

ADMINISTRATORS' KNOWLEDGE AND STATE
CONTROL IN COLONIAL ZIMBABWE:
THE INVENTION OF THE RURAL–URBAN
DIVIDE IN BUHERA DISTRICT, 1912–80

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ABSTRACT: The power of the state to impose its self-produced categories of thought poses a major problem to Zimbabwe historiography which has often taken as unproblematic the relation between knowledge about, and control over, African societies as presented in the state's archives. This article challenges this hegemonic view of the colonial state, presenting an alternative interpretation of administrative reports on Buhera district. It shows how Buhera society became increasingly represented as the traditional, rural end of a rural-urban divide in colonial policy discourse, while, in reality, social life in the area became intimately linked to the urban economy of Salisbury.

KEY WORDS: Zimbabwe, colonial, migration, development, labour.

Dr Holleman spoke well and clearly [to the African welfare workers], and not at all in the patronizing way that is so common to white officials ... 'Now gentlemen,' he said ... and I could see how the listening Africans liked his politeness ... 'The theme of my lecture, gentlemen, is the community. The African community. And the basis of community, which is the tribe.' And with this he drew on the blackboard a circle – the tribe. 'And the unit of the tribe is the kinship group.' And with that he divided his circle into neat portions – the kinship groups. 'And what gives the feeling of homogeneity in the village is the way these units are shaped.' The Africans were listening very intently, and I was, too; for it was difficult for me to see the tribe as a circle and the kinship groups as segments of it. Dr Holleman was explaining how these units were broken into and scattered by the young men going into the towns to work ... 'But [when] the fabric of the tribe is broken, gentlemen, the fabric of the community is destroyed; and it is you who must rebuild it'.¹

DORIS Lessing's brilliant irony brings out the theme of this paper, the role of the state in colonial Zimbabwe.² Confident that they knew 'African society',³ white officials saw it as their task to guide it into the modern world. By capturing it in symbols such as the 'segmented circle', they categorized African social life into an intelligible and malleable social order. This power of the state and its representatives to impose their self-produced categories of thought⁴ poses a major problem for the historiography of Zimbabwe,

¹ D. Lessing, *Going Home* (London, 1996), 151–3 (originally published in 1957).

² The research for this article was funded by the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (Wotro).

³ 'African' and 'African society' are, of course, highly problematic terms for they homogenize numerous different peoples in and beyond Zimbabwe's borders. In this article they are used in a general sense, to denote the indigenous peoples of Zimbabwe.

⁴ P. Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action* (Cambridge, 1998), 35.

which has long attributed to the state a dominant role in directing social change. This is noticeable in the perspective of Holleman, as Doris Lessing so clearly illustrates. Here the state features as an agent of modernization, guiding Africans' incorporation into an urbanized, industrial society. Equally, a similar causality between policies and outcomes can be found in more critical materialist analysis. For instance, historians like Arrighi, Phimister and Palmer have perceived the Southern Rhodesian state as the architect of an institutional framework which transformed African peasant societies into exploited proletarians in a modern, class-based society.⁵ Hence, although representing opposing historiographical positions on the state, both perspectives present a hegemonic view of the state that is often based on an uncritical adoption of its categories of thought.

More recently, the hegemonic view of the state in colonial Africa has been deflated by authors who have pointed to the conflicting interests within colonial administrations, their limited resources and the contradictory processes that shaped them.⁶ The present article, which also highlights the limitations of the colonial state's administrative capacity, does not, however, focus on factionalism within the state apparatus. Instead it focuses on administrators' production of knowledge on African societies and its consequences for state control over those societies. It may seem paradoxical to challenge a hegemonic view of the colonial state and its categories of thought with sources on an area that can be considered rather untypical of Zimbabwe's colonial history. For, unlike many other districts, Buhera (Figure 1) was never the scene of large-scale land alienation and eviction of Africans from their ancestral lands. As white settlers had little interest in its dry and sandy soils, the area comprising present day Buhera was left to its inhabitants and became known as the southern Sabi Native Reserve.⁷ Sources on this district-sized 'native reserve' are therefore largely limited to the settler state's records. Nevertheless, these records are of interest to historical inquiry for two reasons. First, they allow for a different interpretation of the usual role of state in development. At one level, it may be seen that the reports of the administrators in Buhera district often merely reflect the shifting biases in the state's policies towards Africans, and the

⁵ G. Arrighi, 'Labour supplies in historical perspective: a study of the proletarianisation of the African peasantry in Rhodesia', and G. Arrighi, 'The political economy of Rhodesia', in G. Arrighi and J. S. Saul (eds.), *Essays on the Political Economy of Africa* (Nairobi, 1973), 180–234, 336–77; I. Phimister, *An Economic and Social History of Zimbabwe, 1890–1948: Capital Accumulation and Class Struggle* (London, 1988); R. H. Palmer, *Land and Racial Domination in Rhodesia* (London, 1977).

⁶ S. Berry, 'Hegemony on a shoestring: indirect rule and access to agricultural land', *Africa*, 62 (1992), 328; B. Berman and J. Lonsdale, *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa* (London, 1992).

⁷ On the formation of African Reserves, see Palmer, *Land*, 57–60. Formed in 1895, the Sabi district became part of the Charter district in 1899. In 1912, a sub-station of the Charter district office at The Range was opened at Buhera, in what was by then already known as the Sabi Native Reserve: NC Charter annual report 1912, National Archives of Zimbabwe (hereafter NAZ) N9/1/15; T. W. Baxter (ed.), *Guide to the Public Archives of Rhodesia, Vol. 1: 1890–1923* (Salisbury, 1969), 99. In 1943, the Sabi reserve was made a full Native Commissioner's district, and in 1945 the southern part became an independent district, known as Buhera district: NC Buhera annual reports 1944 and 1945, NAZ, S1563.

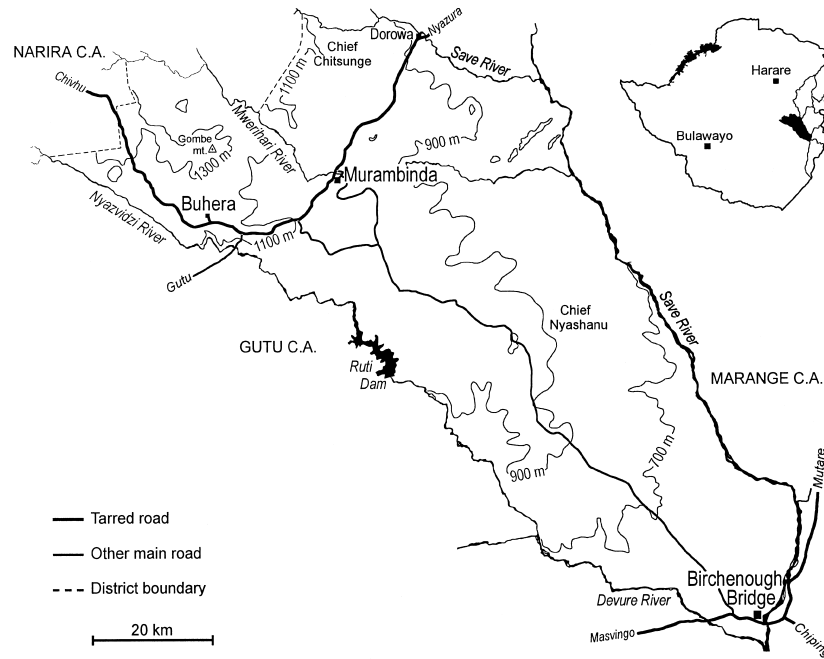


Fig. 1. Buhera district, 2000.

subsequent categories of thought which these preoccupations elicited. Yet, while following these biases in state policies, the analysis presented in this paper will reveal that this archival material also contains observations from local-level administrators which challenge the order and (illusion of) control which these same administrators presented in their reports. Thus, the paper aims to build an alternative interpretation that may stimulate the development of alternative views on the impact of the settler state's policies in other areas.

Second, the case of Buhera district is of interest as a powerful image of 'traditional African society' was modelled on it in the 1950s. J. F. Holleman, who selected the area for an anthropological inquiry in 1945, took the inhabitants of Buhera as a people 'whose traditional way of life had not yet been profoundly influenced by regular contact with Western society'.⁸ His representation of Buhera as a traditional, closed rural society, was well-attuned to the categories of thought of colonial policy discourse in the 1950s. Preoccupied with agricultural modernisation and African urbanisation, the settler state's policies increasingly built upon a classification of African social life in terms of a rural-urban dichotomy. Holleman's book, *Shona Customary Law*, which became influential in circles of the Southern Rhodesian administration, represented Buhera social life along these lines – as the traditional, rural side of this rural-urban divide. However, as the historical analysis presented in this paper will reveal, this representation of Buhera district as a traditional, closed rural society is incorrect. Already in the early colonial period – and probably long before – the Buhera people were strongly in-

⁸ J. F. Holleman, *African Interlude* (Cape Town, 1958), 1.

incorporated into wider networks of economic exchange. When, in the 1950s, urban centres became increasingly important destinations for migrants seeking work outside their home district, Buhera social life more and more contradicted its representation as the rural end of a rural–urban divide. Hence, this paper argues that the rural–urban divide constituted another colonial invention of tradition,⁹ albeit largely an imaginary one – situated in the minds of colonial administrators and an anthropologist.

