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RINDERPEST AND FAMINE IN THE EASTERN BECHUANALAND PROTECTORATE: THE CASE OF THE BANGWATO RESERVE

Phuthego Phuthego MOLOSIWA[1]

ABSTRACT

During the late nineteenth century, a pandemic of rinderpest exterminated large numbers of cattle in Southern Africa. Although in the Bechuanaland Protectorate the disease killed cattle only for two years —between 1896 and 1897, its effects were to last until the very end of the century. The loss of cattle disrupted subsistence production, disintegrated the social fabric and caused famines. I examine the subsistence crisis caused by the loss of cattle and the multiple coping mechanisms that people employed to negotiate the ensuing famine. Despite being thrown into a state of desperation, I argue, rural communities in the Bangwato Reserve appropriated and reconstituted certain features of their cultural and social life to negotiate the ecological shocks, particularly to protect subsistence.[2]

RÉSUMÉ

Pendant le dix-neuvième siècle, une pandémie de peste bovine a exterminé un grand nombre de bétail en Afrique australe. Bien que dans le protectorat du Bechuanaland la maladie n'ait tué le bétail que pendant deux ans – entre

[1] Lecturer at the Botswana College of Open and Distance Learning (Gaborone, Botswana).

[2] By the end of the 19th century, the Bangwato in present-day Central Botswana had colonized many communities along the Limpopo River to the far east of the country and incorporated them into the Bangwato State as a marker of their collective subordination. See Motzafi-Haller, 1994, "Historical Narratives", pp. 417-431; Molosiwa, 2013, "The Tragedy of the Ababirwas", pp. 56-112. When the colonial government established the native reserves in 1899, these groups were systematically subsumed into the Bangwato Reserve for purposes of political administration. It is for these reasons that I choose to use the ethnic designation, 'Bangwato' to refer to the diverse ethnicities in this paper.

1896 et 1897 – ses effets ont duré jusqu'à la fin du siècle. La perte de bétail a perturbé la production des subsistances, désintégré le fonctionnent social, et provoqué des famines. J'étudie la crise de subsistance causée par la perte de bétail et les mécanismes d'adaptation que les gens ont utilisés pour lutter contre la famine qui a en résulté. Je soutiens qu'en dépit d'être mis dans un état de désespoir, les communautés rurales dans la réserve Bangwato se sont approprié et ont reconstitué certaines caractéristiques de leur vie culturelle et sociale afin de faire face aux chocs écologiques, particulièrement pour protéger leur subsistance.

Introduction

Attributing the destruction of African livelihoods in the Bechuanaland Protectorate (hereafter Bechuanaland) at the end of the nineteenth century exclusively to rinderpest would be reductionist. This pandemic only constituted the spark that ignited a famine that had been developing since 1894.[3] By 1895, drought had already made arable agriculture derelict and exposed cattle to hunger and thirst.[4] The destruction, in the same year by the desert locust, of the few crops and patches of grazing that had survived drought also undermined livelihoods.[5] This paper examines the effects of the rinderpest pandemic – an infectious viral disease of ruminants, particularly cattle – on the Bangwato Reserve at the end of the nineteenth century. Primarily, I examine the ways in which indigenous knowledges of famines were reconstituted to negotiate the hardships caused by the loss of cattle and subsistence. Since indigenous knowledges are imbedded in the languages of the local communities, the evidentiary basis for this paper is oral sources, particularly linguistic expressions, such as proverbs and narratives of the elderly men and women. Most of my interviewees were old men and women who are the residue of what constituted the last generation born in the first

[3] Botswana National Archives (hereafter BNA), RC 3/2/1: Moffat's account on failure of crops due to drought and locusts, 1895.
[4] For a semi-arid environment like the Bechuanaland Protectorate's, where people depended almost invariably on rain-fed cultivation and open range cattle keeping, drought refers to a prolonged period of little, erratic or no rainfall when crop production and the quality of pasture and surface water are undermined, leading to subsistence crises.
[5] BNA, RC. 3/2/1: Moffat to Resident Commissioner, 1896.

half of the 20th century. Although very old, they still vividly remembered the stories they were told by their parents and grandparents about the devastations of rinderpest.

Taking cognizance of the potentiality of oral narratives to be misleading, however, I took great care to corroborate them against each other and, where possible, read them against documentary material. But for lack of documentary material on local coping strategies, I give the oral text authority because oral history is not necessarily false, but it has a different credibility to that of the written text. As Portelli argues, its credibility lies

> not in its adherence to fact, but rather in its [diversity] and departure from [fact] as imagination, symbolism and desire…. The diversity of oral history consists in the fact that 'wrong' statements are still psychologically 'true' and this truth may be equally as important as factually reliable accounts.[6]

Capturing the voices of the ordinary peoples is a social historian's creative technique of revealing the hidden transcript of how they dealt with the complex terrain of colonial, ecological and social change. By telling the story in a manner that makes sense to the local communities, the personal narratives, words, concepts and expressions used in this paper diverge from the oft-reified assumptions of the unreliability of the oral text and the accuracy of evidentiary history. This paper is therefore a project between the local Bangwato communities and myself, as the researcher and insider, in which we jointly controlled and shaped the flow of historical discourse about rinderpest and famine.

