

## **TRADITIONAL GRAIN CROPS IN PRE-COLONIAL AND COLONIAL ZIMBABWE: A FACTOR FOR FOOD SECURITY AND SOCIAL COHESION AMONG THE SHONA PEOPLE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study explores the role and contribution of traditional grain crops to the pre-colonial and colonial Zimbabwean economy. The study argues that traditional grain crops were not just a source for food security, but also a force for social cohesion in pre-colonial Shona societies of Zimbabwe. The study contends that in these Shona societies, production was mixed with leisure and that cooperative production was the hallmark of the production system. The study posits that European crops, mainly maize, that were entrenched, especially during the colonial period, not only created food insecurity, but also disrupted social relations of production among the Shona.

**Keywords:** Cooperative Work; Food Security; Maize; Millet; Social Cohesion; Sorghum

### **INTRODUCTION**

The agrarian history of pre-colonial Africa remains topical. Debate continues to rage among agronomists and historians alike on the effects of the introduction of European food crops, especially maize, on African communities. According to Hopkins (1973), Euro-centric scholars have, for example, argued that the introduction of European food crops (and farming techniques, in general) came in handy to save the 'new caught, sullen peoples' of Africa who were 'half devil and half child' from starvation and imminent destruction

Wills (1985) argues that the maize crop was introduced by the Portuguese among the Shona from about the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It spread rapidly into areas formally dominated by traditional food crops such as finger millet (rapoko or rukweza), bulrush millet (mhunga), and sorghum (mapfunde). Mudenge (1988) postulates that the spread of maize production was propitiated by the demand for the crop, especially in the early years of colonization, when the whites who were still trying to find their feet in the sphere of agriculture, required the crop for their own consumption and that of their laborers in the mines, farms, and the emerging towns. Zeleza (1993) highlights that many Africans also took to the growing of the crop, not just because it was a useful addition to their stock of food crops, but also because the crop offered a vent through which Africans could raise funds to pay taxes imposed by the colonial government. Gakou (1987) argues that funds from the sale of the crop could also be used to pay school fees and hospital fees, among a host of many other domestic uses. The white colonial government also, indirectly, encouraged the growing of maize by sidelining traditional grain crops on the commodity market. In this regard, traditional grain crops, like millet varieties and sorghum, whose market opportunities were less, suffered a serious decline. The dual purpose in maize, that of serving as a staple crop and

as a cash crop, accounted for the crop's rapid spread in areas previously associated with the cultivation of traditional crops.

The rapid spread of the crop in colonial Zimbabwe was demonstrated by the fact that in 1931, the colonial government had to impose the Maize Control Act, with the aim of easing the pressure of competition in the sale of the crop to the Grain Marketing Boards between the country's indigenous African farmers and the white settler farmers. Keyter (1978) contends that the Act sought "to utilize the African productive sector [in maize] for the benefit of the European sector" through paying the African farmers lower rates for the maize to be delivered to the Grain Marketing Boards, while at the same time, benefiting the white farmers by paying them higher rates, in spite of the quality of the maize that they delivered to the same commodity boards. In spite of this discriminatory approach to the purchase of the crop, the African farmers, who had become hooked to the growing of the crop, continued with its production at the expense of the traditional grain crops.

In light of the above observations, this study adopts an Afro-centric view in which the rapid spread of maize (and other European crops) is regarded as a major contributing factor to many of Africa's rural food problems and social disharmony today. Maize is conceived to be part of a front - much like the activities of missionaries, hunters, and mineral seekers - in the capitalist penetration of pre-capitalist African societies. With the spread of maize and other European cash crops, the self-sufficiency that used to characterize pre-capitalist Shona and other African societies in terms of food was disrupted with the result that many people in Africa, today, and Zimbabwe, in particular, rely on food handouts either from the government or from non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

### **The Shona People**

The Shona are the dominant linguistic group in Zimbabwe. According to Beach (1983), they settled on the Zimbabwean plateau in about 1 A.D., having moved from the north and across the Zambezi River into the country. Up until the Nguni and White incursions in the 1830s and the 1890s, respectively, the Shona were the most dominant political group on the plateau. They were responsible for the creation of the powerful pre-colonial states of Great Zimbabwe, Torwa, Mutapa, and Rozwi (Beach, 1980).