Building upon the historical analysis of Buhera district, the paper concludes with an exploration of the hegemonic view of the colonial state in Zimbabwean historiography. It suggests that the scholarly focus on areas that experienced dramatic confrontations between European settlers and administrators and Africans – areas for which sufficient and well-classified archival material is available – goes a long way to explain why this dominant role was attributed to the settler state.¹⁰ However a focus on areas which were more marginally incorporated into the colonial state may help us not only to develop a more regionally differentiated view of the role of the colonial state, but also enable us to look differently at African opposition to the colonial state.

COLONIAL ADMINISTRATORS AND THE MOBILISATION OF LABOUR, 1898–1926

The early colonial history of Shona-speaking Zimbabwe has generally been described as a period of peasant prosperity, preceding a decline in independent African farming. Colonization and the emerging white mining industry led to an expansion of markets for both labour and agricultural products such as grain and cattle. African societies actively responded to these new market opportunities, which coincided with the state's imposition of taxes that forced people to generate a cash income.¹¹ A preoccupation with labour mobilization, taxation and the systematic supply of forced labour to white settlers' mines and farms were the two prongs in the state's policy towards Africans. A common assumption in the historical analyses of this period seems to be that Africans' participation in markets for agricultural produce and labour was mutually exclusive and followed one another chronologically. As Palmer has put it, 'it proved possible, and obviously preferable, for the Shona to meet their tax commitments through the sale of foodstuffs and cattle rather than by becoming migrant labourers'.¹² From 1908 onwards, however, the state-subsidised expansion of European agriculture increased competition in agricultural markets, and independent

⁹ T. Ranger, 'The invention of tradition in colonial Africa', in E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983), 211–62; Ranger, 'Migrants, missionaries and the Manyika: the invention of ethnicity in Zimbabwe', in L. Vail (ed.), *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa* (London, 1989), 118–50.

¹⁰ For instance, while it was the absence of settler interference that made the area and its peoples of interest to the anthropologist J. F. Holleman, the dearth of archival sources for Buhera probably explains the limited interest in the area by archive-oriented historians.

¹¹ Phimister, 'Peasant production and underdevelopment in Southern Rhodesia', *African Affairs*, 73(1974), 217–28; Palmer, 'The agricultural history of Rhodesia', in R. Palmer and N. Parsons (eds.), *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa* (London, 1977), 221–54; Palmer, *Land*, 71–3.

¹² *Ibid.* 71.

African farming is seen as entering an irreversible process of decline, in which state intervention is perceived as having been a major force.¹³

Labour mobilization in Buhera sub-district

Based on the flawed assumption that colonialism and capitalism spread simultaneously, the perspective on Zimbabwe's early colonial history outlined above views African participation in labour markets as state-induced.¹⁴ However, Africans' participation in labour markets was probably neither new, nor much controlled by the small, newly-established administration.¹⁵ Letters of the Native Commissioner (NC) of Charter district show that even before the turn of the century, inhabitants of the southern Sabi reserve – where there was no significant internal demand for labour – had taken part in the movement of labour between districts. Although compulsion may have played its part in mobilizing the Buherans, the NC Charter was confident that the supply of African labour could also be generated by means of taxation.¹⁶

Gaining control over Africans' labour was also a major motivation for the establishment of a sub-station in the remote southern part of Sabi native-reserve.¹⁷ And, like elsewhere, labour issues and taxation became recurrent subjects in the reports of the Assistant Native Commissioner (ANC) Buhera, whose sub-station was opened in 1912. Yet, the order presented in the reports of successive administrators conceals both their limited understanding of, and control over, the Buhera peoples and their labour movements.

As Figure 2 suggests, state control over the southern Sabi reserve was limited in the early colonial period. Scattered water sources and the few roads towards the south-eastern end of the sub-district seriously hampered the surveillance of its inhabitants.¹⁸ As a consequence, both collecting

¹³ Phimister, *Economic and Social History*, 50; Palmer, *Land*, 71. A similar perspective on the peasantry of South Africa has been developed in C. Bundy, *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry* (London, 1979).

¹⁴ As Wolf has argued, African societies were incorporated in wider networks of economic exchange long before the colonial era: E. R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley, 1982). Although beyond the scope of this paper, it is likely that Buhera labour migration also preceded the establishment of settler control.

¹⁵ To be sure, with the establishment of the Rhodesia Native Labour Bureau (RNLB) in 1903, the colonial state institutionalized forced labour (*chibaro*). However, the impact of this labour policy on local African societies was limited as the vast majority of the African workers involved originated from outside Southern Rhodesia. For an analysis of the function and operation of the RNLB and its forced labour, see C. van Onselen, *Chibaro: African Mine Labour in Southern Rhodesia, 1900–1933* (London, 1976).

¹⁶ NC Charter: letters 1898–1999, NAZ NSK 1/1/1. NC Charter report on 1900 and 1901, NAZ NSK 1/1/2.

¹⁷ 'This would facilitate the work of the district and obviate long journeys for the natives in connection with the [working] Pass and other regulations', he argued. NC Charter to CNC dd.5 Aug. 1909, NAZ N3/8/4. In 1912, an Assistant Native Commissioner (ANC) was appointed and stationed at a new sub-office at Buhera (see Figures 1 and 2). NC Charter annual report 1912, NAZ N9/1/15; Baxter, *Guide*, 99.

¹⁸ See A. S. Cripps, *The Sabi Reserve: A Southern Rhodesia Native Problem* (Oxford, 1920), 29–33. This problem persisted even in the 1950s. 'The Mwerihari is a big river and during the rain it cannot be crossed for months on end. This means that a third of the district is cut off from the station of Buhera for four to six months on end. This makes

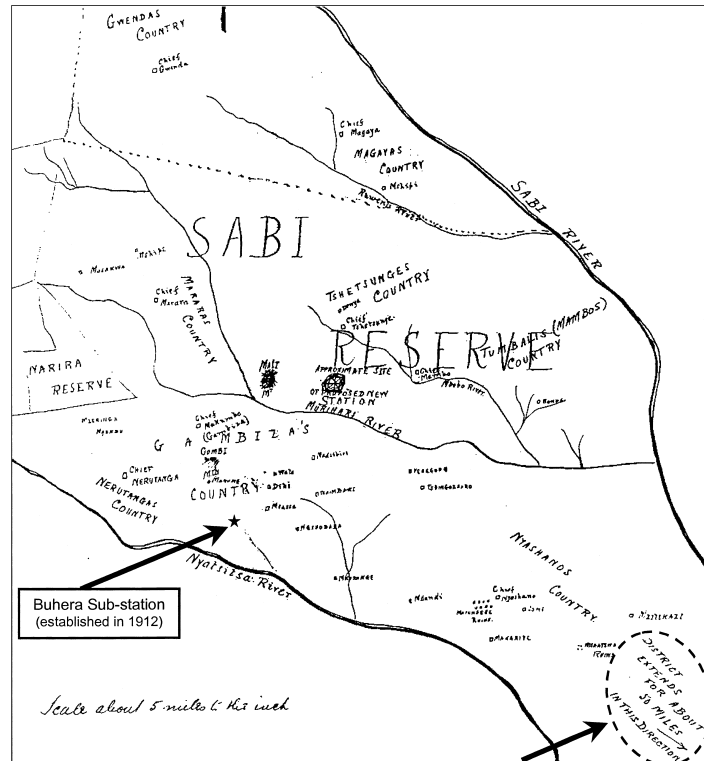


Fig. 2. Sketch map of Buhera sub-district, 1911. From Charter district: letters and diary entries, 1896–1909, NAZ NSK 1/1/2.

revenue and establishing the number of men liable for tax must have been difficult. Tax patrols were infrequent and could be evaded relatively easily, enabling people to resist tax pressure for some time. Furthermore, village headmen, who were responsible for tax collection, occupied an intermediary position between their people and the administration. They could misreport the number of men eligible for tax, the ones present or the tax due. Some men may have managed to evade the tax system altogether, thus escaping from the administration's (and historians') view. Rather than constituting an attempt to meet one's tax obligations, moving away from home may sometimes have served to escape tax collection, as 1920s Annual Reports reveal. Thus, in 1922 it was noted, 'Arrear tax is mostly owed by those who remain away at work. In many cases they remain undetected for years until they lose their registration certificates'.¹⁹ And again, in 1924, 'Very often it is reported that young men have gone out to work and subsequently it is found that they are visiting or loafing in other parts [of the district]'.²⁰

Nevertheless, Buhera district reports of the early colonial period con-

consistent supervision of any development and administration in general, in the country North of the Mwerihari river, impossible at the most important time of the year'. NC Buhera annual report 1952, NAZ S2403/2681.

¹⁹ ANC Buhera annual report 1922, NAZ N9/1/25.

²⁰ NC Charter annual report 1924, NAZ S235/502.