Numerous writers have adequately dealt with the origins and spread of rinderpest in Africa, including Botswana.[7] Other than the grand narrative of transmission and destruction of cattle, what we get in Botswana's literature relating to rinderpest, however, are snippets used only for reference purposes. These works draw their analytical frameworks from the vantage point of political economy narrative and thus offer only an elitist interpretation of the interests of the chiefs and of colonial capitalism in their analysis.[8] Focus on a political economy narrative is understandable

[6] Portelli, 1988, "What Makes Oral History Different", p. 67.
[7] Among others, see Spinage, 2003, *Cattle Plague*; Spinage, *African Ecology*, pp. 1057-90; Marquardt, 2005, "Water, Wood and Wild Animal Populations", pp. 73-98; van Onselen, "Reactions to Rinderpest", 474.
[8] See among others, Parsons, 1977, "The Economic History", pp. 126; Ramsay, 1998, "The Establishment and Consolidation", pp. 77-79.

because the available archival record and missionary reports emphasize the role of the state and the chiefs in famine relief and rinderpest eradication, thus obscuring local community responses and creativity. I do not seek to jettison this interpretation. I seek to understand further the multiple ways that the local communities themselves employed to conceptualize and negotiate the loss of cattle and the accompanying famine. While existing scholarship firmly locates the obliteration of cattle in local struggles between Africans and the colonial state, I forge an alternative conceptual framework to demonstrate that the Batswana drew from their linguistic and cultural repertoire to command the multiple discourses available to them about epidemics and famines to negotiate the dramatic socio-ecological change of the late 19th century.[9] In this sense, I argue, language, whether the meanings of words and expressions shifted or were retained, was central to the reformulation and transformation of local cultural constructs during this time of pestilence and subsistence crisis.

The only significant work that focuses on rinderpest in Bechuanaland restricts itself to the area south of the Molopo River that was initially British Bechuanaland and transferred to the Cape Colony in 1895.[10] Its narrative excludes communities north of the Molopo River. Like the rest, however, it focuses on the ecological communication of the contagion. It also follows the grand narrative of political economy where colonial capitalism takes precedence over local discourses of the pandemic. The historiographical lacuna on the socio-cultural impact of Rinderpest on the local communities is, on one hand, puzzling considering the cattle wealth that Bechuanaland held at the time.[11] On the other hand, this gap has to be expected because, despite the magnitude of the pandemic, there is no archival record of the voices of the local ordinary peoples with regard to their responses to the disease, colonial veterinary controls or to the famine that followed. This lacuna obscures the extent to which the Batswana depended on their cattle for sustenance.

Despite being agro-pastoralists, by the end of the nineteenth century the Bangwato depended on their cattle herds for livelihoods more than they did on crops. The second half of the nineteenth century saw a change in climatic conditions, with much of

[9] Words, concepts and expressions may remain the same, but their meanings may either change or be retained to enlarge traditions in order to deal with emerging socio-ecological changes. See Feierman, 1990, *Peasant Intellectuals*.
[10] Marquardt, 2005, "Water, Wood and Wild Animal Populations", pp. 73-98.
[11] The Batswana owned thousands of herds before the Rinderpest. See London Missionary Society (LMS) Letters, Willoughboy to Cousins, 9 June 1897.

Southern Africa receiving less rainfall than it used to.[12] Living in an environment of high climate variability, the Bangwato generally kept drought-resistant Tswana cattle breeds that acted as a buffer against the increasingly perishable rain-fed arable agriculture. A sudden ecological collapse at the end of the Century, I argue, disrupted livelihoods, destabilized subsistence practices and triggered famine. Rinderpest was particularly devastating for the eastern Bangwato Reserve where, according to several observers, such as travellers, missionaries and wagoners, tens of thousands of trek oxen were destroyed and the transport system brought to a complete halt in Palapye.[13] Though somewhat exaggerated, official guesstimates of 800,000 herd mortality also support eye-witness accounts about the colossal losses of cattle herds in the Bangwato Reserve.[14]

In other parts of Southern Africa, scholarship has focused its interpretation of the relentless obliteration of cattle exclusively on the religiously motivated rebellions that characterized the Rinderpest period.[15] Resonating with ideas of millenarianism and early African resistance to colonial rule the existing body of scholarship thus summarily politicizes rural Africans' responses to colonial policy.[16] Such resistance clichés reify ideas of the ordinary African victim and have therefore obscured the adaptability and resilience of Southern African rural communities to socio-ecological shocks. This paper concurs with a recent counter-argument that political uprisings associated with the pandemic were not generic to the whole region and that such failure to precipitate revolutions is worthy of historical enquiry.[17] I, nevertheless, differ with a subsequent claim that rinderpest failed to precipitate political turbulence because it was only a temporary setback.[18] The idea of rinderpest being a temporary

[12] Endfield and Nash, 2002, "Drought, Dessication and Discourse", pp. 821-841. For Botswana, see Andringa, 1984, "The Climate of Botswana", pp. 117-125.

[13] See reports from Percival (1918); Arnold Theiler (1897); Hutcheon (1896); F L Puxley (1929); Bechuanaland Resident Commissioner, Mr. Netwton (1896). These are cited in Spinage, 2012, *African Ecology*, pp. 1078-1080.

[14] For official guesstimates, see BNA, RC 3/2/1: Moffat to Resident Commissioner, 1896; *Bechuanaland Protectorate Annual Reports, 1896-97. Report for the Northern Protectorate*, p. 13.

[15] van Onselen, 1972, "Reactions to Rinderpest", pp. 473-488; Saker and Eldridge, 1971, "The Origins", pp. 299-317; Ballard, 1986, "The Repercussions of Rinderpest", pp. 421-50.

[16] Peires, 1989, *The Dead Will Arise*; Ranger, 1979, *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia*.

[17] Phoofolo, 1993, "Epidemics and Revolutions, pp. 112-43.

