

White man's disease, black man's peril?: Rinderpest and famine in the eastern Bechuanaland Protectorate at the end of the 19th century

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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. This paper examines 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, the paper argues, rural communities in the eastern Bechuanaland Protectorate appropriated and reconstituted certain features of their cultural and social life to negotiate the hardships and, when these failed, they invented new strategies appropriate with specific situations.

Keywords: Rinderpest; Famine; Bechuanaland Protectorate; Cattle; Subsistence; Pandemic; Cultural; Social life; Livelihoods; Veterinary.

Introduction

Attributing the destruction of rural livelihoods in the Bechuanaland Protectorate (hereafter Protectorate) 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 1895.¹ By 1895, drought had already made arable agriculture derelict and exposed cattle to hunger and thirst.² The destruction, in the same year by the desert locust, of the few crops and patches of grazing that had survived

1 Botswana National Archives (BNA), reference RC 3/2/1: Moffat account on failure of crops due to drought and locusts, 1895.

2 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.

drought also undermined livelihoods.³ This paper examines the effects of the Rinderpest pandemic – an infectious viral disease of ruminants, particularly cattle – on eastern Bechuanaland Protectorate’s (see map 1 below) rural livelihoods at the end of the nineteenth century.⁴ Primarily, it examines the ways in which local famine coping strategies were reconstituted and combined with new ones to negotiate the hardships caused by the loss of cattle and subsistence.⁵ The evidentiary basis for this paper is oral sources, particularly linguistic expressions, such as proverbs and personal narratives. Shifts in the meanings of words and expressions, as told by community elders, are explored to examine the effects of famine on pre-existing features of social cohesion. These contingent linguistic innovations and continuities have been particularly illuminating on the ways in which the Batswana appropriated and reconstituted their cultural repertoire to negotiate the distress caused by Rinderpest.

Little has been written about Rinderpest in the Protectorate. The only available work restricts itself to the area south of the Molopo River that was initially British Bechuanaland and transferred to the Cape Colony in 1895.⁶ Hence it excludes communities north of the Molopo River. Moreover, it focuses on the ecological communication of the contagion, thus giving very little attention to the socio-cultural impact of Rinderpest. The historiographical lacuna on the socio-cultural impact of Rinderpest on the Batswana is, on one hand, puzzling considering the cattle wealth that the Protectorate held at the time.⁷ 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 Batswana with regard to their responses to the disease, colonial veterinary controls or to the famine that followed. Even existing scholarship provides only elitist snippets

3 BNA, RC. 3/2/1, Moffat to Resident Commissioner, 1896.

4 The Bechuanaland Protectorate was a 580 000 km² semi-desert land north of the Molopo River. It was bordered to the north by the Rhodesias (present-day Zimbabwe and Zambia), to the north-west by Portuguese Angola, and to the west by South West Africa (now Namibia).

5 Indigenous knowledge is not primordial. It changes and reproduces itself along with social and ecological transformations. J Scott, *Seeing like a state: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed* (New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 1998), p. 285.

6 G Marquardt, “Water, wood and wild animal populations: Seeing the spread of Rinderpest through the physical environment in Bechuanaland, 1896”, *South African Historical Journal*, 53(1), 2005, pp. 73-98.

7 While there were no cattle censuses to determine the numbers of cattle held by Batswana, official and missionary impressions show that individuals held cattle in their thousands before the Rinderpest. See London Missionary Society (LMS) Letters, Willoughby to Cousins, 9 June 1897; *Bechuanaland Protectorate Annual Reports: Report for Molepolole*, 1898.

about the losses by the chiefs.⁸ 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 Batswana 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 Southern Africa receiving less rainfall than it used to.⁹ Living in an environment of high climate variability, the Batswana 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 disrupted livelihoods, destabilized subsistence practices and triggered famine. Rinderpest was particularly devastating for the eastern Protectorate where, according to guesstimates, approximately ninety-eight per cent of the cattle population died of disease or were culled.¹⁰

Much of the Rinderpest scholarship has focused exclusively on the religiously motivated rebellions that characterized the Rinderpest period in some parts of Southern Africa.¹¹ Resonating with ideas of millenarianism and early African resistance to colonial rule the existing body of scholarship summarily politicizes rural Africans' responses to colonial policy.¹² Such resistance clichés reify ideas of the ordinary African victim and have 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.¹³