The Shona were a community of crop farmers and animal herders. The principal crops grown were finger- millet, bulrush- millet, and sorghum. They also grew leguminous crops, chief of which was cowpeas (*nyemba*). Cultivation also included a variety of vegetables such as pumpkins. Of all the crops it was, however, the grain crops that were the most important. Bourdillon (1982) argues that life revolved around their production. Their success or otherwise had ripple effects on society. Such effects could include famine, starvation, and, in some cases, civil strife. Because of their importance, grain crops not only contributed to food security, but also to the nature of social relations among the Shona.

### **The value of traditional grain crops**

Beach (1983) posits that the Shona had grown traditional grain crops on the plateau for nearly 2000 years before the advent of colonialism. According to Palmer (1977), accounts of early European travelers echoed the fact that the plateau settlers grew a variety of food crops. Mazikana & Johnstone (1984) re-enforce the above by postulating that in 1893, a

settler family, the Moodie, who settled in the eastern part of the plateau observed the existence of an extensive, productive, and prosperous African population of that area.

Because of the food security they gave to the people, traditional grain crops were cultivated throughout the plateau. Millet and sorghum were ground into mealie-meal, which was prepared into some thick paste called *sadza* (which formed the main dish of the Shona and remained the main dish up to today). *Sadza* is often eaten as porridge. The flour from the grains was also made into cakes or unleavened bread. Millet and sorghum were both rich in carbohydrates and also contained the ingredients of a balanced diet.

Traditional grain crops also served the Shona communities in many other ways. Pursglove (1972) argues that bulrush millet and sorghum were peeled and cooked like rice. Both varieties of millet and sorghum were used to prepare traditional beer. The beer, made from sorghum, was particularly rich in vitamin B. Beer, itself, played a very important social role among the Shona as will be indicated later on. Bourdillon (1982) supports the above by further arguing that the grain was often used for barter trade. This was especially so during times of serious drought and famine, what Beach (1980) called '*shangwa*'. Some sweet sorghum reeds were chewed like sugarcane and so sorghum served a dual purpose. Sorghum and bulrush millet gains were used as chicken feed, while the stalks were used as animal feed. Stalks were often used as building, bedding, and fencing material. In particular, the stalks were also used to build granaries to store the variety of the grain crops harvested. The stalks could also be turned into manure by way of compost.

Palmer (1977) posits that grain crops, like maize (*chibagwe* or *magwere*), only became an important staple foodstuff in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Beach (1983) argues that maize initially came in only as a supplement to basic millet porridge. Other white grain crops, like wheat and rice, never really became important during the colonial period. The promotion of maize crop production, as alluded to earlier on, was associated with the entrenchment of settler colonial occupation. Its promotion impacted the production of the traditional grain crops of the plateau. So while traditional crops, like millet, continued to be the staple food of the Shona peoples during the first years of occupation, Schmidt (1996) contends that by 1910, most people, especially those that had taken up employment with the white colonialists in mines and farms, were going for maize meal instead. The surplus millet, produced after 1910, became virtually unmarketable as maize took a more prominent role. The limited amount, peddled to mine settlements thereafter, was mainly for the production of beer (National Archives of Zimbabwe File No. N9/1/14 Annual Report, Goromonzi District, 1911 & N9/1/5, 1912). The government's deliberate policy to kill the production of traditional grain crops continued into the 1930s when the Maize Control Act was enacted. Palmer (1977) argues that by 1939, African traditional grain cultivators had been destroyed completely. This led to an increasing cycle of rural poverty that drove many more people away to towns, and white mining settlements and reduced locals into what Mazikana & Johnstone (1984) called "helpless, dependent paupers, and serfs on their own land."