[18] Phoofolo, 2003, "Face to Face With Famine", pp. 503-527.

disruption obscures not only the socio-cultural effects of the disease, but it also reveals the extent to which existing scholarship is oblivious to the subtlety of famines. Pule Phoofolo's narrative that the prevalence of hunger and malnutrition in Lesotho bordered on famine provides a good example of the elusiveness of famines to existing works.[19]

In the Protectorate, lack of rebellions during this tumultuous period did not necessarily rest on the temporariness of the pandemic and its failure to cause a famine. Nor was it a reflection of the Batswana's timidity. Rather, not having been colonized through coercion and military violence like in the settler colonies of Rhodesia and South Africa, the Batswana were less likely to rebel against their guardian angel, the British Queen, whom they affectionately called *Mmamosadinyana*, or "the little woman", probably for "protecting" them from Boer encroachment.[20] In addition, Bechuanaland was historically a semi-arid land, prone to famines, leading to communities developing great adaptability.[21] The Bangwato's sense of self-reliance and capacity to reconstitute their historical and cultural practices of herd movements away from the locus of disease and of food acquisition, I argue, were more of the primary preoccupations than organizing politically.

Existing scholarship may have avoided putting great emphasis on famines since there is no record of high rates of starvation and human mortality directly associated with the pandemic.[22] Famines, eco-history has demonstrated, are ecologically and socially mediated processes that gradually impoverish communities and may not necessarily kill people.[23] In the Bangwato Reserve, emerging ecological transformations insidiously undermined pre-existing alternative coping strategies. For instance, the traditional facility of rationing produce from the "tribal" *masotla* (grain stores) became ineffectual because very little grain was produced.[24] As these mechanisms got

[19] Phoofolo, 2003, "Face to Face With Famine", pp. 503-527.
[20] Such unquestioning respect and support for the British Monarchy resonated across all British High Commission Territories in Southern Africa. In an unrelated case, the Basotho raided Boer cattle, accusing the Boers of rebelling against the Queen. Phoofolo, 2003, "Face to Face with Famine", p. 510.
[21] Wylie, 1989, "The Changing Face of Hunger", pp. 159-199.
[22] Only in East Africa do we get accounts of famine mortality. See for example, Normile, 2005, "Driven to extinction", pp. 1606–1609.
[23] Wylie, 2001, *Starving on a Full Stomach*; Vaughan, 1987, *The Story of an African Famine.*
[24] *Bechuanaland Protectorate Annual Reports, 1896-97. Report for the Northern Protectorate*, p. 14

eroded, households and communities were thrown into a poverty trap from which it was difficult to emerge.

A shattered ecology: drought, locusts and hunger

By 1895, a year before the outbreak of Rinderpest, much of Bechuanaland was already experiencing drought and invasions by swarms of crop and pasture eating desert locusts.[25] Being a semi-arid environment, with high climate and rainfall variability the country experienced drought that was induced by shortage of moisture to support crop cultivation and vegetation regeneration. Erratic rainfall drastically reduced crop yields, making it difficult for households to store food for succeeding dry years. Inadequate rainfall also compromised the quality of pasture and dried all traditional sources of water, thus having a debilitating impact on cattle. Despite being able to withstand harsh conditions, Tswana cattle had therefore become emaciated by the time the full impact of Rinderpest was felt a year later, leading to substantial losses.

The cumulative effects of these natural mishaps compromised livelihoods and led to serious food deficits and deficient diets, the consequences of which were widespread hunger and susceptibility to infectious diseases in the Bangwato Reserve. Hunger and disease were symptomatic of famine conditions. Some old women remember their grandmothers telling them: "*gone go bohiwa mala ka tukwi*, (people tied their stomachs with head scarfs), *motsetse a ja ka lebogo*, (the nursing mother eating with her hands)."[26] These metaphors – which continue to galvanize talk about years of hunger in present Botswana – were respectively expressions of great hunger and the difficulties of negotiating food insecurity. While in their idiomatic usage they communicated distress, these proverbs also constituted echoes of the resilience and creativity of the Tswana rural communities when faced with famines. That is, communities and individuals had for generations prior to rinderpest been capable of creatively drawing from their linguistic repertoire to survive serious declines in the food supply.

[25] BNA, RC 3/2/1: Moffat Account on Failure of Crops due to Drought and Locusts, 1895.
[26] Interview, K Phuthego (Mogapi, 23 December 2013); M Makgoba (Sefhophe, 24 December 2013); M Mashaba (Molaladau, 15 January 2014).

In the traditions of many communities of the Bangwato Reserve, the *batsetse* (sing. *motsetse*), nursing mothers, underwent lengthy confinement periods within which they were cared for and not allowed to use their bare hands to touch food for purposes of hygiene. However, during times of subsistence crises, such as the one under study, these restrictions were relaxed as the *batsetse* had to fend for themselves. Thus, the subsistence crises that accompanied rinderpest undermined even the most hitherto adhered to public health practices and forced people to disrespect taboos in order to survive. The relaxation of rules governing certain cultural practices and values, such as health care and the *botsetse* (confinement of mothers who have newly given birth), illuminates the Bangwato's struggles to cope with a new, rigid colonial landscape with legally enforced borders, which led people to live on the razor's edge, never completely safe from ecological stresses.

To the Bangwato, cattle were not only a reproducer of social relations.[27] They were an important source of income and insurance against famines. Whenever there was not enough rainfall for crop production, people lived almost entirely on the milk and meat of their herds. They could also exchange herds for grain with other communities who would have produced surplus crops. Additionally, by the end of the nineteenth century, cattle had become central to crop production as they were used in cultivation.[28] Unfortunately, during the period under study, the whole region was experiencing agro-pastoral decline, making it difficult to exchange cattle for food or use them for cultivation.