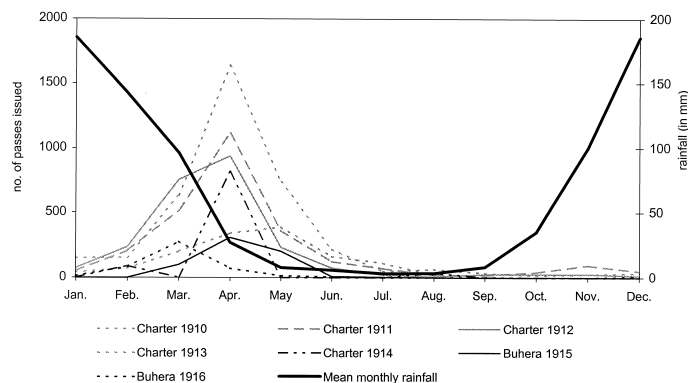


Fig. 3. Mean monthly rainfall and working passes issued at Charter district office and Buhera sub-office, 1910–16.

tinuously present ‘the necessity of paying tax ... [as] about the only reason why natives work’.²¹ However, this direct link between taxation and labour migration is challenged by other observations of the same colonial administrators. They also noted that ‘[m]ost of those who took out [working] passes went in search of work during the month of March’,²² and that many migrants ‘returned during October and November to plant their crops’ (Figure 3).²³ The resulting seasonal fluctuation in the labour supply suggests that the labour-mobilizing capacity of the tax instrument was limited. Rather than being a response to the state’s tax demands, the labour supply was a function of changing labour demands in African agriculture.²⁴

Of course, African agriculture itself presented the major threat to the presupposed relation between taxation and labour supply in colonial policy discourse. As has been well documented in the literature, African farmers’ market production could easily generate the cash required for the payment of tax.²⁵ Nevertheless, in Buhera, labour migration already constituted an

²¹ ANC Buhera annual report 1922, NAZ N9/1/25.

²² ANC Buhera annual report 1916, NAZ N9/1/19. Seasonal fluctuations in the labour supply were common for Southern Rhodesia as a whole. See: CNC review of Sept. 1915, NAZ N9/4/29.

²³ ANC Buhera annual report 1925, NAZ S235/503. See also ANC Buhera monthly report Dec. 1915, NAZ N9/4/29. A similar perspective on workers’ motivations to seek employment can be found in the then popular concept of the ‘target worker’. Based on the prevailing idea that the more a worker is paid, the shorter he will work for a wage, this concept portrayed African workers as irrational economic actors and was used to justify a low-wage structure. See van Onselen, ‘Black workers in Central African industry: A critical essay on the historiography and sociology of Rhodesia’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 1 (1975), 237–8.

²⁴ The 1910–14 figures for Charter district incorporate the working passes issued to inhabitants of the Buhera sub-district. Mean monthly rainfall at Buhera was calculated on the basis of rainfall figures for the period 1915–95, obtained from the Meteorological Department, Harare. Working pass statistics originate from the NC Charter and ANC Buhera monthly and annual reports 1910–1916, NAZ N9/4/23–31 and NAZ N9/1/19.

²⁵ Palmer, ‘Agricultural history’; Phimister, ‘Peasant production’; Ranger, *Peasant Consciousness and Guerrilla War in Zimbabwe: A Comparative Study* (London, 1985), 19–49; Ranger, *Voices from the Rocks: Nature, Culture and History in the Matopos Hills of Zimbabwe* (Oxford, 1999); Arrighi, ‘Labour supplies’, 208.

important element of peoples' livelihoods in the early colonial period (and probably before). But before exploring this, let us briefly consider the administrators' understanding and representation of Buhera's involvement in the migrant labour economy. Their reports, which present statistics on working passes issued, suggest an understanding of, and control over, the migration process that was largely non-existent. Other observations of district administrators, scattered through their reports, can illuminate this. First, the working pass statistics did not adequately reflect the number of job-seekers involved, nor the length of their absence. Indeed, the administrators sometimes recognized that their own figures were largely an administrative construct:

From a statistical point of view the figure of 469 [passes issued] may be disregarded, as it does not give a true idea of the number of natives who left the Reserve to work. They are not compelled to take out passes to seek work and many go without them.²⁶

Still, unreliable or not, the working pass statistics featured in the administrators' reports up to the mid 1920s.

A second problem with the statistical order presented in the Native Commissioners' reports is that these cannot cope with the complex ways in which labour migration practices linked Buhera society to the wider economy. Migrant workers' adjusting their departure and return to the agricultural calendar gives the false impression that they all belonged to a single category of seasonal migrants. But, here again, other remarks in the colonial reports allow for a different interpretation. For instance, the ANC Buhera's complaint of 1916 that 'natives more or less in permanent employment outside the Reserve ... are among the worst tax payers', suggests that not all migrant workers returned home for the agricultural season.²⁷ Apparently, Buhera people were also involved in migration practices which were other than seasonal. Reports from the early 1920s are revealing in this respect. Besides seasonal migration to nearby labour centres, they mention that numerous migrant workers were going further afield for longer periods of time. Different patterns of labour migration could co-exist:

Some small proportion of the workers finds employment on the neighbouring farms, a very large number wends its way to the larger labour centres of the country and yet others travel South to the Northern parts of the Union of South Africa ... Many of this last category, initially at any rate, seem to engage themselves through the medium of labour organisation as farm workers for a long period at a wage rate of about 30/- a month.²⁸

This observed diversity in migration patterns is relevant for two reasons.

²⁶ ANC Buhera annual report 1916, NAZ N9/1/19. Similar remarks about the inadequacy of these statistics can be found in ANC Buhera monthly report Sept. 1916, NAZ N9/4/31 and the annual reports of the NC Charter, 1912–24. See NAZ N9/1/15–22; NAZ S235/502.

²⁷ ANC Buhera annual report 1916, NAZ N9/1/19. The Native Commissioner of Charter district – of which Buhera was a sub-district – already writes about longer-term labour migration before the ANC Buhera. Another indication of the importance of longer-term migration from the area is the system of Tax Advice Forms (TAF) discussed below.

²⁸ The wages obtainable on Southern Rhodesian farms were, according to the ANC Buhera, far lower. ANC Buhera annual report 1926, NAZ S235/504.

First, it points to yet another weakness in the presupposed relation between taxation and labour supply in colonial policy discourse. Colonial state policy was unable to channel the movement of local African labourers.²⁹ Rather than regulating a national labour market, the Southern Rhodesian state operated in the wider regional labour economy of Southern Africa.³⁰ Second, the observations of the ANC Buhera on the different migration practices and knowledge of labour market migrants direct us to the role played by migrant workers themselves. Rather than being subsumed under state regulation, Buhera migrants were active participants in the labour market, giving shape to different migration trajectories – differentiated according to wages obtainable, distance from home and length of absence.

Labour migrants and Buhera livelihoods

If, as argued here, the colonial officials' portrayal of tax-labour order exaggerates state control over African labour, how must we understand Buhera peoples' involvement in labour migration? After all, to recall Palmer's argument, Africans preferred 'to meet their tax obligations through the sale of foodstuffs and cattle rather than by becoming migrant labourers'.³¹ Yet, as the NC Charter observed in 1912, this was not merely an issue of either or, but a combination of labour migration and agricultural production:

There is a gradual decrease in the number of natives going out to work. This may be assigned to two reasons. (1) A large number remain in continuous service for periods of 12 months and more and do not figure in the returns as having gone out. (2) Many have earned sufficient to last them for some years to come. Others are well off in stock and realize good prices.³²

For the inhabitants of Buhera sub-district, especially those in its remote and dry south-eastern end, market production meant predominantly the sale of cattle:

Tax is coming in exceptionally badly. The excuse put forward by the natives is that buyers of stock – large and small – have not been so numerous as in previous years ... It is unfortunate the Chiefs Nyashano's and Mambo's districts are closed to the exit of cattle [because of an outbreak of disease in a bordering district] as the natives of these parts depend a lot on the sale of stock to secure their tax money.³³

The above remarks of the ANC Buhera suggest that changes in the cattle market and veterinary restrictions on the movement of cattle from the area influenced Buhera people's income-generating capacity.³⁴ Equally, it was surely not always tax pressure that made people sell their cattle. In the drought-prone southern Sabi reserve, cattle were primarily used as an

²⁹ This inability to channel the labour supply is also evident in the recurrent labour shortages within the Charter district in the 1910s and 1920s. The poor conditions of service (wages) on European farms encouraged African workers to seek employment further afield. NC Charter annual reports 1913, 1917, 1918, 1924, NAZ N9/1/16, N9/1/20-21, S235/502.

³⁰ B. Paton, *Labour Export Policy in the Development of Southern Africa* (Harare, 1995).

³¹ Palmer, *Land*, 71. ³² NC Charter annual report 1912, NAZ N9/1/15.

³³ ANC Buhera monthly report Sept. 1915, NAZ N9/4/29, Vol.1.