The Shona had become skilled producers of traditional grain crops by the time of the country's colonization in 1890. They had, over the years, gained vast experience in the growing of traditional crops and good knowledge of their climate, weather, and soils. The cultivators were, thus, able to plant the right grain crops in the right soils and at the right time of the year. According to Birmingham (1983), the cultivators, for example, grew the sorghum and millet varieties with the largest seeds, those least likely to shatter easily over the ground, those with the fastest germination rates, and those most

resistant to droughts. The cultivators also went for the quick ripening varieties and especially those whose heads ripened at once rather than at different times of the season. Such vast farming experience by the people promoted food security on the plateau.

The advantages of traditional grain crops over maize were many and varied. Millet and sorghum grew more quickly than maize. King (1985) put forward the argument that the traditional crops also did well in areas with less rainfall as compared to maize. They even did well where there was a short rainy season, like was the case in some areas of the plateau. Because the crops were drought resistant, they turned out to be the crops par excellence for the dry regions of the plateau. Pikirayi (2001) argued that such regions, today, constitute the country's agricultural regions four (4) and five (5) in which not only is the agricultural season short, but also the annual rainfall is usually less than 600 millimeters, even in exceptionally good years. The substitution of these crops was, therefore, not only dangerous but also suicidal as it led to chronic food shortages. Maize, which often substituted the crops, did not (and still does not) do well in such climatic conditions. Maize tends to require higher amounts of rainfall with periods of clear warm weather between the rains. This was not always available on the plateau.

The other climatic advantage of millet varieties was that they could be grown twice in one season where the rainfall season was long. In addition, traditional grain crops tended to be more resistant to witch weeds, as compared to maize. Mudenge (1988) argues that the crops were also less prone to pests, both in the field and during storage. This naturally made them more reliable sources of food and enhanced food security among the Shona.

Among the other advantages of millet and sorghum proposed by King (1985) was the fact that the crops could be easily grown on light, sandy soils, while maize flourished best in fertile, deep, well-drained soils, which were not too acidic. To add to the advantages of traditional crops was also the fact that the crops required less fertilization than maize. Where, for example, maize required large quantities of artificial fertilizers for the provision of nitrogen, phosphorus, and potash during growing and tussling, sorghum and millet could still do well even in the less fertile sandy areas. The requirement for artificial fertilizers today is not a thing that many farmers can meet easily. With the traditional crops, the farmers could, however, still boost their millet and sorghum production by merely adding manure or composite to their fields. The Shona kept large herds of cattle and, as a result, almost every household had manure to use in the cultivation of crops. Cattle raising and crop production were, therefore, complementary. Garlake (1973) supports the above argument in his cattle hypothesis thesis that he used to explain the rise of pre-colonial states, like the Great Zimbabwe and the Rozvi.

In terms of food preparation, traditional grain crops also offered an advantage over maize. The crops were easier to grind in the absence of modern grinding mills. According to Schmidt (1996), Shona women preferred millet and sorghum, which had smaller grains that were easier to pound and grind. The hard and dry maize kernels were much more difficult to stamp onto the floor. Maize required more effort that included soaking, drying, spreading over a number of days to dry before pounding and producing it into mealie-meal. Schmidt further argued that it took a team of 5-10 women a day to grind just a single bag of maize and this was the reason why right into the 1930s, the crop struggled to replace millet and sorghum as the staple food in many of the reserves that had been created by the colonial regimes for purposes of settling the country's indigenous African population. In such areas, grinding meals were a long way to come.

### **Traditional grain crops as a force for social cohesion among the Shona people**

Hamutyinei & Plagger (1987) argued that the centrality of traditional crops in enhancing social relations among the people was succinctly captured in the Shona saying, '*ukama igaswa hunozadziswa nekudya*' (relationships are on their own never adequate, they are only made adequate by people sharing food). Among the Shona, a person who could produce more food and, thus, had some to share with his/her neighbors was always held in great esteem. Such a person had more friends and relatives. By contrast, a person who was not prepared to share food with others was considered not to like those with whom he/she did not share food with. Traditional grain crops, which provided not just the staple food for the people, but also the much cherished traditional beer, were thus a key factor in promoting social relations among the people. It is important to point out that, in terms of beer, the Shona have, to this day, continued to find more favor in taking beer brewed from the malt of traditional crops as compared to beer from the malt of maize. Beer from the malt of traditional grains is thought to taste better. Beer drinking was usually a social event that brought many people together in song and dance and thereby acted as a vehicle for the further extension of relations among the people. The commemoration of the dead, which was a major social event among the Shona, was always done in accompaniment to beer drinking, song, and dance. During such times the importance of traditional crops was emphasized as beer for the commemoration of the dead could only be brewed using the malt of traditional crops.