Between 1895 and 1899, locusts and drought destroyed both crops and pasture. Despite their value as a supplementary diet, locusts could not be used as a substitute for grain and could therefore not offset food deficits. In fact, to many people, as much as they provided an alternative source of food, locusts were more of a nuisance.[29] These denudations caused widespread hunger and malnutrition, particularly among women, the elderly and children. As historian Megan Vaughan aptly demonstrates, famine is a gendered phenomenon, disproportionately affecting publics who have limited opportunities to accumulate social capital.[30] The destructions caused by

[27] Molosiwa, 2013, "The Tragedy of the Ababirwas."
[28] "King Khama interviewed by a lady", *Christian World*, 12 September, 1895. Cited in Parsons, 1998, *King Khama, Emperor Joe*, p. 125.
[29] BNA, RC 3/2/1: Moffat Account on Failure of Crops due to Drought and Locusts, 1895.
[30] Vaughan, 1987, *The Story of an African Famine.*

locusts and drought, particularly on women who depended on crop cultivation for subsistence, were graphically described by the Assistant Commissioner at Palapye in 1895:

> Assisted by a severe drought, the tropical sun has so parched and dried up the soil that a very small proportion of grain sown managed to struggle above the surface of the ground, and this subsequent visit of swarms of locusts from the desert completed the work of devastations.[31]

For the Bangwato women, as with other African women in agricultural communities, their role as cultivators did not symbolize male domination and exploitation of females. Crop cultivation was a space of autonomy for women where they produced food beyond the masculine worlds of men.[32] It gave them control over household subsistence and with it power over men within the domestic space. The foregoing provides a useful corrective to essentialist renditions of the disproportionately gendered forms of power in agro-pastoral societies where men have *de facto* control over women.[33] By undermining arable agriculture, drought and locusts eroded the power of women over the environment and exposed entire households to hunger.

By 1896, missionaries were already talking of a state bordering on starvation in Bechuanaland.[34] But other missionaries and colonial officials saw the loss of livelihoods as an opportunity for industrialising South Africa to procure cheap labour from the Bangwato Reserve and inculcate a work ethic in the "lazy" Bangwato men. The Reverend Howard Williams proclaimed in 1896:

> Certainly the best thing that could happen as far as teaching them the value of labour…. Work was the last thing thought of except among poorer classes and with this, the period rarely exceeds six months. All that is altered.[35]

However, there are no official statistics showing that the ruinous impact of the pandemic caused a mass exodus of Bangwato men to seek wage employment. In fact

[31] BNA, RC 3/2/1: Moffat Account on Failure of Crops due to Drought and Locusts, 1895.
[32] Jacobs, 2003, *Environment, Power, and Injustice*, p. 29.
[33] See among others, Kinsman, 1983, ''Beasts of Burden", pp.39–54; Comaroff and Comaroff, 1990, "Goodly Beasts, Beastly Goods, pp. 199-2002.
[34] BNA, RC 3/2/1: Moffat to Resident Commissioner, 1896.
[35] *Bechuanaland Protectorate Annual Reports,* 1896.

missionary reports indicate that the Bangwato men abhorred wage work.[36] Analysis of linguistic change demonstrates this point. In the Setswana language, the etymology of the verb *go bereka* (to work), or *mmereko* (derived from the Afrikaans word, *werk*, whose English equivalent is "work"), can be traced to the rise of wage labor earlier in the 1870s when Batswana men, through chiefly fiat, were sent out to go and work in the diamond mines of South Africa to raise tribal revenue.[37] Like the indigenous concept of *tiro,* a derivative of *go dira* (to do), *go bereka* can connote both paid and unpaid labour. But the Bangwato valued *tiro* more than *mmereko*, not only because of its indigeneity to their language, but for its connotation of work within a kin-based mode of production, particularly farming and herding.

These linguistic differences are crucial to understanding the social and cultural impacts of industrial labour within families in the Bangwato Reserve. *Tiro*, as it referred to unpaid agro-pastoral work, "inculcated values of social discipline and reinforced the authority of the sociopolitical hierarchy, something wage work threatened."[38] Isaac Schapera, the doyen of Botswana studies, also observed how male elders in the 1930s in the Bangwato Reserve did not believe wage work had value.[39] Forty years later, anthropologist Hoyt Alverson concurred, explaining that ploughing fields and animal husbandry all require masculine activity, "almost all of which the Tswana describe as actions they want to do. To be at wage work is not deemed by most to be "doing" anything at all."[40] Thus, "doing" defined the ideal Setswana masculinity and which was under unprecedented threat during the tumultuous Rinderpest period. With these linguistic insights, the social crisis of wage work is better understood because the Bangwato men deemed industrial "work" as "idle" activity. Men who left their homes in search of employment, whether they found jobs or not, by and large wallowed in idleness.

Unhappy with the Bangwato men's lack of keenness to seek wage work, Europeans labelled them as lazy and therefore seldom employed the few that availed themselves. As missionary John Moffat reported in 1896, railway contractors refused to hire the Bangwato men because "the Bechuanas do not work well and are too fond of going

[36] London Missionary Society (LMS) Letters, Willoughboy to Cousins, June 1897.
[37] Schapera, 1947, *Migrant Labour,* p. 26; Lord Hailey, 1952, *Native Administration,* p. 160.
[38] Livingston, 2005, *Debility and the Moral Imagination,* pp. 118-119.
[39] Schapera, 1947, *Migrant Labour*.
[40] Alverson, 1978, *Mind in the Heart of Darkness,* pp. 118-122.

home at short notice."[41] Contrary to European stereotypes of indolent Batswana men, evidence suggests that the Bangwato men abhorred wage employment because it undermined their efforts to produce food for their families during a time when droughts were recurring at short intervals. Earlier in 1891, for instance, a group of Bangwato men employed in the construction of the Mafikeng-Bulawayo Telegraph line went on strike at the beginning of the ploughing season. These men admonished Khama (the Bangwato chief) and their European employers for tying them to wage employment at the expense of their households' subsistence needs:

> It is all very well for Khama and you white men. You have people who will till your lands, and take care of your crops and families in your absence, but we have none; and if we do not [plough] ourselves, no one will do it for us, and our wives and children will starve and die.[42]

The agency of these men, who openly challenged chiefly authority and their European employers in order to return home and plough their fields, coupled with Europeans' reluctance to hire the purportedly indolent Batswana men meant that there were very few Bangwato engaged in wage work.