³⁴ A further explanation for the drop in cattle sales is that 'prices offered are 40 to 50 percent below last year': NC Charter monthly report Sept. 1915, NAZ N9/4/29, Vol.1.

insurance against recurrent food shortages.³⁵ Trading cattle for grain and cash was, in fact, a rather common business in Buhera sub-district. Besides supplying European traders, African farmers from the better-watered north-western part of the sub-district supplied grain to the south-eastern end where recurrent crop failure had made people specialize in cattle production. John Iliffe has related these crop failures to the colonial state's segregationist land policies that concentrated Africans in reserves and pressed them into marginal areas such as:

The lower eastern section of Buhera whose administrator reported in 1918 that ... 'although acreage cultivated increases, there has never been sufficient food produced to carry the population from season to season for the past three years.'³⁶

However, until the 1920s, the colonial state's land policies probably neither caused, nor, aggravated food shortages in Buhera, as forced population movements into the sub-district were small.³⁷ Rather than forced immigrations, the observed increase in cultivated area resulted from the expansion of plough agriculture, enabling farmers to cultivate larger fields. The southern Sabi reserve had long been occupied, its lowveld being the centre of Hera dynastic power long before the establishment of European rule.³⁸ Crop failure was a recurrent feature in Buhera, but selling or bartering stock for grain could usually mitigate grain shortages. For those without a herd, labour migration provided the means to build one. Hence, rather than being a Pavlov-like reaction to the colonial state's tax demands, the Buhera labour supply was probably more dependant on herd sizes, stock being the major source of wealth. The ANC Buhera once recognized this relation:

It is anticipated an increased number of natives will be forced out to work during the coming year owing to the loss of their accumulated wealth during the past drought which was used up to keep themselves and families in food.³⁹

Once a substantial herd was built up, the occasional sale of stock could raise the imposed taxes and supplement the relatively small cash incomes obtained from crop sales. Obviously, not everybody could regularly sell a beast and, besides its monetary value, keeping stock was also significant in other spheres of social life. Young men of marriageable age, in particular, had to build up a herd, both for bridewealth (*roora*) payments and farming purposes. Hence, engaging in migrant labour was not just – as Palmer seems to suggest – a last resort of peasant producers' whose crop production or marketing efforts had failed. Labour migration could be a deliberate strategy to accumulate wealth. It formed an integral part of the career of many Buhera men, as the following observation of the ANC Buhera reveals:

³⁵ For instance, during the 1916 drought Buhera stock owners bartered away some 2,480 cattle to European traders alone, receiving 5,000–6,000 bags of grain in return: J. Iliffe, *Famine in Zimbabwe, 1890–1960* (Gweru, 1990), 60. In total, the administration permitted the removal of some 8,000 cattle from the sub-district. ANC Buhera annual report 1916, NAZ N9/1/19.

³⁶ Iliffe, *Famine*, 62.

³⁷ Few Africans were evicted in the Charter district as 'since the financial position is becoming acute, the large landowners who were inclined to oust the natives from their Estates, are now encouraging them to remain and settle so as to benefit by collecting as much rent as possible'. NC Charter annual report 1915, NAZ N9/1/18.

³⁸ D. N. Beach, *A Zimbabwean Past: Shona Dynastic Histories and Oral Traditions* (Gweru, 1994), 36–43. ³⁹ ANC Buhera annual report 1916, NAZ N9/1/19.

A very considerable proportion of the able bodied male population has been away at work during the year. Some opportunity of testing the accuracy of such a statement was afforded by the collection of the population at different centres for vaccination purposes ... 13,500 people were gathered together in October, amongst this number an able bodied young man of working age was very rarely noticed. During November a further 6,000 people were assembled, amongst this number was a higher but still remarkably small proportion of young men of working age; the increase in proportion observed during November may have had some connection with the fall of early rains and an influx of workers returning home.⁴⁰

To conclude, in the early colonial period, and conceivably long before, Buhera livelihoods were already strongly incorporated into markets for labour and agricultural produce (grain and cattle). This market incorporation was probably not matched by an equal incorporation into the colonial state. Despite the major preoccupation with African labour in colonial policy discourse and the controlled social order which officials presented in their reports, the archival sources also allow for another interpretation. Observations suggesting that the state impinged very little on social life in Buhera can equally be found in these sources. Rather than being purely state-induced, Buherans' participation in the labour market may also be understood in relation to their other livelihood practices – crop and stock production. Recurrent droughts, particularly affecting the south-eastern end of the sub-district regularly depleted its inhabitants of their wealth, turning (temporal) wage labour into another option to sustain their livelihood.

FROM LABOUR TO PRODUCE MARKETS: THE STATE AND AFRICAN AGRICULTURE, 1926–39

Moving on from a preoccupation with the mobilization of African labour, colonial state policies in the 1920s and 1930s witnessed a growing interest in African agriculture. Marked by the appointment of E. D. Alvord as Agriculturist for the Instruction of Natives in 1926, African farming became the object of government planning. Nevertheless, in Zimbabwean historiography the 1920s and 1930s have been regarded as the stage of the 'dominant theme of Rhodesian agricultural history', which Palmer has typified as 'the triumph of European over African farmers'.⁴¹ Labour mobilization policies, unable to curb independent African farming in the early colonial period, were 'increasingly supplemented by attacks on African land holdings and participation in produce markets'.⁴² These 'attacks' were closely linked to the emergence of a – heavily state-subsidized – white farming sector which felt increasingly threatened by African producers' competitiveness. Aided by the crisis of the 1930s which decreased agricultural prices, these state policies have often been regarded as effecting the collapse of independent African peasant farming in the 1930s. From the 1930s onwards, Arrighi has maintained, a situation of 'unlimited supplies' of African labour prevailed, removing the need for extra-market forces – that is, state intervention – to generate a labour supply.⁴³

⁴⁰ ANC Buhera annual report 1927, NAZ S235/505.

⁴¹ Palmer, 'Agricultural history', 221.

⁴² Phimister, *Economic and Social History*, 47. ⁴³ Arrighi, 'Labour supplies', 226.

Although the crisis in African agriculture is widely accepted in Zimbabwean historiography, the 'de-peasantization' thesis has also been challenged.⁴⁴ Ranger, for instance, found that although 'peasants of all sorts became more aware of the role of the state'⁴⁵ during the 1930s, by the end of the decade 'African agriculture had survived everywhere'.⁴⁶ Hence, the 1930s crisis in African agriculture did not mark the completion of a process of proletarianization of African peasant farmers. While focusing on peasant resistance, Ranger thus started to question the dominant role attributed to the colonial state by scholars of political economy schools of thought. Nevertheless, the 1930s did witness an increased state control over Africans' participation in both the labour and produce markets. In the labour market, this extended control has gone largely unnoticed in the academic literature. Yet, the system of Tax Advice Forms (TAF) enhanced colonial administrators' understanding and control over labour movements as well as the state's capacity to raise tax from Africans working outside their home district.⁴⁷

The growing attention to African farming in colonial policy discourse was equivocal. On the one hand, state intervention attempted to enhance Africans' agricultural practices, but simultaneously sought deliberately to undercut African competitiveness in agricultural produce markets in an attempt to protect the interests of white settler farmers.⁴⁸ Two lines of policies can be distinguished in this latter strand. First, the operation of these markets was manipulated. The effect of policies such as the Maize Control and Cattle Levy Acts was that Africans farmers received lower prices than did their white colleagues. Second, segregationist policies undermined African farmers' ability to produce for markets. The enforcement of the 1930 Land Apportionment Act led to a further removal of Africans from alienated land and squeezed them together in the reserves. Increased population pressure on land in these areas undercut individual farmers' productive capacity and caused concern within the colonial administration over the carrying capacity of the reserves.

⁴⁴ W. Döpcke, *Das Koloniale Zimbabwe in der Krise: Eine Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte 1929–1939* (Münster, 1989), 173–94. P. Mosley, *The Settler Economies: Studies in the Economic History of Kenya and Southern Rhodesia, 1900–1963* (Cambridge, 1983), 71.

⁴⁵ Ranger, *Peasant Consciousness*, 84.

⁴⁶ Ranger, *Peasant Consciousness*, 78. In addition, Johnson has challenged Arrighi's thesis of unlimited supplies of labour, arguing that even after the 1930s, 'extra-economic forms of coercion remained of critical importance in securing large supplies of labour in Southern Rhodesia': D. Johnson, 'Settler farmers and coerced African Labour in Southern Rhodesia, 1936–46', *Journal of African History*, 33 (1992), 112.

⁴⁷ Tax Advice Forms (TAF) were first used in 1924. They enabled the collection of tax from migrant workers in the district of employment rather than that of origin. Thus, local administrators could keep track of tax-paying inhabitants of their district and the major destinations of their migrant labour force.

⁴⁸ The settler state's interference with irrigation schemes in African areas is a good example of this double-edged attitude towards African agriculture: E. Manzungu, 'Engineering or domineering? The politics of water control in Mutambara irrigation scheme, Zimbabwe', *Zambezia* 22 (1995), 115–36.

