indicate the "traditional" nature of the African communities, particularly in the rural areas. This continuation of "tradition" was taken as evidence of an inability to transform and change in the face of fundamental social and economic disruption. However, a detailed study of bridewealth exchange in Gwelo District over the period from 1894 (when the town of Gwelo was established) through to the 1920s indicates that it was precisely through adaptations of the bridewealth system that various groups within the African community were able to protect their interests and take advantage of the new situation.

That bridewealth exchange survived at all is, in many ways, surprising. It underpinned the kinship-based labour system, which was itself under threat as waged labour systems spread through the region. Moreover, the increased opportunities which opened up for women over the first ten years of occupation, enabling them to build lives for themselves outside the lineage network, seemed to threaten any benefits from the exchange for the family which was providing the bridewealth. Additionally, a series of Native Marriage Ordinances passed by the Legislative Council of Southern Rhodesia between 1901 and 1917 laid down a strict

procedure for African marriages which seemed likely to destroy the dynamic role of bridewealth exchange within the community.⁴ The vitality of the bridewealth system was not the result⁵ of inertia but of positive intervention on the part of vested African interests.

In Gwelo District, the disruption to the bridewealth system preceded the establishment of the town in 1894. The shock waves from the mining boom, the South African War, and the general dislocation in the south over the preceding half-century had already had their impact further north, even before the European invasion. The Gwelo District was a veritable melting-pot of people leaving or trying to reach the south. The Europeans added to this disruption, creating the new social environment of the town and bringing with them a range of new technology, from the plough to the steam-train. African reactions to these developments were swift; as one pioneer trapped in the town during the First Chimurenga War of 1896 recalled:

The natives used to be afraid of the telegraph line and would not touch it in the last wars (1894), saying the devil was in it.... But a telegraph line had recently been laid to Selukwe 25 miles SE and natives had been employed on it, and had become accustomed to handling and using the materials, and thereby losing all fear of them.

After the first few days in laager the wire was cut on both side(s) of us ...⁶

The railway reached the town in 1902, bringing in its wake construction workers⁷, traders, migrant workers and whites, many of whom were accompanied by their black employees. It was in this rapidly changing environment that household heads attempted to assert their authority.

They began at a disadvantage. Their authority was vested in their control over the bridewealth system. This had been severely undermined by the decimation of family cattle-holdings during the last decade of the nineteenth century. In 1898, the Acting Assistant Native Commissioner in Gwelo District reported:

Natives in this District, seem to have a much lower sense of morality than either Zulus or Natal Kaffirs. Since rinderpest raged through the country, there has been no regular system of lobola in this District. The scale (if it may be called one) of loboba, now in use, consists of three or four native hoes or axes per wife though in many cases no lobola at all is given.⁸

To blame this solely on rinderpest was disingenuous, given that most local African cattle had been seized by the BSACo as "King's Cattle" following the defeat of Lobengula. None the less, it seems clear that the bridewealth system was destabilised by the absence of cattle.

The lack of livestock meant that crop production was the primary activity of Africans in the region at this time, and this tendency was encouraged by the opportunities to market surplus in the nearby town and mines. Some producers also undertook short periods of waged work on European farms. A further source of income was sales of beer and food to migrant workers who flocked into the area in search of waged labour on the mines and in the town. These workers posed an additional problem to household heads, in that they might encourage young women to leave the villages with them.

In the cattle-barren early years of the century, household heads responded to this threat by attempting to integrate these foreigners into their villages. This not only made economic sense - allowing increased production for the new market

- but was also preceded by the prevalence of "garidzela" marriages. These matrilineal service marriages were established in many areas of habitual cattle shortage to the south and west of Gwelo. In the 1890s, before the introduction of tax and the extensive monetization of the African economy, and especially in the absence of livestock, a garidzela marriage was the obvious arrangement for any young man wanting to establish himself with a wife. In the first decade of the twentieth century, when Europeans in the area were still shifting slowly from mining to agriculture, there was a constant demand for African produce. The garidzela system then made sound economic sense to any family head, for an extra pair of hands could reap more dividends than a bridewealth payment of cash or cattle. This was particularly true for the majority of cultivators, whose production methods were labour intensive. In 1907, a year after noting the absence of ploughs in use by local farmers, NC Stuart reported:

It may be taken for granted that the custom of allowing the future son-in-law to live at the future bride's kraal, the former becoming practically the servant (or 'son') of the girl's father, has not yet died out.¹⁰