Apart from the views above, it is important to stress that the production of traditional grain crops was such that the crops possessed a unique capacity to enhance social relations among the people. Beach (1983) argued that the production of the crops was largely labor intensive. The processes of land preparation and sowing in an age when ploughs were still largely unknown, weeding or hoeing, harvesting or reaping, threshing, and winnowing were such that any one person working alone would not realize much success as the work processes tended to be slow and demanding. It took, for example, a person more time to work the same piece of land in weeding *rapoko*, than in weeding maize. The greater spacing in the cultivation of the maize crop allowed for a faster work rate compared to the more compact spacing in *rapoko*, which tended to discourage the same work rate. For that reason, the production of the traditional crops became largely dependent on cooperative work.

As an approach towards work and especially more towards the production of grain crops, cooperation was the engine for social cohesion among the Shona people. Philosophical ideas (largely couched in the form of Shona proverbs) such as '*kuita mushandira pamwe samajuru*' (to work together like ants (in building an anthill)), '*chara chimwe hachitsvanyi inda*' (one finger cannot squash louse), '*kuchera mbeva kukomberana*' (to dig mice is to encircle them), '*rume rimwe harikombi churu*' (one man does not surround an anthill), '*kuturika denga remba kubatirana*' (to put up a roof to a hut is to assist each other) and '*zano ndega akasiya jira mumasese*' (know- all left his/her blanket in the dregs of beer) were all developed as ways of encouraging cooperative work among the people (Hamutyinei & Plagger, 1987).

Central to cooperation and the communal approach towards work was the concept of reciprocity. Reciprocity was the means by which the people affected a system of social insurance. It meant giving in response to another person's needs, but without expectation of direct or specific return. Largely speaking, reciprocity gave rise to the idea that 'if I attend your work party, you should also attend mine.' Among the Shona, the feeling was expressed in philosophical ideas, such as '*kandiro kanoenda kunobva kamwe*' (a small plate of food goes where another comes from) and '*kupa hwuturika*' (to

give is to put up for the time of need) (Hamutyinei & Plagger, 1987). Conventionally put, the ideas expressed the view that 'one good turn deserves another'. Unless the reasons for failure to reciprocate a good turn (by attending other people's work parties) were good enough to be appreciated by those whose work parties one failed to attend, failure to attend other people's work parties was always looked at with disfavor. According to Mudenge (1988), one risked becoming a social outcast if he/she constantly failed to attend other people's work parties.

Work parties were of two different, but closely related, forms. The first of these was '*humwe*' (beer work parties). '*Humwe*' was invariably known as '*hoka*', '*nhimbe*', or '*jakwara*'. In '*humwe*', an individual seeking to get the assistance of others in his/her work brewed some beer and prepared some food for the workers. '*Humwe*' made the work process a social event akin to a feast in which the workers rejoiced (and made merry) at the same time as they carried out some serious work business. Although '*humwe*' could be called for other work processes, such as the thatching huts or fencing of homesteads, it was largely an approach used in the production of grain crops. '*Humwe*' could be called for all the stages in the circle of grain production, from cutting down trees, digging the land, sowing the crops, and weeding the crops, to harvesting the crops. According to Bhila (1982), '*humwe*' was also called for such work as the threshing of the harvested crops and with the winnowing of the threshed crops.

The second of the work processes in the production of traditional grain crops was '*majangano*' (none beer work parties) (Gombe, 1998). '*Majangano*' operated as a simple labor exchange program in which members took to the work of each household in turn without the host having to prepare beer (and in some cases, even food). A generous host could, however, still make some provisions for his/her guests. Although '*majangano*' could be used in all the stages of grain production, much like '*humwe*', the work process tended to find favor with the last stages of production involving threshing and winnowing of grains. The two stages marking the end of the farming season required the farmers to remove their crops from the temporary holding places (usually bare rock on which threshing took place) to the more durable granaries before livestock could be allowed to roam freely in the fields during the dry season. '*Majangano*', which did not involve the cumbersome process of preparing beer, thus enabled for speedy removal of crops from insecure temporary holding places to which even thieves could wreck havoc if the crops were not quickly removed to secured places.

