

## **“This Good Land is not for Elephants”. Poverty, Migration and Development in the Binga District of the Zambezi Valley, Zimbabwe**

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**KEY WORDS** Migration; poaching; wildlife

**ABSTRACT** Migration has always attracted the attention of scholars, some of whom have argued that it results in the improvement of host communities. In contrast, this article argues that migration gives rise to underdevelopment and poverty among host communities. It uses the example of Binga, a district in northwestern Zimbabwe occupied by the Tonga, a marginal ethnic grouping. It is to this area that one of the country's most powerful ethnic groups, the Ndebele, are flocking to pursue commercial agriculture on land set aside for a safari hunting operation by the Tonga. While the Ndebele prosper from commercial agriculture, the Tonga, the owners of the land, sink into poverty. They watch how immigrants usurp their land and threaten Campfire, a wildlife management programme that is starting to benefit them.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Two specific things have been argued about migration and its relationship with development. Firstly, it has been argued that migration makes it possible for migrants to alter their life situations materially. Hill (1986, 1972 and 1963), Cheater (1984) and Parkin (1972) are some of the scholars who have shown how poor individuals make use of migration to improve them socio-economically. Secondly, it has also been argued that migration, in addition to improving the status of migrants, also brings about positive change to the host community. Jackson (1969) has shown how host communities have had their improvement kick-started by in-migration.

In this article, I argue that although it plays a poverty-alleviation function for migrants as well as having a developmental effect, migration, in certain contexts, creates problems for host communities. Put differently, migration gives rise to poverty and underdevelopment among host

communities. There is hardly anything new in this observation: in the 60s and 70s numerous scholars conducted migration studies which concluded that migrants, upon settlement, tended to monopolize the resources and privileges meant for the host communities. I need only refer to Safa and Du Toit (1975) a volume of studies pointing in this direction.

This article, as its case study, uses Binga, a wildlife-rich district in the Zambezi Valley that divides Zambia and Zimbabwe and which is occupied by the Tonga, an ethnic group at present struggling to improve itself through a safari hunting operation. The neighboring Ndebele, a landless ethnic group, migrate into Binga where they turn wilderness areas into agricultural commercial zones and, in the process, threaten the viability of the new wildlife management programme.

### **BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

The study area is a vast district with 88 000 people. It is a semi-arid district in the northwest of Zimbabwe. Unlike other parts of Zimbabwe, Binga still has some areas under tsetse, a fly that causes disease among humans, livestock and wildlife. This, together with the rugged terrain, explains why the area is underpopulated and poorly-developed as compared with other districts like Lupane, Nkayi and Gokwe, which are its neighbours (Colson, 1950: 35-42).

Until recently, the Tonga, a small matrilineal group that lived under feuding petty chiefs (Gielgud, 1898: 1) occupied Binga. Unlike other tribes in the country, the Tonga did not have a central authority for the whole area (Anon, 1900: 226-228). Occasionally as is the case done today,

(Lan, 1985) unity across all tribes was forged when the whole group was threatened by an external force. Usually this political and social unity, which was a response to external threats, was facilitated by religious figures who were believed to control the fertility of all the land (Colson, 1950; 1969; Ranger, 1963; Alexander and Ranger, 1997). The Tonga lived along the Zambezi River where they fished so as to supplement riverine agriculture. In the 1950s, the Tonga were relocated from the Zambezi River to make way for the rising waters of Kariba, a lake created to solve industrial problems faced by Zambia and Zimbabwe (former Rhodesia). While they were promised development (Tremmel, 1994; Colson, 1971) the Tonga did not actually receive anything and, until independence, lagged behind other ethnic groups who had access to agricultural inputs and education (Murphree, 1966). Like other Zimbabwean peasants (Dzingirai, 1992), the Tonga now distrust the state.

Since independence, Binga like other districts in the Zambezi Valley (Cutshal, 1989), has been recipient to thousands of landless and petty commercial farmers, mostly Ndebele, who regard it as "Eden" after the mythological fertile land where the two first humans allegedly dwelt. The Ndebele now form a tenth of the population of the district.

Socially, immigrants look down upon the Tonga. They say that the Tonga people are lazy and unable to look after themselves. Politically, they refuse to be subordinate to Tonga authority. They mostly ignore calls by the Tonga leadership to attend meetings and ceremonies important to the district. When they do come, immigrants refuse to take instructions from Tonga leaders. In one development meeting I attended, the invited immigrants brought their own chairs and sat far removed from the Tonga who respectfully sat on the ground in deference to their chief. And while the chief addressed the gathering, immigrants chatted and exchanged tobacco among themselves. The Tonga find immigrants' behaviour annoying and often employ religious ritual and myth to control them (Dzingirai and Bourdillon, 1998). For example, they threaten the immigrants with droughts, famine and other natural disasters if they violate Tonga rules of behaviour and authority. They also employ

witchcraft to control ambitious and wealthy immigrants (Madzudzo and Dzingirai, 1999). For example, the Tonga accuse any wealthy immigrant, of being a witch not fit to stay in Binga. I have elsewhere described some unsuccessful attempts by the Tonga to get rid of such people (Dzingirai and Bourdillon, 1998).