By 1896 drought combined with rinderpest to exterminate cattle and relegate many men to a perilous social position of cattlelessness regardless of whether or not they "worked" in the so-called "projects of civilization", such as road and railway construction.[43] Wealthy men became the *bahumanegi* (the poor), leading to the pandemic becoming known as *re tshwana hela* (we are all the same), and thus collapsing pre-existing hierarchical boundaries pertaining to wealth.[44] The death of cattle also eroded the purchasing power of many households since they now had no cattle to sell or trade for food. In addition, European stores inflated the prices of foodstuffs, such as corn meal, to profit from the subsistence crises.[45] Despite the inflated prices, the Bangwato were spending money "with reckless extravagance" on

[41] BNA, RC 3/2/1: Moffat Account on Relief, 1896; *Bechuanaland Protectorate Annual Reports, 1896-7*, p. 5.
[42] Parsons, 1977, "The Economic History", p. 124.
[43] BNA, RC 3/2/1: Moffat's eye-witness report on loss by Rinderpest, 1896.
[44] Interview, B Phuthego (Mogapi, 28 December 2013); K Moagi (Maunatlala, 6 January 2014).
[45] Parsons, 1977, "The Economic History", p. 126.

luxuries, such as sweets, thus exacerbating poverty in the Reserve.[46] Added to the rising poverty levels was the unavailability of transportation, which made it more difficult to secure food from surplus areas.[47]

The foregoing resonates with the food security scholarship's idea that famine occurs because people lose their entitlement to food due to a host of factors, including failure in own production, deficient diets, loss of purchasing power and inability to secure food from surplus areas.[48] The inability to command food, however, did not completely erode people's resilience. As central pillars of cultural life, such as the traditional food storage facilities, failed to cope with the ensuing subsistence crisis, old traditions were re-appropriated to negotiate the famine. The Bangwato re-appropriated many of their indigenous concepts, words, expressions and proverbs and used them to build communal and differentiated responses to the famine.

Turning desperation into survival: famine and coping mechanisms

The subsistence crises that accompanied rinderpest were so cataclysmic for the rural communities that observers thought that rinderpest killed people as much as it did animals. One Andreas Lefantiri from Lesotho claimed in 1897 that the disease obliterated Bechuanaland's human populations as much as it did animals. Writing to a newspaper in Lesotho, Lefantiri asserted:

> After the death of cattle, the disease enters human beings. Oh! You have never seen anything of the like before! In one day, approximately 100 people die in every village.[49]

Contrary to Lefantiri's claims, there is no evidence that the Protectorate communities contracted rinderpest. Human mortality in the wake of the pandemic can be ascribed to debilitation on account of malnutrition and opportunistic infections as a result of the loss of certain constituents of the diet due to shortage of milk and cereals.[50] As the famine intensified and people became desperate, old traditions and

[46] *Bechuanaland Protectorate Annual Reports, 1896-7,* p. 14.
[47] BNA, RC 3/2/1: Moffat Eye Witness Report on Loss by Rinderpest, 1896.
[48] Diana Wylie, 2001, *Starving on a Full Stomach.*
[49] "Letter from Andreas Lefantiri", *Leselinyana* [Morija], 15 June 1897. Cited in Phoofolo, 1993, "Epidemics and Revolutions", p. 127.
[50] BNA, RC 3/2/1: Moffat's eye witness report on loss by Rinderpest, 1896.

practices were appropriated, reconstituted and, some of them, discarded to offset the crisis. In the end, indigenous epistemologies about famines shaped many people's decisions about what temporary coping mechanisms to adopt for the duration of the famine.

Many people sought recourse to pre-existing coping strategies, the sustainability of which Europeans had questioned. A white farmer, for instance, talked of Africans postponing "death by eating caterpillars, bark, roots and long-decayed corpses [of cattle]."[51] Such doubts about indigenous famine coping strategies are revealing of Europeans' little knowledge of Africans' food systems and how they shifted with ecological shocks. The Bangwato were not just agro-pastoralists. They were also hunters and foragers, though for the wealthy, hunting and foraging were part-time activities. In times of normal food supply, hunting, an exclusively male activity in pre-colonial times, was a pastime for men at the cattle posts. Mostly they hunted small game, such as antelope, the meat of which was seldom shared with the women and children in the villages. Only meat of large animals, such as kudu and buffalo would often be shared with women and children because it was plentiful.[52] But such large animal meat was a rarity because it only became available occasionally following a community hunting expedition sanctioned by the king.[53] Thus, hunting occupied a marginal position in household subsistence, and was therefore a supplementary measure as the Bangwato lived on a diet of cereal, milk, vegetables, and occasionally, meat from domesticates.[54] Conversely, during famines hunting was carried out extensively.[55] For the rinderpest period, however, hunting was not much useful as the preferred cloven-hooved wild game was as affected as cattle.[56]

On the other hand, foraging, a female domain, was an important contributor to the traditional diet as it added to the nutritional value of the meals, particularly for poor families.[57] At the end of the nineteenth century, there was a phenomenal rise in

[51] "Rotting Carcasses and Ruined Men", *Farmers' Weekly,* 26 Dec. 2003, p. 32.
[52] Interview, E Basupi (Serowe, 15 December 2010); M Rashasho (Mogapi, 26 December 2010).
[53] Interview, O Serumola and A Masilo (Bobonong, 09 February 2011).
[54] Interview, O Serumola and A Masilo (Bobonong, 09 February 2011).
[55] Bechuanaland Protectorate Game Proclamation no. 19 of 1940.
[56] Selous, 1908, *African Nature*, pp. 131-137. Spinage, 2003, *Cattle Plague*, p. 533
[57] Zachrisson, *Hunting for Development*, pp. 94-97; Interview, M Makgoba (Sefhophe, 25 December 2010); M Montsosi (Bobonong, 09 February 2011).