The two work processes, '*humwe*' and '*majangano*', not merely brought people together in the production of food, but also accorded the people the opportunity to socialize on a wide range of issues concerning their society. Bhila (1982) argues that '*humwes*' and '*majanganos*' for example, accorded members of the community the opportunity to share jokes and to tease each other at the same time as the people worked. Jokes and teases were all hallmarks of a sharing and peace loving society. Jokes and teases helped to remove tension and suspicions likely to lead to conflicts in a society. Other than jokes, the work processes often provided the opportune moment for which corrective measures could be taken against the erring members of the society. For example, those known to beat their wives or to do some such other anti-social activities could be rebuked either directly, by the elders during the rest sessions at work, or indirectly, through song about their bad habits during the work session. If a member, on realizing that the song was directed at his/her bad ways, showed anger, he/she would be reminded in the Shona parlance that '*anyumwa bere nderake*' (he who suspects a hyena is his/hers). This was Shona adage to show that only the guilty got offended or angry when evil things are mentioned. It was something akin to the old men getting discomfort at the mention of dry bones for fear it implies their

imminent death. The teases, however, enabled members of the society to know that their bad habits were known to the society and hence the need for them to make drastic reforms for them to remain acceptable as members of the community. It is important to note that such corrections of bad habits during the work processes were meant to prevent the bad habits from getting worse to the extent of warranting the attention of the chiefs. If such was to happen, the members risked being fined or even being banished from the area.

Apart from the above views, Gelfand (1979) postulates that the work parties also provided opportunities for the socialization of young members of society into adulthood. They were socialized into the importance of cooperative effort and the dangers of separatist work effort. Among the Shona, as Gelfand noted, even the children are taken out to the fields and each one works according to his/her ability, even if it only means looking after the baby as the elders are working. Laziness, with its potential to create a generation of misfits in society, such as thieves and robbers, was greatly discouraged among the children. The work sessions thus created important platforms for the socialization of the youngsters into the ways of the society. Other than being trained into the ways of work during the work sessions, children also learned more about their kith and kin through the processes of interaction as the elders related to each other during the work session. Ideas relating to respect, especially for the elders, were largely cultivated during the work sessions. During these sessions, elders were at liberty to send children, irrespective of who the parents were, on errands. Any child that showed signs of unwillingness upon being sent by an elder got rebuked. Children were taught to respect all elders as if they were their own 'fathers and mothers' (that is, their own parents).

The work processes of traditional grain crops, which fostered as they did, social cohesion among the people took a tumble with the introduction of European crops, especially maize. Maize encouraged separatist work effort as it could be produced by way of mechanization. On the other hand, the growing of maize in many of the rural areas where soils were poor and rains erratic meant that the opportunity costs for raising a 'humwe' were high compared to the results of the work to be achieved. Yields of maize, for example, tended to be poor in the majority of cases as a result of poor rains and lack of adequate fertilization. Also, the continuous cultivation of largely uneconomic plots in the rural areas (reserves) as a result of land expropriations by the colonial regimes ensured that crop production in the areas would remain poor and as such contributed to the disintegration of collective work effort and the attendant disruption of social relations that took place.

## **CONCLUSION**

The role of traditional grain crops in fostering good social relations has always been important among the Shona peoples of past and present day Zimbabwe. The labor intensive nature of the crops was of great importance in the crops' ability to bring people together in cooperative work. Cooperative work cultivated the spirit of 'oneness' or 'togetherness', which bound them in cordial social relations, especially social relations of production. European crops, especially maize, failed to generate the same capacity for cooperative work. The spread of maize in areas formerly dominated by traditional grain crops became part of the major reasons, including the onslaught of colonialism, in general, for the collapse of cooperative production work among the Shona people and the consequent disruption in social relations.

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