The same year, he noted the increase of land under cultivation, producing surplus grain for the market.¹¹ Moreover, the civil court records for the mid-1910s contain a number of references to this arrangement, including the following testimony from a man married in 1903:

I paid 4 head of cattle as lobola. She came to work a garden at my kraal but lived at her guardians' kraal ... Some 4 years later her uncle Mpunza came and asked me to take back my cattle as he and his brothers wished me to come and live at their kraal and work in lieu of paying lobola. They asked me on three occasions and I finally consented and took my cattle.¹²

It seems that fathers were using their control over their daughters to attract men from elsewhere to come to settle in their villages, and abandon wage labour. The 1890s and 1900s saw a sustained undermining of the system of patrilineal marriage.

However, this use of the garidzela system could be no more than a short-term solution to the problem of maintaining control over the labour of women and junior men. The civil court case records demonstrate that the garidzela option was, for these young men, a burdensome relationship, from which they could extricate themselves by appeal to the European legal system and the provisions of the NMO. Two factors worked to undermine the garidzela system. One was the increasing need for cash in the region. The other factor was the build-up of cattle stocks, both in African and in European hands. Cash was in demand in the Gwelo District from the start of European settlement. The proximity of the town encouraged Africans to buy manufactured goods. As well as requiring cash for commodities, local men also needed to pay tax. Sale of grain went some way towards raising the money¹³, but from the start expanded food production was accompanied by periods of labour, usually on white farms. Local workers initially only undertook very short contract periods of waged work,¹⁴ up to two months in 1903 - and for most of the year they worked in the fields.¹⁴ Garidzela arrangements did not allow young men to produce in their own right and reap the cash benefits that followed. Nor did they allow migrant workers to undertake lengthy contracts without fear of losing their marriage-rights.

The build-up in cattle stocks and the availability of waged labour provided these young men with the opportunities to challenge the authority of lineage heads. Cattle were in great demand in the area, and African producers were keen to establish their holdings. In 1907, the NC could report an estimated 1400 cattle in African hands, a figure which had risen to 9500 by 1913.¹⁵

Cattle had a particular importance in Gwelo, with its excellent pasturage, particularly as the mines failed to make massive profits, and the Creamery was opened in 1914.¹⁶ It was not only Africans who were building up cattle herds. In

his report for 1915, the Mayor of the Municipality noted that:

there are more cattle in the Gwelo district than in any other district in the country, and with this fact in our favour and the advantages of our central position and railway connections, I trust that Gwelo will ultimately become the chief cattle market in the country.

Unlike in other areas of Southern Rhodesia in the 1910s, then, European holdings of cattle in Gwelo District were more significant than African holdings. The importance of cattle had become paramount, not only for African producers but also for European farmers and traders.

It was in this situation that young men were able to redefine the bridewealth relationship and gain considerable autonomy for themselves. There was a real demand for cattle during this period, and lineage heads were ready to relinquish control over the labour of junior men, preferring to accept cattle in bridewealth exchange. Before the bridewealth system was undermined in the later part of the nineteenth century, cattle had been the fundamental measure of wealth, because the bridewealth system established livestock as the medium whereby rights over women's labour and fertility had been exercised. Control over lineage labour through cattle exchange had defined the controllers of the means of production. However, by the late 1900s, cattle represented wealth in other ways. Apart from the impact of the meat and dairy markets, oxen were in great demand. They were essential for transport, but, for some years, were not permitted to be imported from the south. In addition, draught oxen were required for ploughing. With the introduction of the plough, the use of wagons to transfer products to markets, and the opening of the Creamery, cattle emerged as an integral part of the production process itself, routinely exchanged as such by Europeans.

In order to consolidate the privileged position in the production process, lineage heads had to regain control over cattle. The bridewealth system was tailor-made to enable them to build up their livestock holdings. However, the "cattle beget children" nature of bridewealth exchange had been altered fundamentally by the commoditization of cattle and the influx of cash into the economy. Whereas before cattle had been circulated almost exclusively as part of bridewealth payments, now the sale of cattle was the most important industry in the region. This exchange of cattle in other contexts began to change the significance of bridewealth payments, and allowed them to be seen outside their original context. Rather than marking a return to "tradition", the attempts by lineage heads to secure control over cattle through bridewealth exchange demonstrate the range of new strategies and manipulations by which they tried to refashion the system to their advantage.