gathering, with some men becoming gatherers and whole families relying on wild food plants, worms and insects.[58] One most relied upon food of the wilderness was the *mophane* worm, which though seasonal, added nutritional value to the diet. These are caterpillars that seasonally occur and feed on the leaves of the *mophane* tree, scientifically known as *Acanthocampa belina*. Highly nutritious, *phane*, as the Batswana call these caterpillars, continues to form a part of the cuisine in many Tswana communities today. It is preserved by cooking or smoking, drying and storage in a cool place, particularly the grass-roofed mud hut. In that way, people can consume their stores until the next harvest.[59]

Other households subsisted on semi-decomposed meat of Rinderpest animals, which the Europeans conflated with "long decayed corpses."[60] The eating of semi-decomposed cattle meat was a traditional delicacy among Bangwato men in the rural communities. Such meat is called *nama e e dikologileng seolo*.[61] In Tswana culinary habits, meat cannot be eaten only when it is deemed to be *bodile*, or rotten. Eating semi-decomposed meat was a longstanding practice based on the notion that *kgomo ga e latlhwe*, or it is forbidden to throw away cattle. Also, based on the expression: *lebitla la kgomo ke legano* (the grave of a cow is the mouth), it was socially unacceptable to throw away the meat of cattle, regardless of how they died.[62] For the Bangwato, as with the rest of the Batswana communities, the idea of *phitlho*, 'burial', connotes wholeness. If meat of a cow was to be eaten, nothing of it was to be thrown away because eating meat was akin to burying the cattle. Perhaps this belief that cattle should be "buried in the mouths of people" informed Herskovits's idea of the "cattle complex."[63]

[58] Interview, G Mooketsi (Serowe, 15 January 2014); G Garebatho (Palapye, 25 July 2011); M Tseleng (Lerala 05 January 2014).
[59] Interview M Molosiwa (Kgagodi, 10 August 2011); D Molebatsi (Kgagodi, 10 August 2011).
[60] "Rotting Carcasses and Ruined Men", *Farmers' Weekly*, 26 Dec. 2003, p. 32.
[61] The use of the euphemism, *nama e e dikologileng selo* rather than *nama e e bodileng* (rotten meat) was important since nobody would fathom eating rotten meat. Interview, J Galebotse (Serowe, 5 February 2014); B Sekonopo (Mahalapye, 23 December 2013).
[62] Interview, O Serumola and A Masilo (Bobonong, 09 February 2011).
[63] In 1926, anthropologist Herskovits postulated that Africans were so emotionally and spiritually attached to their cattle that the cattle were seen as sacrosanct. Herskovits, 1926, "The Cattle Complex", pp. 230-272.

Under conditions of normal food supply, semi-decomposed meat was eaten on occasions and was not usually an integral part of the everyday diet. With increasingly long hot days at the end of the nineteenth century, and meat being the only plentiful foodstuff, subsisting on deficient diets centring on *nama e e dikologileng seolo* from infected cattle is likely to have caused food poisoning and opportunistic infections. In the Transvaal, for instance, reports were abounding about pervasive food poisoning among Africans, which the Secretary of Native Affairs attributed to eating meat from animals killed by disease.[64] With the Transvaal bordering the eastern Bangwato Reserve, there is likelihood that border communities on either side had relatively similar experiences of the famine and coping strategies may have transcended the borders. But not all households and communities survived by subsisting on rinderpest cattle. In rare cases where some cattle were not infected, the owners, who "recognized the deadly nature of the pandemic and the certainty that whole herds [were going] to perish", slaughtered them to make biltong.[65] Subsisting on a predominantly unbalanced diet of meat may have prevented starvation, but it also caused deficiency diseases, such as scurvy, which contributed to human mortality.[66]

The loss of an important source of draught power in oxen and rising levels of deficiency disease forced communities to re-appropriate traditional coping strategies. Many women took recourse to the traditional *mogoma*, long-handled hoe for cultivation in order to produce food for their families.[67] The result was a reduction in the extent of the land prepared for cultivation. Since during this time the rains stopped as quickly as they started, the slowness and physical exertion of the hoe meant that women failed to utilize the little moisture available in the soil. Prospectively, the hardships would continue beyond the rinderpest period. In particular, people's ability to secure food was further eroded by the introduction of colonial taxation later in 1899.[68] The desire to tax an impoverished and emaciated colonial subject was borne out of the government's objective of building a self-financing colonial model in order to spend very little in administration and therefore maintain economic prudence.

[64] Ballard, 1986, "The Repercussions of Rinderpest", p. 444.
[65] BNA, RC 3/2/1: Moffat Account on Relief, 1896.
[66] *Bechuanaland Protectorate Annual Reports, 1896-7. Report for the Northern Protectorate*, p.10.
[67] Interview, M Mashaba (Molaladau, 15 July 2011); D Molebatsi (Kgagodi, 10 August 2011).
[68] Makgala, 2004, "Taxation in the Tribal Areas", pp. 279-303.