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- 8 For instance, Khama is reported to have lost so many cattle that out of his three hundred to four hundred head of trained trek oxen, the remainder was not enough to make one span. See C van Onselen, "Reactions to Rinderpest in Southern Africa, 1896-1897", *Journal of African History*, xiii(3), 1972, p. 487.
- 9 GH Endfield and DJ Nash, "Drought, dessication and discourse: Missionary correspondence and nineteenth-century climate change in Central Southern Africa", *The Geographical Journal*, 168, 2002, pp. 821-841. For Botswana, see J Andringa, "The climate of Botswana in histograms", *Botswana Notes and Records*, 16, 1984, pp. 117-125.
- 10 J Ramsay, "The establishment and consolidation of the Bechuanaland Protectorate, 1870-1910", WA Edge & MH Lekorwe (eds.), *Botswana Politics and Society* (Pretoria, JL van Schaik Publishers, 1998), p. 79; BNA, RC 3/2/1: Moffat to Resident Commissioner, 1896.
- 11 C van Onselen, "Reactions to Rinderpest in Southern Africa, 1896-1897", *Journal of African History*, xiii(3), 1972, pp. 473-488; H Saker and E Eldridge, "The origins of the Langeberg rebellion", *Journal of African History*, 12(2), 1971, pp. 299-317; C Ballard, "The repercussions of Rinderpest: Cattle plague and peasant decline in colonial Natal", *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 19(3), 1986, pp. 421-450.
- 12 J Peires, *The dead will arise: Nongqawuse and the great Xhosa cattle-killing movement of 1856-1857* (Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 1989), pp. 122-138; T Ranger, *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia, 1896-1897: A study in African resistance* (London, Heinemann, 1979), pp. 191-226.
- 13 P Phoofofo, "Epidemics and revolutions: The Rinderpest epidemic in the late nineteenth-century Southern Africa", *Past & Present*, 138(1), 1993, pp. 112-143.

The article, nevertheless, challenges a subsequent claim that Rinderpest failed to precipitate political turbulence because it was only a temporary setback.¹⁴ The idea of Rinderpest being a temporary 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. 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, having not 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.¹⁵ In addition, the Protectorate was historically a semi-arid land, prone to famines, leading to communities developing great adaptability.¹⁶ The Batswana's sense of self-reliance and capacity to reconstitute their historical and cultural practices of food acquisition enabled them to focus more on negotiating the famine than organizing politically.

This paper is a critique of previous Rinderpest scholars who 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.¹⁷ Socio-environmental narratives in Southern Africa have demonstrated that famines are ecologically and socially modulated processes that gradually impoverish people and do not always cause human mortality.¹⁸ In the eastern Protectorate, emerging ecological transformations insidiously undermined pre-existing alternative coping strategies, which people had previously developed to adapt to environmental shocks. As these mechanisms got eroded,

14 P Phoofolo, "Face to face with famine: The Basotho and the Rinderpest, 1897-1899", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 29(2), 2003, pp. 503-527.

15 Such unquestioning respect and support for the British Monarchy resonated across all British High Commission Territories in Southern Africa. This may explain why the Basotho raided Boer cattle, accusing the Boers of rebelling against the Queen. P Phoofolo, "Face to face with famine...", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 29(2), 2003, p. 510.

16 D Wylie, "The changing face of hunger in Southern African history, 1880-1980", *Past and Present*, 122(1), 1989, pp. 159-199.