Although a minority, the Ndebele, much to the bitterness of the indigenous people, occupy all major political positions that oversee Binga (Dzingirai, 1996: 19-30). All provincial heads and heads of all ministries are Ndebele-speaking people. The party chair, the governor and the provincial administrator - called *the big men* or *elders* in local parlance - are Ndebele. These men claim to be hierarchically above the Tonga-dominated Binga Rural District Council that administers the area.

In the late 1980s, the government, under the influence of the private sector and non-governmental organisations, introduced a community-based natural resource management programme called CAMPFIRE. The programme's objective is to develop the Tonga and other marginal groupings in the country. In return for conserving wildlife as well as refraining from encroaching into wildlife zones, the Tonga receive cash benefits from sport hunting. Despite some teething problems that include the unwillingness of other powerful stakeholders to work with, and adequately reward, local communities (Murphree, 1993; Murombedzi, 1992), Campfire has, to date, generated as much as Z\$10 million for the district. It would arguably be generating even more, were it not for immigrants who, for agricultural purposes, encroach into wildlife zones, poach wildlife for subsistence and, also, randomly kill those animals which raid crops and livestock.

The following section describes who these immigrants are, their mode of settlement, their agricultural practice and how they impact on wildlife and the Campfire Programme.

#### NDEBELE IMMIGRANTS: ORIGINS AND SETTLEMENT PROCESSES

The immigrants, or squatters as they are referred to by Council, are mostly Ndebele-speaking people who at the turn of the century fled

from Southern Africa in response to widespread fighting in that area. The other groups include the Shona who are members of the dominant ethnic group in Zimbabwe. The majority of immigrants originate from Lupane, Nkayi and, Gokwe, all neighbouring districts to Binga. A few immigrants originate from places that are far removed from Binga. That immigrants should originate from nearby areas is not surprising: sociologists have long established a positive relationship between the desire to migrate and the distance from the area of settlement (see Jansen, 1969: 60-63).

Immigrants say they became aware of the availability of land and of the possibility of settlement from different sources. There are those immigrants who heard of the availability of land in Binga from the media, especially the state radio and newspapers. In Zimbabwe it is common for vote-seeking politicians to tell landseekers where they can get land (Dzingirai, 1994: 167-176). It is, therefore, not surprising that they should be people claiming to have learnt of settlement possibilities through the state-owned media. What is surprising is that the media should encourage squatting or illegal settlement.

In addition, there are those people who heard of settlement possibilities from frontier immigrants. People say they met and talked with these frontier immigrants at church meetings, political rallies and traditional rituals. I must point out that it is not only in Binga where frontier immigrants are important sources of information. Generally, in all the parts where immigration occurs, frontier immigrants play a crucial role in bringing about awareness of settlement possibility (Murombedzi, 1994).

Finally, other immigrants learnt about Binga through personal experience. Immigrants in this category include former soldiers who patrolled the area during the Zimbabwe War of Liberation. They also include members of the veterinary department who conducted tsetse control campaigns in the Zambezi Valley. One immigrant said he was struck by the land and its fertility, abundant wildlife, and vast grasslands - all resources that nobody seemed interested to exploit.

Nearly all immigrants in Binga admit to having made an initial reconnaissance trip, which is

a common practice in migration (CASS, 1989). During this trip, prospective immigrants spent a day or two examining land fertility, sampling public opinion regarding migration, ascertaining the level of infrastructure, and discovering how other migrants were coping. In one case I came across, prospective immigrants frequented local beer parties to ascertain whether indeed the Tonga were friendly. Reconnaissance provided prospective settlers with a window into the new and unknown world; it was upon it that a decision to migrate was made.

As is common in Zimbabwe, immigrants acquired land from a variety of sources which suggests that in Zimbabwe there is no clearly defined land authority (Cheater, 1990; Murphree, 1993; Nhira, 1994; Derman and Murombedzi 1994). Some acquired land from modern leaders who include councillors. Councillors are elected leaders and are associated with the ruling party, ZANU PF. Other immigrants say they acquired land from traditional leaders namely chiefs and village heads. Although prohibited by law to allocate land, chiefs continue to allocate land mostly to lure supporters (Dzingirai, 1994; Derman, 1997: 331-380). Finally, there are some who say they acquired land from other immigrants who had surplus land. I came across cases where prospective migrants acquired land from wealthy relatives who had preceded them in settlement.