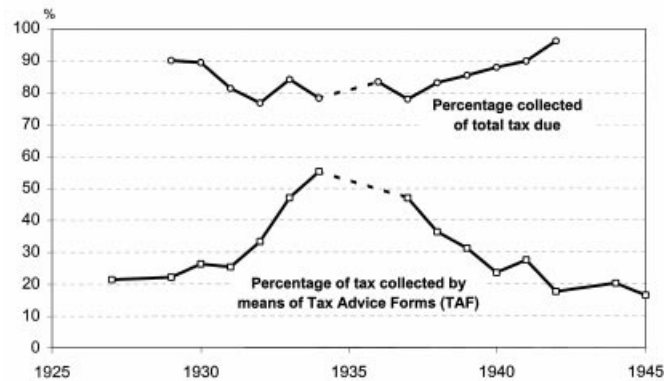


Fig. 4. Percentage of tax collected by means of Tax Advice Forms (TAF), and percentage collected of total tax due: Buhera sub-district, 1925–45.

Economic depression, market regulation and veterinary measures in Buhera

Segregationist policies and state regulation of cattle and maize markets were also important forces in Buhera. It is, however, difficult to isolate the impact of these measures from the wider impact of the economic crisis of the early 1930s. As in other African areas, declining prices for agricultural produce and a contracting labour market constrained Buherans' capacity to generate cash income. Certainly, the colonial state's policies deepened the crisis in produce markets. The Maize Control Act of 1931⁴⁹ institutionalized sales to maize depots in white farming areas, increasing transport costs for maize produced in the reserves.⁵⁰ Lower prices for African maize producers were the result, but in Buhera it was chiefly the northern part which was affected. Maize was not widely grown in the early 1930s, for 'the bulk of the growers reside within a short radius of the Store in the Narira Reserve'.⁵¹

Similarly, the Cattle Levy Acts of 1931 and 1934 further reduced the already low prices on the cattle market and '[n]atives were disinclined to sell at the low prices offered'.⁵² Hence, the Buhera population faced difficult times, particularly as the 1930s also witnessed a serious drought. Cash was particularly scarce, and even the state's tax revenue suffered from the depressed markets; its own policies were hampering market production. The actual tax collected as a share of the ANC's projected revenue decreased, only to reach pre-1930 levels again in the early 1940s (Figure 4).

⁴⁹ The Maize Control Act of 1931 was amended several times during the 1930s. See C. F. Keyter, *Maize Control in Southern Rhodesia 1931–1941: The African Contribution to White Survival* (Salisbury, 1978); Döpcke, *Das Koloniale Zimbabwe in der Krise*, 265–75.

⁵⁰ The ANC Buhera annual report of 1934 commented: 'It is difficult to arrive at any estimate as to the amount of maize grown but what surplus there might have been was unmarketable owing to transport costs. Dissatisfied with the law traders were in any case unwilling to buy.' NAZ S1563.

⁵¹ ANC Buhera annual report 1932, NAZ S235/510. In Southern Buhera the main grain crops were finger millet (*rukweza* or *rapoko*) and bulrush millet (*mhunga*).

⁵² ANC Buhera annual report 1932, NAZ S235/510.

Yet, it was the state's veterinary measures, rather than its interventions in maize and cattle markets, that deepened the impact of the 1930s crisis. Quarantine measures following outbreaks of disease regularly meant that cattle owners could not sell stock outside the district. Such measures even affected tax collections:

The unfortunate drop in tax collection is directly traceable to the position created by restriction on cattle movements consequent on the Foot and Mouth disease, aggravated by the state of famine which handicapped the greater portion of Nyashano's people [of south-eastern Buhera sub-district].⁵³

There is no doubt that the veterinary measures imposed were not, as a rule, the result of disease outbreaks in areas without cattle dip-tanks. Cattle in the non-dipping zone of the southern Sabi reserve were generally free from ticks and diseases, but subject to restricted movement for fear of disease spreading.⁵⁴ The establishment of cattle dip-tanks in the area may, therefore, be understood primarily as a 'technology of control', enabling greater state surveillance over the cattle sector through stock counts, the organization of sales and the collection of dip fees.⁵⁵ Although a large part of the sub-district was not covered by dip tanks, which casts doubt on the reliability of stock figures presented in colonial records,⁵⁶ state control over stock sales to buyers from outside the sub-district was probably substantial. Hence, it was mainly through veterinary measures that the state exercised control over the cattle-oriented economy of the Buhera sub-district. Although initially not designed as an instrument to undercut African peasant production, it was these measures of the colonial state that most affected the crisis-struck Buhera economy. The ANC Buhera in his report of September 1938 summarized the situation:

It is hoped that some relaxation of the restrictions on the movement of cattle from the non-dipping area will ensue. It is difficult to understand why an area which is and always has been free from disease should be penalised by such restrictions as have been imposed for the past two or three years.⁵⁷

Various responses to the 1930s crisis can be noticed in Buhera's colonial records. For instance, the state's veterinary measures probably caused intra-district trade to gain in significance. Such trade may well have become increasingly demonetized, as the colonial reports suggest. Cattle from the drought-prone south-eastern end of the Sabi reserve were bartered with the

⁵³ ANC Buhera, annual report 1931, NAZ S235/509.

⁵⁴ Disease outbreaks were confined to the northern part of the sub-district, where cattle dip-tanks were erected from 1926 onwards. In the non-dipping area in the southern part, cattle always were 'remarkably free from ticks and disease', as the NC Buhera remarked in 1945. Nevertheless, 'the chief veterinary surgeon [was] keen on this area being put under dipping': NC Buhera annual report 1945, NAZ S1563.

⁵⁵ The system of cattle regulations and dip fees probably was the state's most effective instrument of control in the 1930s. An example of its use is the forced labour imposed upon registered cattle owners in the Charter district. See Cripps, *How Roads Were Cut in the Native Reserves of Charter District, Mashonaland 1934-5* (London, 1936), 7.

⁵⁶ The ANC Buhera acknowledges the problem of counting stock in the non-dipping areas, as is evidenced by his letter to his superior in which he explains the differences between the stock estimates for 1931 and 1932: NC Buhera to NC Charter, 6 Jan. 1932, NAZ S138/1.

⁵⁷ ANC Buhera monthly report Sept. 1938, NAZ S1619.

grain-producing northern parts.⁵⁸ Simultaneously, the scanty evidence on crop sales in the ANC Buhera reports suggests a shift in cash-crop production. Whereas the market production of maize in the northern part of the Sabi reserve and the Narira reserve declined during in the early 1930s, sales of groundnuts increased. This adaptability of the Buhera people to changing market situations is also apparent from the Assistant Native Commissioner's Tax Register. After 1931, the share of tax forwarded to the ANC Buhera by Africans working in other districts increased (Figure 4).⁵⁹ This suggests that income earned by longer-term migrants was becoming more important in sustaining Buhera livelihoods.⁶⁰

To summarize, Buhera livelihoods, consisting of various combinations of cash crop, commercial stock production and labour migration, went through a period of adjustment in the early 1930s. The relative importance of these different livelihood practices altered, and the composition of marketed crops altered. The problems of marketing did not simply result in decline: stock numbers increased substantially in this period.⁶¹ When cattle prices temporarily picked up and restrictions on cattle movements were lifted, cattle owners responded quickly. Furthermore, towards the end of the 1930s, the economic situation improved. In the early 1940s, when cattle prices rose more substantially and cattle marketing was re-organized, sales improved.⁶² Crop marketing improved as well, albeit not the sale of maize. 'This, I think, is due partly to the poor rainy season for maize and partly for the low price of maize compared with other produce of the land', the ANC Buhera reported in 1942.⁶³

Colonial land use policies in Buhera

Besides policies which sought to diminish African competition in produce markets, the 1920s and 1930s simultaneously witnessed a growing interest on the part of the colonial state in African land use. In order to absorb those displaced by the Land Apportionment Act, it was felt that the carrying capacity of the reserves needed to be increased. Consequently, the colonial state sought to intensify African land use. This, as previously mentioned, resulted in the appointment of E. D. Alvord, who promoted intensified

⁵⁸ Possibly other animal products also became more important cash earners. In the early 1930s sales of sheep and fowl were noted: ANC Buhera annual reports 1932–4, NAZ S235/510–511, and S1563.

⁵⁹ NC Charter and ANC Buhera annual reports 1927–45, NAZ S235/505–518; S1563; S1051.

⁶⁰ The reports of the 1930s do not mention an increasing rate of male absenteeism in Buhera. This may, of course, relate to the ANC Buhera's deficient observations on labour migration. Both oral and archival sources do, however, indicate that in the 1930s migrations of Buhera men to South Africa were common.

⁶¹ The estimated number of cattle almost doubled, from 30,812 in 1931 to 60,978 in 1942: ANC Buhera annual reports 1931 and 1942, NAZ S235/509 and S1563.