But the Tax was followed by widespread defaults and evasions as men, the primary taxpayers, resisted or simply did not have the means to pay.[69] As Schoenbrun teaches us:

> A history of power is more than a history of domination and resistance. It is also a history of creativity and dispersed and contradictory notions of the texture of power.[70]

Schoenbrun's insight is a representation of the ordinary peoples' capacity to invent new sources of alternative power, in this case deliberate tax defaults, to contest the institutionalized power of the state. Initially, the chiefs also protested against colonial taxation mainly due to the ravages of drought, famine and the loss of cattle. They also feared that colonial taxation would eclipse their own efforts at taxing their people. But after being offered ten per cent as commission for the tax they collected from their communities, they relented and started colluding with colonial officials to "persuade" men to migrate to the mines, though with little success.[71] The tax revenue, however, did not benefit any community in the entire Bechuanaland. For instance, no medical services were provided despite a rise in disease incidence.[72] Eventually, lack of medical services had reverberating demographic effects for the country as human mortality escalated and population growth was considerably arrested.[73] Human mortality across all communities was estimated at about twenty per cent of the total population.[74] Despite rising mortality, the tax revenue continued to be siphoned away to finance general administration.[75] No wonder colonial taxation came to be imagined as a form of "state-sanctioned banditry".[76]

Faced with a government that provided little social welfare and a declining agro-pastoral economy, the Bangwato re-appropriated and reconstituted certain features of Tswana cultural life to negotiate the famine. It was customary for people who would otherwise have failed to command food to benefit from expressions that denoted

[69] BNA, RC 3/2/1: Moffat Account on Relief, 1896; *Blue Book on Native Affairs*, 1899, p. 65.
[70] Schoenbrun, 1998, *A Green Place, A Good Place*.
[71] Makgala, 2004, "Taxation in the Tribal Areas", p. 286.
[72] Molefi, 1996, *A Medical History*, p. 9.
[73] BNA, S 43/4: High Commissioner to Hon. Lewis Harcourt MP, 6 Nov. 1904,
[74] Ramsay, 1998, "The Establishment and Consolidation", p. 72.
[75] R.K.K. Molefi, 1996, *A Medical History.*
[76] CJ Makgala, 2004, "Taxation in the Tribal Areas", p. 298.

sharing, such as *sejo se nnye ga se hete molomo* (lit. little food does not pass the mouth) and *bana ba motho ba kgaona tlhogwana ya ntsi* (lit. siblings share the head of a fly).[77] The former is a teaching to siblings to always share food while the latter implies that no matter how little the food, it can be shared. These proverbs express the communality of food as a pillar of social cohesion. The *Baeng*, visitors, would be invited to share a meal or something would be prepared for them to eat even if they had visited outside meal times. The term *baeng* connotes both invited and uninvited guests. During this time of subsistence crises, as with preceding famines, most of the visitors came uninvited, but they could still be offered food depending on availability.[78]

Such visitors included the *bafeti* (the passers-by). The word *bafeti*, in its Tswana idiomatic usage, is derived from *feta* (pass). The *bafeti* were dreaded for their notoriety to *apaya ka lenao* (lit. cook by one's foot), or visiting with the aim of partaking in other families' meals. People who "cooked with their feet" were primarily the poor community members known for wandering about the village, entering other households with the hope of being offered food. They could be invited to share a meal if they were lucky to *feta*, or pass-by, during meal times. Among the Bakalanga of Serowe, visitors of any kind, upon reaching the entrance of every household they wanted to enter, would shout: "*nda pinda*!", a Tswana equivalent of *ke a feta*! (I am passing by!).[79] Courtesy required the owner of the household they were supposedly passing-by to shout back: "*pindani*!" (pass on!), or *feta*! in Tswana parlance, to invite them in, as keeping quiet would be interpreted as antisocial. Contrary to its English equivalent of "pass on!" the call, "*pindani*!," connoted an invitation to enter the compound. The word *bafeti* and the call *pindani* were respectively organic to the Bangwato and the Kalanga languages. Before the subsistence crises of the Rinderpest era, however, such visits from the *bafeti* were few and far apart.

As household subsistence became dangerously compromised at the end of the nineteenth century, the numbers of the *bafeti*, and the frequency of their visits, increased in tandem as desperate people tried to exploit any available practice of

[77] Interview, M Mashaba (Molaladau 15 July 2011); D Molebatsi (Kgagodi 10 August 2011).
[78] Interview, G Mooketsi (Lerala, 15 January 2014); K Moatswi, (Maunatlala, 23 January 2014).
[79] Interview, Z Bakani and C Maposa (Serowe 12 November 2011).

courtesy. This led to a dramatic rise in the practice of *apaya ka lenao*, which under normal circumstances would accord visitors access to the meals of other households. The call, "*le re tima eng*!" (what are you not sharing with us!), became common parlance as the *bafeti* tried to solicit invitations from other households to share their meals.[80] Subsequently, the tradition of sharing was undermined as people tried to protect household subsistence from the *bafeti*. The Bangwato drew from their linguistic repertoire to reconstitute the *bafeti* into the *di eta di ema*, or "things that do not pass on," for their notoriety in entering other households for the sole purposes of getting food.[81] One social theorist has termed this process of giving people the image of things as "thingfication."[82]

The reconstruction of the *bafeti* into these invasive things called the *di eta di ema* dehumanized them and, in historian Clapperton Mavhunga's terminology, transformed them into "vermin beings", thus assuming a "pestiferous" identity.[83] By "thingfying" the *bafeti*, the Bangwato were redefining the hungry people's attempts to secure food as invasive. To effectively subvert the power of the scavenging *di eta di ema*, households discarded one of their important features of food sharing and courtesy. They stopped offering uninvited guests food, thus undermining the proverb: *sejo se nnye ga se hete molomo* (lit. that which is small does not pass the mouth), or no matter how small the food is, it is always enough for everyone to partake in.[84] In times when the majority of households had enough food, this proverb expressed food sharing, a component of social cohesion that provided meal entitlements to all community members and therefore ensured general food security.