While immigrants do not say they paid cash for the land, they all admit, as do others in parts of the Zambezi Valley (Sperienburg, 1990; Murombedzi, 1992; 1994), to have given some cash or kind, usually groceries, in return for land. Migrants say they gave these valuables as a token of thanks, and nothing more. One migrant said that he gave his used shoes to the Tonga village chief, his source of land, as a way of reciprocating the latter's kindness in providing him with land. While all this may be true, one can also argue that immigrants offer valuables to these land-givers in order to formalize the land transaction. Whatever the reason, the land-giver always emerged with some property that elevated him above the level of ordinary person (Mukamuri, 1996).

Although some immigrants break ties with their old homes, others continue, as do other

rural migrants in Zimbabwe (Mumbedzi, 1994), to maintain links with them. Where they continue to hold property in the old home, immigrants normally do so through friends, relatives or some employees. I came across two cases in which a person left his old property in the custody of his spouse. One can argue that immigrants maintain old homes so that they can always have somewhere to run back to when problems arise in the new home (Dzingirai, 1999: 166).

I next examine how these immigrants affected Campfire.

#### IMPACT OF MIGRATION ON CAMPFIRE

Immigrants impact Campfire in four main ways: they poach, hunt, kill and encroach on wildlife zones.

**Migrants and poaching:** Generally migrants poach wildlife. During my ten-month fieldwork hardly a month passed without a migrant having been arrested for poaching wildlife. A National Parks officer who operates in the area estimates that immigrants killed nearly 200 impala and over 100 buffalo during the period I was in the field.

While almost every migrant has access to meat, not everyone is a hunter. As is the practice in other parts of Zimbabwe (Murindagomo, 1988), those who cannot hunt, usually buy meat supplies from the more experienced migrant hunters. Though not an immigrant, during fieldwork, I bought meat during fieldwork from expert hunters (I had no other legitimate source of meat!) Usually it is not the expert hunter who conducts the sale of meat. His children, or some other minors, roam villages selling or delivering meat to clients. Since poaching is a punishable offence to all adults in Zimbabwe, the use of children by adults can be interpreted as a strategy to minimize chances of prosecution.

Usually migrant hunters target impala, bushbuck and buffalo. They do not hunt elephants because they say the meat tastes bad. As argued elsewhere (Hasler, 1994; Dzingirai, 1997), it could be that migrants are afraid of hunting elephant which they find too formidable to kill.

Poaching by immigrants continues to reduce the number of animals that the Tonga can sell to sport hunters. As a result of the depleting effect

of migrants, the council has considerably reduced the number of buffalo for sale to safari hunters. Secondly, poaching continues to reduce the number of animals that are earmarked for subsistence use by the Tonga. Though it has long planned to provide its own people with game meat, the council has, to date, been unable to meet this promise because there is little game left. There is some evidence that the Tonga who stopped poaching on account of Campfire are now resuming their poaching. These say there is no point in being good people when foreigners are being allowed to hunt with impunity.

#### ENCROACHMENT ON WILDLIFE ZONES

As indicated earlier, migrants, unlike the Tonga, are keen and able commercial farmers. Immigrants have large herds of cattle. One immigrant from Nkayi had a herd of 300 cattle, the highest number in all the communal areas of Zimbabwe. These herds are released, much to the frustration of the council and safari hunters, into wildlife zones where grass is abundant. As is to be expected, the introduction of cattle into Binga and the rest of the Campfire areas results in competition for pasture between wildlife and domestic animals (Madzudzo, 1996; Lyman, 1994).

In addition, immigrants are commercial crop growers who specialize in cotton and other cash crops. As in many parts of the Zambezi, immigrants, in a bid to improve and increase their harvests, make large tracts of farming land out of safari hunting land. These tracts are then cleared of their trees through felling, stumping or uprooting the trees. Although the migrants themselves have small families and yet require a good supply of labour, they usually make use of the Tonga to prepare their land for them. In return, migrants provide second-hand goods to the Tonga.

Often the wildlife, seeing its habitat reduced by fire and axes to bare ground, retreats to remote areas or into the nearby Chizarira National Park. This leaves the Tonga with very little wildlife to sell to sport hunters. Indeed sport hunters who pay hunting fees to the council, regularly complain that they cannot, because of immigration, locate some of the wildlife which were

said by the council to be resident in Binga's communal lands.