⁶² Buhera cattle sales possibly also benefited from the installation of weigh bridges at cattle sale pens: ANC Buhera to NC Charter on slaughter cattle price order GN 18/42, 15 Jan. 1942. The number of cattle sold rose from 1,560 in 1940 to 2,681 in 1942. The ANC Buhera concluded, 'there is no ground for the belief ... that among natives, the higher the price of cattle the fewer do they sell': ANC Buhera annual report 1942, NAZ S1563.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

agriculture through an agricultural extension programme and land use policies such as ‘centralization’ – the reorganization of land in consolidated grazing and arable blocks, with a line of residential sites in between.⁶⁴ This state interference with African land use was, however, not motivated by solely segregationist considerations, for the concern for the ‘carrying capacity’ of the African reserves was simultaneously informed by an emerging ideology of conservation within the colonial administration. Hence, when the settler state started to extend its control over Africans’ land-use practices it was, from the beginning, tied up with, and justified by, a discourse of conservation.⁶⁵

In the Buhera sub-district as well, conservationist concerns ran parallel with an idea of intensifying land use. As in other African reserves, population growth and an influx of evicted people increased the pressure on land,⁶⁶ especially in the better-watered north-western part of the sub-district. This area, the ANC Buhera reported in 1936, was ‘becoming thickly populated’ and so:

The time is not far distant when it will be necessary for the preservation of the fertility of the soil to insist on the more economical use of it, and when it will be no longer possible to study the wishes of the people if they are opposed to better methods of agriculture.⁶⁷

The Buhera peoples, who opposed the idea of demonstrators (and centralization), were confronted with the first agricultural demonstrator two years later. Simultaneously, a start was made with centralization in a small part of the sub-district. Yet, by 1942, the demonstrator only had 25 co-operating farmers, and the enforcement of centralization proved problematic.⁶⁸ Up to the mid-1940s the impact of these land-use policies was actually minimal.

In the drought-prone southern part of the sub-district, colonial state intervention had an equally limited influence on existing land-use practices during the 1930s. In this sparsely populated area, where settlement was concentrated around water sources, the common agricultural practice of shifting cultivation remained unaltered. Hence, the carrying-capacity-minded administrators did not include Buhera in their growing list of

⁶⁴ For an overview of the extension programme, see J. A. Bolding, ‘Alvord and the demonstration concept: origins and consequences of the agricultural demonstrator scheme, 1920–1944’, in J. Mutimba, J. A. Bolding and P. van der Zaag (eds.), *Interventions in Smallholder Agriculture: Implications for Agricultural Extension in Zimbabwe* (Harare, forthcoming).

⁶⁵ W. Beinart, ‘Soil erosion, conservationism and ideas about development: a Southern African exploration, 1900–1960’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 11 (1984), 53; ‘Introduction: the politics of colonial conservation’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 15 (1989), 153.

⁶⁶ In the early 1930s, more than 1,000 people moved into the Buhera area. ANC Buhera annual reports 1932 and 1934, NAZ 235/510 and S1563.

⁶⁷ ANC Buhera to NC Charter, on ‘Survey of Sabi Reserve’, 28 Oct. 1936. NAZ S1542 A4 Vol. 4.

⁶⁸ Correspondence on appointment of agricultural demonstrators and centralization Sabi Reserve 1934–38, NAZ S1542/D7; ANC Buhera monthly reports May, Sept., Oct. 1938, NAZ S1619; ANC Buhera annual report 1942, NAZ S1563; ANC Buhera to NC Charter on ‘Natural Resources Act’, 26 Jan. 1942, NAZ S2806/1958.

overpopulated and overstocked African reserves.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, a modest start was made with the development of water supplies in the dry south in the late 1930s, the need for this being increased by reason of an anticipated further influx of Africans into the area. On the whole, however, the growing preoccupation with African land use in colonial policy discourse had virtually no impact on land use in Buhera sub-district during the 1930s.

To conclude, the situation in which the Buhera people found themselves at the beginning of the 1930s was indeed serious. Both market production and labour market participation were becoming difficult as a result of declining producer prices, labour demand and wages. State intervention in markets aggravated the situation, but it was primarily veterinary policies which deepened the crisis in Buhera livelihoods. Yet, as Ranger has argued, it was not an irreversible process of decline in African agriculture. By the late 1930s, the situation had already improved, and the share of income generated by labour migration to other districts had decreased.⁷⁰ The labour–land–cattle–based economy of Buhera, capable of withstanding the colonial state’s interventions in produce markets during the 1930s, had adjusted itself. By the mid-1940s the prosperity of the rural economy surprised the ANC Buhera, who commented, ‘a considerable amount of grain is traded in the district. It is remarkable that the figure is so high when average distance to railhead is in the region of 70 miles’.⁷¹

PLANNED MODERNIZATION: THE COLONIAL STATE AND THE RURAL-URBAN DIVIDE, 1940–61

While the 1930s have been regarded in Zimbabwean historiography as the epoch of triumph of European over African farming, the 1940s and 1950s can be seen as the height of planned modernization. Government planning, seen as the vehicle of African modernization, was greatly intensified, but also met with greater opposition from African nationalists. Not surprisingly, then, growing African resistance to state planning in this period has attracted considerable attention in Zimbabwean historiography. However, with the growing attention to African opposition to the colonial state, there has also been a tendency to shift the focus from rural to urban areas, where organized opposition to the colonial state took shape from the 1930s onwards.⁷² A notable exception in the literature is Ranger, who has continued to draw

⁶⁹ ANC Buhera to NC Buhera on overstocking circular no. 29, 3 June 1942, NAZ S2384/7. It was 1952 before ‘the district was declared an “overstocked” area in terms of the Natural Resources Act’: NC Buhera annual report 1952, NAZ S2403/2681.

⁷⁰ This does not mean that migrant incomes became less important, as considerable numbers of Buhera migrants sought employment in the Union of South Africa in the 1930s.

⁷¹ NC Buhera annual report 1945, NAZ S1563. The most important crops sold were groundnuts and millet.

⁷² J. van Velsen, ‘Trends in African nationalism in Southern Rhodesia’, *Kroniek van Afrika*, 4 (1964), 139–57; P. Harris, ‘Industrial workers in Rhodesia, 1946–1972: working class elites or lumpen-proletariat?’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 1 (1974), 139–61; B. Raftopoulos, ‘Nationalism and labour in Salisbury, 1953–1965’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 21 (1995), 79–93; T. Barnes, ‘“So that a labourer could live with his family”’: Overlooked factors in social and economic strife in urban colonial Zimbabwe, 1945–1952’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 21 (1995), 95–113.

attention to African rural areas in the post-Second World War period through his argument that state intervention in the African rural areas caused an agricultural crisis in the reserves in the 1940s.⁷³ Ranger sees the loss of land in the 1950s – caused by further evictions from alienated lands and the Native Land Husbandry Act – as fuelling the peasant radicalism that shaped the rural support for the liberation struggle in the 1970s.⁷⁴

While state intervention in African land use had already increased in many areas during the 1930s, with the implementation of the 1940 Land Apportionment Act and the Natural Resources Act of 1941 this involvement was further expanded. As a consequence of the former act, the reserves in the Shona-speaking areas had to absorb another influx of Africans evicted from alienated lands. At the same time, farming in the reserves became further restricted by the state's conservationist concerns laid down in the Natural Resources Act. The colonial state's attempt to re-organize African agriculture culminated in the Native Land Husbandry Act (NLHA) of 1951, generally regarded as the most ambitious and far-reaching rural intervention programme of the colonial period. Yet, confidence in state planning in the 1940s and 1950s did not confine itself to African rural areas. The rapidly expanding urban economy in post-war Southern Rhodesia spurred on the settler state to develop more comprehensive policies for African urban areas. The resulting emergence of a rural-urban divide in colonial policy discourse led, as reflected by Zimbabwean historiography, to African urban and rural social settings being increasingly treated separately, as two distinct objects of administrators' modernizing efforts.

The rural-urban divide and the emergence of Buhera as a farming society

The emergence of a rural-urban divide in colonial policy discourse is also noticeable in the reports of the NC Buhera. Remarks on oscillating labour migration gradually disappeared from his reports and the heading 'labour' in the district reports began to refer to the labour situation within the district itself.⁷⁵ But, once again, other observations in the NC reports sources permit an alternative interpretation. Although not viewing them as an indication of the importance of circulatory migration, the NC Buhera also observed a growing number of omnibuses operating in the district.⁷⁶ Buhera district was no longer reduced to a mere labour reserve for the settler economy, but now became 're-invented' as 'traditional' rural African society, requiring state intervention in order to develop. This image is also paramount in Holleman's study of Buhera. To Holleman, Buhera represents a typical farming society,

⁷³ Ranger, *Peasant Consciousness*, 105. ⁷⁴ Ranger, *Peasant Consciousness*, 137–77.

⁷⁵ NC Buhera annual reports 1940–61, NAZ S1563; S1051; S2827/2/2/1-8; S2403/2681.

⁷⁶ The number of omnibuses linking Buhera to Enkeldoorn (Chivhu) rose from one in 1955 to fifteen in 1961. Furthermore, the NC Buhera observed that accumulated wealth was invested in transport, '[p]rivate motor cars are often seen in the Reserve. Unfortunately many of these are in poor condition and must cost their owners a lot of money to keep them on the road': NC Buhera Annual report 1961, NAZ S2827/2/2/8, Vol. 1; Annual report 1957, NAZ S2827/2/2/5, Vol. 1. See also J. A. Andersson, 'Re-interpreting the rural-urban connection: migration practices and socio-cultural dispositions of Buhera workers in Harare', *Africa* (forthcoming).