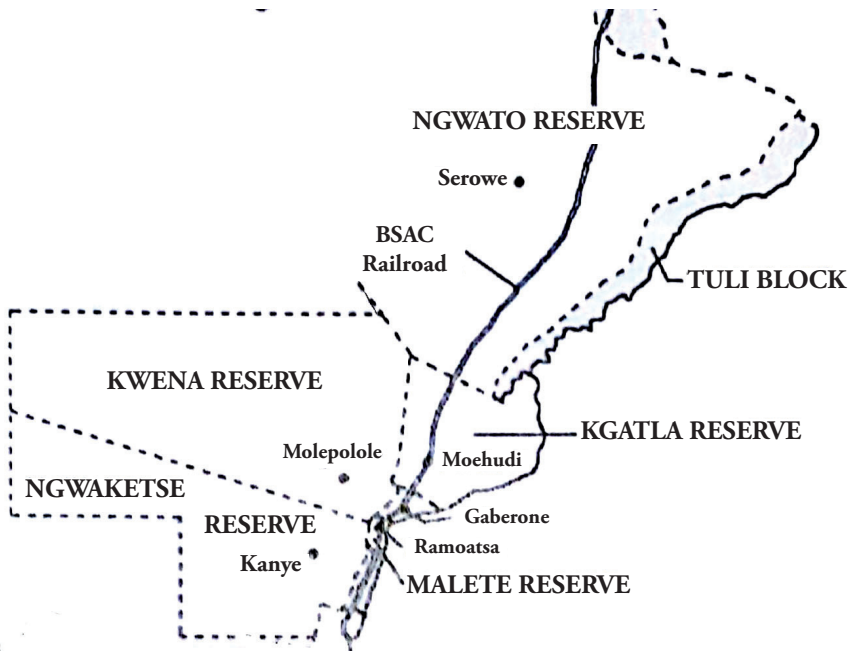
17 Only in East Africa do we get accounts of famine mortality. See for example, D Normile, "Driven to extinction", *Science*, 319(5870), 21 March 2005, pp. 1606-1609.

18 D Wylie, *Starving on a full stomach: Hunger and the triumph of cultural racism in modern South Africa* (Charlottesville and London, University Press of Virginia 2001); D Wylie, "The changing face of hunger..." *Past and Present*, 122(1), 1989, pp. 159-199; M Vaughan, *The story of an African famine: Gender and famine in twentieth century Malawi* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 16, pp. 59-63.

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

The paper illuminates the coping strategies that the Batswana communities devised to offset the subsistence crises that accompanied Rinderpest. But it starts by giving a brief exploration of the devastations of Rinderpest. It also shows that the nuanced ways through which the Batswana imagined and contested colonial veterinary policy as they lost cattle in large numbers contributed to cattle losses. As the pandemic became widespread, the colonial administration adopted a more drastic measure, called “stamping out” policy, which became notorious for contributing to cattle mortality and therefore impoverishing Africans. “Stamping out” involved the indiscriminate culling of cattle in communal areas without regard to their Rinderpest status.¹⁹ Such dispossessions caused the Batswana to conceptualize Rinderpest as a biological weapon unleashed by colonial officials to destroy their most coveted resource.

Map 1: Eastern Bechuanaland Protectorate



Source: Adopted and modified from CJ Makgala, “Taxation in the tribal areas of the Bechuanaland Protectorate, 1899–1957,” *Journal of African History*, 45, 2004, p. 283.

¹⁹ G Marquardt, “Water, wood and wild animal populations...”, *South African Historical Journal*, 53(1), 2005, pp. 73-98.

“He who has no cattle is as good as dead”: Containment policy, rumour and imagery

Sources that mention the obliteration of cattle by Rinderpest in the Protectorate guesstimate bovine mortality rates to around ninety-seven per cent of the colony's cattle population.²⁰ Since it was the first time that the Batswana had encountered a disease that killed large numbers of cattle in such a short space of time, they suspected that their cattle were deliberately poisoned.²¹ The Batswana began to be suspicious of colonial veterinary policy as early as 1892 when, upon learning of the outbreak of the pandemic in East Africa, the colonial administration enacted a law that unilaterally prohibited the export of all cattle produced on communal areas.²² Suspicions of foul play reverberated across the region with Africans elsewhere constructing an apocalyptic imagery that blamed Europeans for the outbreak of the pandemic.²³

Such kind of rumour easily permeated the then porous borders and intensified the Batswana's suspicions of European veterinary intervention. As ninety-year old Gaarekwe Baipidi of Lerala confirms, “people believed their relatives in the Transvaal who told them that the Boers were killing their cattle.”²⁴ Rumour also spread linking the “white man's medicine to the death of the Batswana's cattle.”²⁵ Rumour reveals an important hidden transcript of the social realities and imaginations of non-literate rural societies.²⁶ As the colonial administration continued to implement policies that labeled communally produced cattle as a disease time bomb, rumour came to dominate public discourses of the intersection between disease and being a colonial subjectivity. The rural communities used this mode of expression to interpret the role colonialism played in the death of their cattle.