One strategy whereby lineage heads could attempt to ensure cattle payments was to refuse to allow the registration of the marriage under the provisions of the NMOs until a significant portion of the bridewealth had been paid. As criminal sanctions could be brought to bear on those who did not register, there was some power to this sanction. More importantly, however, the nature of the exchange itself allowed cattle to be accumulated. Oxen and other livestock could be demanded in settlement of damages or bridewealth payments.¹⁸ Additionally, cash payments could be converted to cattle. As one of my informants commented on this period:

It did not bother parents to be paid in money, if that was what was agreed. They could always buy cattle with the money.¹⁹

For those household heads who were swift to benefit from the European markets, their position could be consolidated by using this transformed bridewealth system to accumulate cattle.

However, this process of rural differentiation, and the relative advantage of household heads over unmarried men, depended upon the senior men being able to maintain a tight control over both women and cattle. As I have demonstrated elsewhere, their control over women was seriously undermined by the early 1910s, and

it was only by household heads forming an alliance with the European authorities that African women's autonomy was curtailed in the latter half of the decade.²⁰ Equally threatened, however, was their control over cattle, and it was this crisis which finally allowed junior men to defy lineage control.

The existence of an open market in cattle profoundly undermined the sanctions which lineage heads could bring to bear on junior men, for they were no longer dependent on the family herd to raise their bridewealth. The ready availability of waged work provided most unmarried men with the opportunity to buy cattle or livestock for themselves. Moreover, cash was increasingly acceptable as a form of payment, as an initial payment if not in full. Many young men coming into the area from far away broke with parental control completely. However, unmarried men from within the area were also enjoying an unprecedented independence from their lineage heads. On the one hand, they were able to raise bridewealth for themselves, without entering into a patronage relationship with the lineage head. On the other hand, moreover, they had access to alternative sources of patronage even where they were not able to raise bridewealth or damages for themselves. White employers were ready to take over the patronage role of lineage heads, even to the point of paying damages. For example, on 26 April 1912, Robert Twilley, a respected local farmer, wrote to the NC, Gwelo:

I have arranged with Pete that if it is your ruling that he is liable to Mguide for a cow as the price of his wife, as I believe they agreed, that I have a cow here which is just dry from her last calf - this I agree to allow Pete to hand over in settlement in the event of your decision being in favour of Mguide.²¹

Under such circumstances, it was impossible for lineage heads to maintain a monopoly over cattle. While their control over women was also weak, they had no means of attracting labour to their households. The period of prosperity for household heads was shaken by their inability to maintain their levels of production in the absence of ready access to young male labour. While some families were able to maintain the production of a surplus, and to adopt new cultivation methods, others were finding it hard even to feed themselves. The Europeans compounded this process of rural differentiation by seizing land from African cultivators and pushing them out into "Reserves", further away from the markets.

In the late 1900s and early 1910s, then, a process of rural differentiation was accompanied by a struggle between junior men and household heads, both eager to take advantage of the new conditions. Access to women and cattle was at the heart of this struggle, which was fought out through manipulations of the bridewealth system. Those who could gain access to women and cattle were well placed to exploit the possibilities of producing surplus grain for the European market. The commoditization of cattle and the proximity of markets and employers undermined the advantaged position of established African producers. The chiefly monopoly over trade had been shattered by the presence of European markets, while the chance to raise bridewealth through waged work offered unprecedented independence to junior men, who no longer needed to work for the lineage heads.

The outbreak of the First World War dramatically changed the situation in Gwelo District. The prosperity of the preceding five years was undermined from all quarters. Prices of manufactured goods rose dramatically, at a rate not matched by the price of grain. Demand for labour fell as Europeans were hit by bankruptcy and war, and wages on the farms - where the majority of local workers found work - began to drop. Many white farmers introduced labour clauses into their tenancy agreements, thereby depriving their tenants of accessible waged work. In 1915 these problems were compounded by crop failure, followed by drought in 1916 and 1917. This hit particularly hard as so many producers had come to depend upon producing a surplus to meet their cash needs.²²

Gwelo was unusual in that, from the start, local peasant production had been accompanied by waged labour. The crisis of the war years undermined both these sources of cash. In 1916, the NC reported that:

For a short period there was a slight shortage (of labour). Early in the year there was an excess and this caused a fall in wages. A number of natives returned to their kraals rather than work at lower rates than those to which they had been accustomed.²³

The depression was to continue for the next decade.