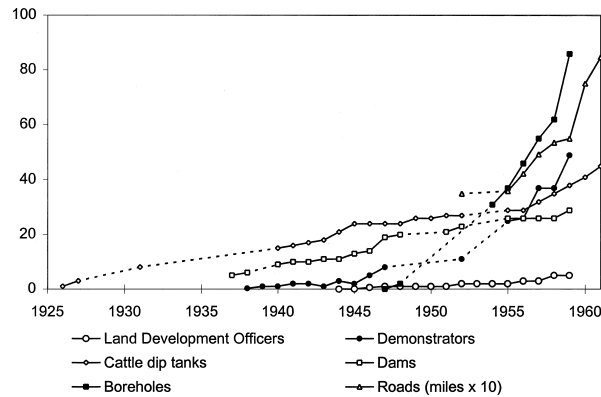


Fig. 5. Some parameters of colonial state intervention: Miles of road maintained, number of dams, boreholes, cattle dip-tanks and staff in Buhera sub-district, 1926–61.

characterized by ‘the *nhimbe*, the collective work-and-beer party ... [that is] the pivot of all organised economic activity amongst the Mashona people’.⁷⁷ In his writings there is no mention of the Buheran involvement in the Southern African migrant labour economy, let alone discussion of its consequences for the organization of agricultural labour. In line with the dominant academic structural–functionalist paradigm of the time, Holleman describes African social life as guided by a coherent system of customary laws, not disrupted by outside influences. Hence, to planners in the colonial administration, this explanation of ‘customary laws’ provided the background knowledge of African society required for the administration’s efforts to modernize it.⁷⁸

Unlike the 1920s and 1930s, when the colonial administration’s growing preoccupation with African land use had little impact upon Buhera sub-district, the 1940s witnessed a rapid expansion of state intervention. In 1943, the sub-district was accorded a full Native Commissioner status, and after the end of the Second World War its staff was increased substantially, particularly in the sphere of agricultural and community extension. White Land Development Officers (LDO) and African demonstrators’ implementation of soil conservation measures, centralization and the agricultural demonstration programme started to affect the larger part of the southern Sabi reserve. Roads were made, villages were laid out in lines, dams were constructed, a stockbreeding centre was set up, demonstration centres were established, and irrigation projects were initiated.⁷⁹ Figure 5 gives an overview of this expanding state intervention.

Doubtless, the state’s development efforts were, as in the 1930s, motivated partly by the need to increase the carrying capacity of the Sabi reserve for

⁷⁷ Holleman, *African Interlude*, 16; Holleman, *Shona Customary Law*, 10–11.

⁷⁸ See also note 8.

⁷⁹ For instance, a large irrigation project (Devuli or Devure irrigation scheme) was set up in the south-eastern end of the district in the 1940s, and another small one near Murambinda in 1956.

another planned influx of Africans evicted from alienated lands elsewhere.⁸⁰ Yet, the effort of the state to enhance African farmers' food production in the increasingly crowded reserves⁸¹ could sometimes be in conflict with the conservationist policy discourse underpinning other interventions in African agriculture. According to the NC Buhera, who recognized this tension, soil conservation could not be enforced by state regulation:

The Natives are exhorted to grow more food. This would be justified if all the Natives followed modern methods of cultivation and observed even the rudimentary principles of soil conservation but alas! the majority do not do so ... To contend that legislation will curb the ignorant native in his destructive ways is mere wishful thinking. The only solution is to drop the price of grain and reduce the profits allowed to the grain trader. This should discourage the Native from cultivating to excess and the grain trader from making excessive profits.⁸²

Although the late 1950s seem to have produced more colonial reports on the Buhera area than all preceding periods together,⁸³ the categories of thought produced and the impact of policies such as the Native Land Husbandry Act of 1951 have to be critically examined. These policies considered Buhera to be a farming area from which people without farming and grazing rights could, and would, be excluded. They were to be absorbed in the urban sector of the economy. The colonial reports show no understanding of existing land and cattle ownership arrangements or of the relative importance of labour migration, cultivation and cattle in people's livelihoods.⁸⁴ The information gathered served a legal-technical planning exercise that may have had little bearing on actual local situations.

Agricultural modernization: the impact of the NLHA in Buhera

In the early 1990s, Ian Phimister suggested that the impact of the NLHA may have been overestimated in Zimbabwean historiography. Not only did the implementation of the act progress slowly and meet with enormous protest, but it did not cause massive landlessness or the end of entrepreneurial farming in the reserves. As he argued, a 'large number of better-off peasants came through the Land Husbandry Act, if not unscathed, then more or less intact'. Hence, Phimister suggested that the NLHA did not end independent African peasant production or diminish peasant differentiation, contending that it 'is a moot point whether the implementation of the Land Husbandry

⁸⁰ As is evidenced by the remark, 'The rate of absorption of population is dependant entirely on the provision, firstly, of water by boreholes and wells': NC Buhera to Provincial NC Gwelo on the removal of natives from European areas, 16 Aug. 1950, NAZ S2588/2004.

⁸¹ Buhera was one of the target areas of the state's Food Production Drive (FPD) policy in the early 1950s: Correspondence and reports FPD policy 1951-4, NAZ S160 AGR 4 Mar. 1951 and S160 AGR 3/1E/52.

⁸² NC Buhera, annual report 1952, NAZ S2403/2681.

⁸³ Assessment reports NLHA Buhera 1953-1961, NAZ S2808/1/5.

⁸⁴ See also G. K. Garbett, 'The Land Husbandry Act of Southern Rhodesia', in D. Biebuyck (ed.), *African Agrarian Systems* (Oxford, 1963), 185-202.

Act accelerated the process of proletarianisation or merely certified its existent'.⁸⁵

In Buhera, equally, where people became wealthier in the early 1950s, protest against the NLHA was substantial. Destocking, resulting in the compulsory sale of thousands of cattle in the late 1950s, was widely resented.⁸⁶ The ploy of Buhera stock owners to reduce the impact of the act by redistributing stock among family members exposed the flawed assumption of individual stock ownership among the architects of the destocking policy. The impact of this policy was further reduced by the fact that the stock regulations (enforced at the cattle dip-tanks) were never followed up, diminishing the long-term impact of the NLHA on the cattle sector. Evasions of the stock regulations, on the other hand, became firmly institutionalized as a result of the Act.⁸⁷

Opposition to land allocation under the Land Husbandry Act was mainly confined to the better-watered, northern part of Buhera. In Chief Chitsunge's area (Figure 1) opposition was so strong that government officials carried weapons when visiting the area. In other areas, however, opposition was minimal, while in the southern parts of the district the act was never implemented.⁸⁸ The impact of the NLHA was further reduced by the fact that in many areas of the district, ample land was available for allocation. The NC Buhera allocated such land, and it was even applied for by absent men working in towns or on farms.⁸⁹ Hence, the rural and urban class formation envisaged by the Act never materialized, as Buhera migrant workers did not become landless. Not surprisingly then, opposition to the Act was not always directed towards land allocation *per se*, as a letter in the *African Weekly* reveals:

We appreciate land allocation but in our case, there is ... [so shortly before the rainy season] no time now for us to prepare and plough fields. We would be pleased if we could be allowed to use our former fields for this year, and allocation could continue after the next harvest, or we will starve.⁹⁰

Land allocations, once made, also proved difficult to enforce with Buhera office's limited administrative capacity. People extended their plots, forcing government to make the concession of allowing plot extensions, provided that farmers dug contour ridges on these lands. Furthermore, those who had not been allocated land initially (because of their youth) were given some later, causing the issue of land rights to continue up to the early 1970s.

⁸⁵ Phimister, 'Rethinking the reserves: Southern Rhodesia's Land Husbandry Act reviewed', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 19 (1993), 237.

⁸⁶ In the period 1956–60, each year more than 7,500 cattle were sold against the 1,500 to 4,000 per year in the period 1940–55. The only exception is the drought year 1947, when more than 6,000 cattle are reported to have been sold: NC Buhera annual reports 1940–61.

⁸⁷ Even in the 1990s the Veterinary Department has few clues about the number of stock in the district.

⁸⁸ Personal communication, Mr. C. J. K. Latham.

⁸⁹ See NC Buhera to Provincial NC Midlands on NLHA 1951, 3 Mar. 1955, NAZ, S2808/1/5, as quoted in J. A. Andersson, 'The politics of land scarcity: land disputes in Save communal area, Zimbabwe', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 25 (1999), 563.

⁹⁰ W. M. Manhera, 'May Buhera land allocation please be postponed: it is too late now', *African Weekly*, 23 Oct. 1960, 14.

Consequently, designated divisions between grazing, residential and arable areas became blurred. Hence, the practice of land allocation diverged substantially from the Act's intentions and the administrative order found in the archives.