20 G Marquardt, “Water, wood and wild animal populations...”, *South African Historical Journal*, 53(1), 2005, p. 74; J Ramsay, “The establishment and consolidation...”, WA Edge and MH Lekorwe (eds.), *Botswana politics...*, p. 77.

21 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, K Matubako (community elder/farmer), Mogapi, 23 December 2013/S Tsalile (farmer), Kanye, 15 November 2013.

22 BNA, reference RC 14/2/14: Mr Currey to Acting Colonial Sec. Natal, 25 October 1892.

23 *Eastern Province Herald*, July-August 1897. C van Onselen, “Reactions to Rinderpest...”, *Journal of African History*, xiii(3), 1972, p. 481.

24 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, G Baipidi (farmer), Lerala, 22 January 2014. Baipidi's testimony is supported by personal recollections from, B Sekonopo (traditional doctor/farmer), Mahalapye, 3 March 2011/M Montsosi (community elder), Bobonong, 15 March 2012/M Maphane (community elder/farmer), Mogapi, 23 December 2013/S Tsalile (farmer), Kanye, 15 November 2013.

25 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, M Maphane, 23 December 2013.

26 L White, *Speaking with vampires: Rumour and history in colonial Africa* (Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 2000), pp. 83-85; A Stoler, “In cold blood: Hierarchies of credibility and the politics of colonial narratives”, *Representations*, 1(37), 1992, pp. 151-189.

The policies of “stamping out” and veterinary cordons looked particularly suspicious to all Africans in the region and were therefore subverted in many instances.²⁷ Most of the cattle were “stamped out” in African communal grazing areas.²⁸ But in the Protectorate compensation was seldom received as communally produced cattle were killed wherever they were found and the owners might not have known whether or not their cattle had been “stamped out”.²⁹ The restriction of animal movements to diseased spaces through the cordoning off of affected areas also attracted conspiracy theories. As the veterinary cordon circumscribed herd mobility, an important pre-existing disease control mechanism, cattle mortality increased in the communal areas. This raised fears about the cordon, with rumour spreading that such restrictions of mobility were a ploy by the government to kill the Batswana’s cattle.³⁰

The death of cattle quarantined within the cordons shaped the Batswana’s ideas of the “stamping out” policy. They imagined an intricate link between the fixity of herds within “diseased” spaces and the pandemic, and therefore conceptualized the cordon as a symbol of disease. The following testimony is revealing of the Batswana’s images of the synergistic relationship between the cordon and the pandemic:³¹

We grew up hearing stories of white men enclosing the Batswana’s cattle inside fences so that they could not escape the disease. Their police and soldiers surrounded the fences and shot any animal that managed to escape from the *diseased fences*.

To them, the colonial government was containing disease within the contracted communal spaces in order to stamp out their cattle. This image of a government intent on dispossessing its subjects bred perceptions of the

27 Stamping out involved the arbitrary killing of cattle regardless of their Rinderpest status and without the consent of the owners. For illuminating discussions on the “stamping out” policy, see, among others, G Marquardt, “Water, wood and wild animal populations...”, *South African Historical Journal*, 53(1), 2005, pp. 74-75; C Ballard, “The repercussions of Rinderpest...”, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 19(3), 1986, pp. 421-450.

28 G Marquardt, “Water, wood and wild animal populations...”, *South African Historical Journal*, 53(1), 2005, pp. 85.

29 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, M Mosarwa, 23 December 2013/M Mosarwa, (community elder, Goodhope), 25 February 2013; G Montsho (former cattle herder/elder, Bobonong), 25 March 2011.

30 PP Molosiwa (Personal Communication), interview, M Mosarwa/J Montsho, (elder, Goodhope), 5 February 2014. The deployment of armed guards to man the cordons was also an important feature of colonial veterinary policy in the former British Bechuanaland, south of the Molopo River. See G Marquardt, “Water, wood and wild animal populations...”, *South African Historical Journal*, 53(1), 2005, p. 84.