Food shortages and rising commodity prices exacerbated the wealth differences between African producers. The wealthier producers retrenched. There was a very marked increase in investment in ploughs between 1914 and 1917, from an estimated 65 to an estimated 175. By 1921, just before the acute drought and slump of 1922, it was estimated by the NC that there were 250 ploughs in use in the District.²⁴ For most producers, however, it was increasingly difficult to compete with the local European producers. Many farmers moved African cultivators off their land. Moreover, an outbreak of East Coast Fever in 1912 had resulted in restrictions on cattle movement. These were quickly suspended in the Gwelo District, as cattle sales were so vital to the European economy there.²⁵ However, while they were in force, European farmers were able to impose new conditions on their tenants, which the tenants could not resist by moving to unalienated land without losing their cattle. The imposition of compulsory dipping and dipping fees in 1914 added a new cash obligation to African budgets. Also, during this time African producers were being moved into Reserves, as their land was seized by the Native Reserves Commission. In particular, land near to market centres was alienated.²⁶ The next ten years saw slump, crises of production and acute shortages of cash in the Reserves and unalienated areas of the District. Coupled with crop failures, the late 1910s saw the decline of grain surplus production, as crops were consumed rather than sold. Cattle prices also plummeted, and herds were allowed to build up in the hope that prices would recover.²⁷ The incentive to work for wages was low. Interaction with the cash economy decreased. For the first time, rent and tax arrears began to build up. Dipping fees became an increasing financial burden as herds grew.²⁸ Moreover, the price of commodities rose sharply from the onset of the First World War. Many goods which had been integrated into the African community as essential items became expensive luxuries. The annual report for the District in 1920 recorded:

The high cost of all goods has, to a certain extent, induced the natives to attempt manufacturing several articles previously purchased by them. In Lower Gwelo Reserve quite good hats are being made from palm leaves, native made pipes are also replacing the imported article, and skins are being more generally used in the place of blankets.²⁹

In the face of this crisis, there had to be some restructuring of production relationships in the rural hinterland.

Household heads had to find a strategy which enabled them to resist this progressive impoverishment. Many young people were forced off the land in search of permanent waged work. Others neglected waged work and the cash economy in order to work full time nurturing poor crops. Household heads required their own strategy of adaptation if they were to maintain their position in the production process. As before, those with control over women and over the bridewealth system held an advantage over those who did not. The restrictions upon women's independence were consolidated by the promulgation of the Natives Adultery Punishment Ordinance in 1916, the outcome of years of pressure upon the European administration by chiefs and headmen.³⁰ Once again, household heads were able to manipulate and transform the "traditional" bridewealth system in order to maintain their authority in the changed circumstances. By reasserting their control over women and restricting their movements, senior men were able to ensure that young men would be forced to maintain their links with the rural hinterland, even if they were no longer involved in production there. Moreover, by changing the content of the payment, they were able to ensure a flow of hard currency into the villages.

For by this time it was neither service nor cattle that was required by senior men, but cash. As household heads, they were liable for tax payments, and so had a particular need for money. Furthermore, even those producers who had invested in ploughs, and were still able to produce a surplus for the market, needed cash rather than cattle, to invest in good draught animals and grade bulls. Demanding cash as bridewealth ensured that money would flow into the rural economy. Furthermore, even where cattle was offered, parents would prefer them to be converted into cash. For poorer families, a single one-off cash payment could be demanded, simply in order to meet immediate cash needs: tax, rents, dipping fees, and, in some years, to buy grain.³¹ This conversion of cattle into cash was not simply the substitution of a comparable medium of exchange for bridewealth purposes. Such bridewealth exchanges bore a strong surface similarity to the commodity transactions of the market place. However, by these transformations of the bridewealth system, household heads were able to cushion themselves from the worst effects of the slump and re-establish their authority over women and junior men.

In the course of responding to changing social and economic conditions over the course of a generation of European occupation in Gwelo district, African producers profoundly transformed the bridewealth system. For the first decade, bride-service was common. By the late 1900s, however, the bridewealth system was being used by lineage heads to accumulate cattle. The open market in cattle, combined with the access to cash through wages and produce sales, rapidly undermined this strategy. However, by the 1920s, slump and poor crops led to a demand for cash payments, and lineage heads were able to protect their position by exploiting this flow of cash back into the rural areas. Far from being a fossilized "tradition", the system of bridewealth exchange was at the centre of a dynamic struggle within the African community, and was itself radically altered in the process.