To conclude, the 1950s were undoubtedly a period in which the colonial state's presence was most strongly felt in Zimbabwe's rural areas, including Buhera district. However, the wealth of archival material, and the rural interventions which the Act produced, should not lead to an overestimation of its effectiveness. Categories of thought produced by the Act, such as individual land and stock ownership, were in practice more fluid than initially envisaged, and therefore easily manipulated. This is not to say that the overall impact of the Act was limited, but rather that local differences in interpretation, implementation and appropriation (by administrators and local peoples) determined its short-term and long-term outcomes. In Buhera, the cattle sector suffered immediate losses, but crop production continued without much disruption. The re-organization of land use had virtually no negative impact on people's access to land. Rather, it was the opposite; the practice of sub-dividing large villages into independent smaller units during the Act's implementation enabled established immigrant families to found their own independent villages. Thus, for a large number of people, the claim to land was strengthened rather than diminished.⁹¹

THE LOSS OF CONTROL AND UNDERSTANDING: THE LAST TWO DECADES OF SETTLER RULE

The scale of colonial state intervention in African reserves in the late 1950s was unprecedented in many areas of Southern Rhodesia, including Buhera. Never before had the lives of the inhabitants of the sub-district been so directly affected by the colonial administration's policies. These interventions were, however, short-lived. The implementation of the Native Land Husbandry Act met with widespread African opposition and sabotage. Protest against the Act was, in fact, so widespread that the government decided not to prosecute offenders. As the NC Buhera complained, 'With lack of staff ... and with the instruction not to prosecute offenders under the Act, control is fast being lost and will be very difficult to regain should we wish to do so'.⁹²

These words reflect not only the perceived idea of the official that they were in control, but are also visionary for the opinion of his successor in the 1970s. For, in the last two decades of its rule, the settler state gradually lost all control over the Buhera area and its people; in effect, it relinquished the control it had largely gained in the 1940s and 1950s. As part of an emerging policy discourse of decentralized community-based development of the African reserves, the legal position of local-level and traditional authorities strengthened. In Buhera, this policy of African self-government progressed slowly and did not seem to function well. When, in the mid-1970s, guerrillas

⁹¹ Thus, the NLHA fits into the long-term processes of segmentation and political struggle between communities as described by Beach, *A Zimbabwean Past*, 36–43; Holleman, *The Pattern of Hera Kinship* (London, Rhodes-Livingstone Papers, 1949); Andersson, 'The politics', 553–78.

⁹² NC Buhera annual report 1963(?), NAZ, S2808/1/1, Vol. 2.

started to penetrate the Buhera territory, the District Commissioner (DC)⁹³ at Buhera realized that the government had no control over the area:

The position is, briefly, that the first terrorist incursions into this district occurred on the 6th of July 1976. Due to lack of staff, vehicles, weapons and equipment it was impossible to get into the affected areas. Army coverage here has been minimal and sporadic ... I realise that this is a pretty sorry state of affairs, but in the past 12 months I have lost one European and 6 African members of staff killed in action or murdered by ters [terrorists]. I am not prepared to lose more in taking unnecessary risks.⁹⁴

Still, despite evidence to the contrary, the image of Buhera as representing the traditional, agriculture-based African society was firmly rooted in the mind of its District Commissioner. Unlike his predecessors in the early colonial period who could observe discrepancies between labour policy and practice, this District Commissioner did not recognize the increased significance of labour circulation between Buhera and Salisbury.⁹⁵ Although his administrative tasks would have enabled him to observe the importance of rural–urban ties, stereotypical thinking dominated.⁹⁶ In a letter to J. F. Holleman, who enquired about the importance of labour migrancy, he wrote, ‘I regret there are no figures available ... however, all DC’s in the past have reported on the reluctance of the tribesmen in the Buhera district to seek employment outside the Buhera district and this continues today’⁹⁷. Nevertheless, a survey held in 1969 revealed that there were at least four bus companies providing no fewer than seven bus services a day to Salisbury alone.⁹⁸ Buhera livelihoods, which were already firmly incorporated into the Southern African migrant economy in the early colonial period, had now become firmly tied to the urban economy of Salisbury.⁹⁹

CHALLENGING THE NOTION OF THE HEGEMONIC COLONIAL STATE IN ZIMBABWE

The historical analysis of Buhera sub-district presented in this article adds to a growing body of literature which stresses the relative weakness of the colonial state in Africa. Focusing on its limited resources, on its internal

⁹³ With a departmental reorganization of the state apparatus in 1962, Native Commissioners were renamed District Commissioners: Government Notice No. 514 (16 Nov. 1962).

⁹⁴ DC Buhera to Secretary African Development Fund, 2 Feb. 1978, NAZ records centre Mutare, ACC 16/22/2/78. Guerrillas had penetrated the area at least two years earlier. The little-patrolled district was used to hide weapons and served to prepare for guerrilla actions.

⁹⁵ In the early 1960s, the Tax Advice Forms were abolished; this way of tax collection from absent migrant labourers was considered to be too expensive. Consequently, District Commissioners lost the sole administrative practice providing them with insight into oscillating labour migration from the districts: personal communication, Mr. C. J. K. Latham. See also note 47.

⁹⁶ For instance, requests to the District Commissioner for compensation from the workmen’s compensation fund reveal numerous cases of injured and killed migrant workers from Buhera in the late 1960s: DC Buhera LABOUR 4, 1967–9, NAZ record centre, box 11948.

⁹⁷ NC Buhera to J. F. Holleman, 2 Oct. 1972, NAZ records centre, box 119147.

⁹⁸ Community Advisors’ reports 1968–72, NAZ records centre, box 119148.

⁹⁹ J. A. Andersson, ‘Re-interpreting the rural–urban’.

conflicts of interest and on the contradictory processes that shaped such states, this literature has challenged the 'hegemonic state' perspective in African historiography.¹⁰⁰ In examining the categories of thought produced by the colonial state, the present discussion has emphasized another aspect of the hegemonic colonial-state picture. It has sought to show how the state's own sources provide for an interpretation in which the settler state plays a far less dominant role in directing social change than has been often assumed in Zimbabwean historiography. This, of course, raises the problematic question of the uniqueness of the Buhera case in Zimbabwe's colonial history. Such a question is not easily answered. The limited sources available on Buhera could also be used to construct a historical narrative that stresses the colonial state's control. Yet, as the analysis presented here has shown, colonial officers' reports often presented an order that, in reality, was far more complex and therefore difficult to control. If a similar perspective is adopted, it may well be found that colonial records on other areas also allow for a less hegemonic interpretation of the role of the colonial state in directing historical developments. Other sources, not originating from the colonial administration, may also be more useful for such reinterpretation, as current historical research continues to be biased towards the colonial state's archival materials. Ranger, for one, has recognized this problem explicitly, explaining that he 'first identified a district in Matabeleland for which there seemed to be a great deal of archival material'.¹⁰¹ Thus, he elaborates on his selection of Matobo district in southern Matabeleland, the research setting of his monograph, *Voices from the Rocks*. Ranger sought a district 'to compare and contrast' with Makoni district, the main focus of his earlier study, *Peasant Consciousness and Guerrilla War*, which so convincingly rectified the passive role attributed to African farmers in Zimbabwean historiography. He recognized that the Makoni district 'was unusual because conditions there were particularly favourable to African peasant production'.¹⁰² The Buhera district is another example of such an 'unusual' district, albeit not for its favourable agricultural environment. The lack of settler interference in the area and, related to this, the limited colonial records that were produced on it, have caused the area to be one of those reserves on which little more than administrative data exists.

It is ironic to take the work of Ranger as an example to suggest that Zimbabwean historiography has perhaps been too much focused on those areas where Africans were in direct confrontation with white settlers – for which ample archive material is available. For, years previously, Ranger himself warned against a heavy reliance on the colonial state's archival material. In a review article on Palmer and Parsons' classic book, *The Roots of Rural Poverty*, he argued:

There is certainly a good case to be made for the priority of archival sources ... [However,] a book so dependent on colonial documentation is bound to argue that the colonial impact constituted the crucial event in peasantization'.¹⁰³

Furthermore, it was Ranger who made a case for the role of social actors from

¹⁰⁰ Berry, 'Hegemony'; Berman and Lonsdale, *Unhappy Valley*.

¹⁰¹ Ranger, *Voices*, 1. ¹⁰² Ranger, *Peasant Consciousness*; Ranger, *Voices*, 1.

¹⁰³ T. Ranger, 'Growing from the roots: reflections on peasant research in Central and Southern Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 5 (1978), 107.

below in shaping protest against the colonial state. Thus, he went beyond the perspective of suppressed peasant initiative as put forward mainly by historians of political economy schools of thought. A focus on areas where Africans were not so much in direct confrontation with white settlers, as was the case in Buhera, may shed a different light on the relationship between colonial state policy and African protest. Not only may this result in a more regionally differentiated view of popular protest against the colonial state and the support for this struggle in rural areas.¹⁰⁴ It may also result in additional and newer interpretations of the roots of resistance against the colonial state. Such interpretations may focus less on land issues but would pay, for example, more attention to the grievances of Africans running up against the racial policies of the colonial state which were hampering their upward mobility in society.

¹⁰⁴ For instance, Kriger has argued that in Mutoko district, guerrillas often lacked peasant popular support. She claims that guerrilla coercion is underestimated in the study of Zimbabwe's liberation struggle, arguing that the evidence of popular support rests on inferences rather than on peasant accounts: N. J. Kriger, *Zimbabwe's Guerrilla War: Peasant Voices* (Cambridge, 1992), 238.