Because of the capacity of hungry people to manipulate traditional practices of courtesy, preparation of food and eating times also became highly guarded secrets. Divulging information about a family's eating habits would most likely attract unwanted visitors. For this reason, children who dared divulge such information to outsiders were certain to forfeit a meal as they would be told: "your meal was offered

[80] Interview, B Sekonopo (Mahalapye, 23 December 2013); M Makgoba (Sefhophe, 25 December 2010); K Phuthego, (Mogapi, 25 December 2010).
[81] Interview, M Makgoba (Sefhophe, 25 December 2010); K Phuthego (Mogapi, 25 December 2010); M Mashaba 15 (Molaladau, July 2011).
[82] Césaire, 2000 [1955], *Discourse*, p. 42.
[83] Mavhunga, 2011, "Vermin Beings", pp. 151-176.
[84] Interview, K Matubako (Mogapi, 23 December 2013); M Mashaba (Molaladau, 15 July 2011).

to your visitors."[85] Missionary impressions indicate that food was not easy to secure to the extent that preparation and eating of meals was done late at night and with the maximum silence possible.[86] The emerging practice of eating in silence produced a new cautionary phrase: *didimala*! *O tla re biletsa di eta di ema*! (hush! You will attract the things that do not pass on!).[87] This linguistic innovation is a reflection of emerging social sanctions that were particularly developed to silence children who, after going for a whole day without a meal, got excited in the evenings in anticipation of something to eat. Thus, social integration was weakened as individuals and households resorted to clandestine mechanisms of protecting their subsistence.

The famine also produced new gendered forms of power struggle. Men uncharacteristically invaded women's spaces, particularly the cooking space. Under normal circumstances, the cooking space was the preserve of women, particularly when it did not involve the preparation of large amounts of meat.[88] But some men started sticking around such women's spaces, especially during meal preparation times. There are folktales of men sitting next to their wives during dishing times to make sure that they got the largest share of the food. Such displays of masculine power in the subsistence domain are graphically captured in old woman, Ketholegile Phuthego's reminiscence of what she was told by her grandmother:

> My grandmother used to tell us stories of greedy men who would tap their foot on the ground while their wives were dishing. The number of tappings equalled the number of spoons of food he wanted put in his plate. He would keep tapping until he was satisfied that there was enough food in his plate. If he doesn't stop tapping, the wife doesn't stop dishing or she could be thoroughly caned.[89]

These gender struggles illuminate the hidden transcript of the social realities of change during times of food insecurity. The testimony gives us important insights into men's use of masculine power to control all forms of productive resources. It also

[85] Interview, M Makgoba (Sefhophe, 25 December 2010); K Phuthego, (Mogapi, 25 December 2010).
[86] BNA, RC 3/2/2: W.H. Surmon (Resident Magistrate, Southern Bechuanaland Prottectorate) to Resident Commissioner (Mafikeng), 1896.
[87] Interview, M Makgoba (Sefhophe, 25 December 2010).
[88] Interview, K Moatswi (Serowe, 23 January 2014); K Phuthego (25 December 2010).
[89] Interview, K Phuthego (25 December 2010).

exposes the Bangwato men's use of patriarchal power to justify their greed. To contest such greed induced displays of masculine power, women invented new forms of naming, with some of them giving their sons names that had resonance with food preparation, such as *Rradijo* (he who loves food), *Sebeso* (fireplace), and *Pitsana* (small pot).[90] In the Bangwato naming traditions that antedated rinderpest, children were given names that symbolized gender differentiation. Whereas daughters would be given names that associated them with domesticity, such as *Seapei* (she who cooks) and *Segametsi* (she who fetches water), boys received names reflecting wealth, success and male influence in the public sphere, such as *Mojaboswa* (inheritor of the family's pastoral estate) and *Puso* (governance). The object of giving sons names that symbolized food preparation was therefore not just to ridicule greedy men but also to challenge their invasion of one of the few domains where women could exercise power beyond the purview of male dominance.

By the end of the Century, pre-existing traditions of sharing food and practices of courtesy had been put on hold as people protected household subsistence against 'marauding hordes' of hungry people. Access to food within families had also become unequal as men used their power as household heads to get a disproportionately higher share of the little food available. The disintegration of the social fabric, as it pertained to food, was compounded by the advent of the cash nexus. Unlike cattle, which were seen as communal because many people could benefit from them, cash introduced the notion of private property. The need to raise cash to pay taxes necessitated the sale of surplus grain instead of sharing it with needy relatives and neighbours. The commoditization of food also made people ever more individualistic. All these undermined social cohesion and exposed many people to famine.

Conclusion

Before the end of the nineteenth century, Tswana cattle were an important component of the agricultural economy of rural communities in the country. Their contribution to food security, equity and sustainable production in this context cannot be disputed. These breeds of cattle were well adapted to the local stress factors such as harsh environments and long periods of under-nutrition. Their hardiness therefore enabled

[90] Interview, B Sekonopo (Mahalapye, 23 December 2013); K Moatswi (Serowe, 23 January 2014).

rural communities to rely on them for sustenance, particularly during periods of low crop yields. Large numbers of these livelihoods supporting cattle were lost at the end of the nineteenth century as the first ever massive epizootic, Rinderpest, swept through the whole of Southern Africa's previously unexposed and entirely susceptible cattle population. The result was widespread hunger, starvation and disease, leading to famine conditions.

This paper has explored the intellectual capabilities, which the Bangwato developed to negotiate the famine that accompanied rinderpest. Contrary to existing narratives that put great emphasis on the trajectory of the pandemic, its apolitical economy and religious influence, this paper focuses on community adaptability to socio-environmental change. I argue that the loss of subsistence was not necessarily a road to perdition for the Bechuanaland Protectorate communities. The famine necessitated drastic changes in diets, social arrangements and behaviours. For this reason, despite having lost their most important source of livelihoods, the rural communities cannot be summarily represented as hopeless victims. They exhibited their adaptability and resilience to ecological and social change by drawing from their linguistic and cultural repertoire to survive the devastations.

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