- 1 See, for example, the letter from Sir Harry Johnstone to Lord Salisbury, 31 May 1897, cited in P Mason, Birth of a Dilemma (1958), p 214:
In districts where ... climatic conditions encourage true colonization, there undoubtedly the weakest must go to the wall and the black man must pay for the unprogressive turn his ancestors took some thousand years ago.
- 2 The term "bridewealth" is used throughout, in preference to the Shona word "roora" or the Ndebele word "lobola", in recognition of the multi-lingual nature of Gwela District.
- 3 For studies discussing the importance of bridewealth systems in nineteenth-century southern African social systems, see, for example: P Harries, "Kinship, Ideology and the Nature of Pre-Colonial Labour Migration", and J Guy, "The Destruction and Reconstruction of Zulu Society", both in S Marks and R Rathbone (eds), Industrialisation and Social Change in South Africa (1982); C Murray, Families Divided: the impact of migrant labour in Lesotho (1982); and W Beinart, The Political Economy of Pondoland 1860-1930 (1982).
- 4 D Jeater, "The Native Marriage Ordinances 1901-1917" (unpublished, 1987).
- 5 Cf Colin Murray's remarks on Lesotho (op. cit.):
"traditional social relations of hierarchy or of kinship should not be analysed as surviving elements, more or less functional to the interests of capital, of a non-capitalist or pre-capitalist mode of production ... Rather, the persistence or vitality of traditional social relationships should be analysed as an integral aspect of more or less subtly conflicting processes of transformation.
- 6 Peter Falk, "The Gwelo Laager, 1896" in Rhodesiana 22 (1970).
- 7 See the work of Jon Lunn on the railway construction workers.
- 8 NAZ NB/6/1, 1898. Emphasis in original.
- 9 Mr Gielgud, NC Sebungwe, "Report on the Shankwi Custom of Galizela or Garuzela", 17 September 1906. NAZ N3/17/4.2.1.
Responses to CNC circular letter No K1595/1916. NAZ N3/17/1.
H Hemans, Acting NC Gokwe, to SN Gwelo, 10 November 1916: "Garidzela as an offence under Ordinance No 15 of 1912" and related correspondence between P Nielsen, NC Gokwe, and SN Gwelo. NAZ N3/17/4.2.1.
- 10 NAZ NB/6/1, 1907 (first report of that year).
- 11 Ibid., 1907 (second report of that year).
- 12 NAZ NGA 4/1/1, case number 2/1915, 19 April 1915.
- 13 NAZ NB/6/1, 1907 (second report)
- 14 Ibid., 1903.
- 15 Ibid., 1907 (second report); Report of the Chief Native Commissioner, 1913. Regardless of the accuracy of the figures, this clearly indicates a considerable increase.
- 16 "Gwelo: the Steady Growth of the Midland Capital" in Rhodesian Annual 1913-1914, p 127.
- 17 NAZ S/GW 244. Minutes of His Worship the Mayor, Gwelo Municipality.
- 18 See the account of civil court case No 6/1913, discussed in my extended version of this paper, "Bridewealth and Conflict in the African Community 1894-1920s" (unpublished, 1987).

- 19 Interview with Ambuya Mangwenya, 16 March 1987, Ascot Township, Gweru.
- 20 D Jeater, Mothers & Prostitutes: the reconstruction of African gender relationships in Southern Rhodesia 1898-1923 (1985).
- 21 NAZ NGA 4/1/1, case number 10/1912, 2 May 1912.
- 22 NAZ N9/1/17; N9/1/18; N9/1/19; N9/1/20.
- 23 NAZ N9/1/19.
- 24 Report of the Chief Native Commissioner, 1914, 1917, 1921.
- 25 NAZ S/GW 244, 1920.
- 26 R Palmer, "The Agricultural History of Rhodesia", in Palmer & Parsons (eds), The Roots of Rural Poverty (1977).
- 27 In his report for 1917, NAZ N9/1/20, the NC commented: "... the natives weathered the lean years remarkably well and without depleting to any appreciable extent their holdings in cattle."
- 28 Ibid. Covering review of the annual reports of the NCs of Matabeleland for 1921, S Jackson, SN, Gwelo.
- 29 NAZ N9/1/23.
- 30 Jeater, op. cit.
- 31 See extended discussion on the acquisition and uses of cash payments in "Bridewealth and Conflict in the African Community 1894-1920s".