Immigrants and their killing of crop-raiding animals: The raiding of crops by wildlife is a common problem in Binga as in many parts of the Valley (Nabane and Marzke, 1994). While some immigrants resort to scaring away elephants by shouting and beating on drums, others have acquired guns to shoot them. Sometimes immigrants shoot the elephants they find in their fields. However, it is becoming common for immigrants to track marauding animals in the forest where they kill or wound them. Those immigrants who injure elephants - and there is joy when the job is done (Hasler, 1993) - say they do so deliberately in order to teach them that human property is sacrosanct.

As in many parts of the Valley, the shooting of crop-raiding wildlife has now become a serious problem in Campfire. In Binga as many as 10 elephants have been killed, and an equal number wounded, by angry farmers since Campfire started. While this represents a loss on the part of the Tonga, this is not so among immigrants who witness an improvement in their livestock and cash crop production. Good farmers now earn as much as Z\$100 000 per year from cotton and livestock sales. This revenue is used to improve homesteads and for the sinking of boreholes. In contrast, there is not a single Tonga farmer who has been able to have his or her own borehole. That immigrants are benefiting from agriculture is evident from the remark by Ncube, an immigrant from Lupane who has twice won the award for being the best cotton grower in that region: Most of the immigrants are now well-to-do. From being initially poor, immigrants whether from Lupane or Nkayi are now better off. Those who have settled and made fields on wildlife hunting areas have earned more money for themselves than those Tonga people have earned from Campfire.

"This Campfire is a waste to us, and let me tell you that we will resist any eviction from Binga because we are producing cash crops, which benefit the whole country. If the Tonga do not accept this, then we will fight them. These are matters of life and death".

The immigrants' economic activities and their

effect on wildlife has incensed the Tonga who had planned to develop by means of Campfire. The Tonga find that they do not have revenue to build schools, clinics and other much-needed social services. More importantly, the Tonga lack money to share among households as wildlife dividends. Their plight is evident in a remark from Tonga elder who is also a village-chief:

"Our elders of the past have said that a poor man is always a person of misfortune. The elders spoke long back, that a poor man cannot break the chains of poverty. We had hoped Campfire was our salvation. But these aliens are killing our wildlife, and our safari lands are being turned into commercial farming areas".

The elders' words are always prophetic. When the Tonga through their Council try to get immigrants out of the area, they run into problems with *big men* as the case below suggests.

#### IMMIGRANTS AND BIG MEN

Following disenchantment with immigrants, the Tonga resolved in 1995 to get rid of them. The Council passed a resolution and served every immigrant with an order to vacate Binga. When alerted of the planned eviction, immigrants promptly gathered and sent emissaries to the local chief who had provided some of them with land. While he at first supported immigrants, the chief eventually abandoned them when the Council accused and warned him of the consequences of usurping its legal right to allocate land. The immigrants then went, first to the provincial party chair, then a Ndebele, and later to the provincial officer and governor, both Ndebele. These persons, influential because of their role in the liberation war, instructed council to suspend its intention until a decision on migrants was made at the higher, national level. In one of the worst cases of distortion, calculated to weaken Council initiative, the big men said that the Tonga wanted immigrants to vacate Binga because they were from another ethnic group. They alleged that they would mete out punishment on the Tonga for their illegitimate and anti-nationalist stance. Since then, Council has suspended its decision to expel immigrants from the district. On their part, immigrants continue,

with impunity, to wreak havoc on the forests and the wildlife which Campfire seeks to conserve. The remark by Tshuma, their chief spokesman, reveals immigrants' shared confidence arising from the intervention of big men:

"The Council can't touch us. The Tonga maintain silence because the big men have spoken in our favour. We will turn this land from a wilderness into a cotton country. We will shoot and drive away these crop-raiding animals, into the Zambezi River, and beyond it. This good land is not for elephants".

### CONCLUSION

Two conclusions can be drawn from this study. Firstly, migration is a solution to those who migrate. It creates new possibilities for survival and capital accumulation among immigrants. In the case study, the Ndebele migrants who lacked land, were able to make a living when they migrated into Binga, a district with a good supply of land and pastures. Indeed, some of the Ndebele immigrants were able to accumulate capital and became a wealthy group.

Secondly, although offering a solution to migrants, migration creates limitations to, and problems for, the host communities. In the case study, immigrants interfered with Campfire, a programme benefiting the Tonga. Immigrants grabbed land earmarked for safari hunting and put some of it to use for commercial agriculture and ranching. Upon settlement, these immigrants also started killing wildlife, which they said interfered with commercial agriculture.

On the basis of these two points it can be concluded that migration is not always an innocent phenomenon that results in development for both immigrants and host communities. In certain contexts, migration gives rise to or perpetuates poverty.

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