31 PP Molosiwa (Personal Communication), interview, K Matubako, 23 December 2013/M Mosarwa, 25 February 2013/G Montsho, 25 March 2011.

imminence of “social death”, or the systematic erosion of a people’s socio-cultural fabric while keeping the physical bodies intact.³² Resonating with this imagery of colonial brutality is the Tswana metaphor, *motlhoka kgomo ke mong kang a sule* (he who has no cattle is as good as dead). The growing fear of social death caused many communal farmers to re-invent their pre-colonial coping strategy of cattle mobility from a mechanism of negotiating ecological shocks to an instrument of subverting veterinary policy. The smuggling of herds from affected areas to unaffected ones, however, stimulated the propagation of the contagion and substantially added to herd mortality.

Apart from the cordons and the culling, the Batswana were also afraid of immunization, which involved the “injection of healthy cattle with bile from infected animals”.³³ The method killed sick animals faster and in large numbers than would have died of the disease.³⁴ The death of inoculated cattle further buttressed suspicions that Europeans were deliberately using lethal injections to kill the Batswana’s cattle. “*Gatwe ba ne ba di kenta ka botlhole* (they say cattle were injected with poison)”,³⁵ reminisces hundred-year old Maphane. This imagery has echoes of a recent theory that Europeans mapped colonial subjectivities as pests and therefore marked them for elimination.³⁶ It is therefore fitting to conclude that the colonial government used Rinderpest as a biological weapon to destroy African cattle. As Marquart notes, throughout the region, colonial governments were “sanctioning the destruction of a majority of African cattle”.³⁷ In an unrelated case, Clapperton Mavhunga has commented, “colonial regimes in Africa used disease control as cover to kill or confiscate livestock and destroy competition from Africans, turn them into cheap labor, and force them off their lands”.³⁸ This argument is supported by evidence from the Protectorate where by 1900 the Babirwa, and other communities who were impoverished by Rinderpest, were dispossessed of

32 For specialist insights on the theory of social death, see O Patterson, *Slavery and social death: A comparative study* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1982); V Das, “Language and body: Transactions in the construction of pain”, A Kleinman, V Das et al., *Social suffering* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997), p. 78.

33 C Ballard, “The repercussions of Rinderpest...”, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 19(3), 1986, p. 442.

34 CA Spinage, *Cattle plague: A history* (New York, Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2003), p. 423; PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, M Maphane, 23 December 2013/Sediegeng Kgamane (regent of the Bangwato, Serowe), 25 November 2010.

35 PP Molosiwa (Personal Communication), interview, K Matubako, 23 December 2013.

36 CC Mavhunga, “Vermin beings: On pestiferous animals and human game”, *Social Text* 106, 29(1), Spring 2011, pp. 151-176.

37 G Marquardt, “Water, wood and wild animal populations...”, *South African Historical Journal*, 53(1), 2005, p. 86.

38 CC Mavhunga, “Vermin beings...”, *Social Text* 106, 29(1), Spring 2011, p. 153.

their prime farming lands on the banks of the Limpopo River.³⁹ These losses tended to give substance to rumour that Europeans poisoned African cattle so as to expropriate their lands. In the end, the containment of Rinderpest aided the propagation of the contagion as the Batswana circumvented veterinary controls to protect their herds. Unfortunately, even those cattle that escaped the cordons and the culling died because of the destructions caused to the landscape by drought and locusts. These ecological shocks further undermined the Batswana's capacity to secure food from traditional sources.

A shattered ecology: Drought, locusts and hunger

The roots of famine

By 1895, a year before the outbreak of Rinderpest, the eastern Protectorate was already experiencing drought and invasions by swarms of crop and pasture eating desert locusts.⁴⁰ Being a semi-arid environment, with high climate and rainfall variability, the Protectorate 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 two years 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. As one missionary observed: "the disease spreading among breeding stock is depriving [natives] of milk as article of food."⁴¹ Hunger and disease were

39 D Wylie, "Lesser breeds without a law", *A little god: The twilight of patriarchy in a Southern African chiefdom* (Hanover & London, University Press of New England, 1990), pp. 149-155; PP Molosiwa, "The tragedy of the Ababirwas": Cattle herding, power and the socio-environmental history of the ethnic identity of the Babirwa in Botswana, 1920 to the present" (Ph.D, UMN, 2013).

40 The Limpopo region, which covers much of eastern to southern Botswana, experienced cycles of low rainfall, locusts and low crop yields in the 1895/1896 and 1896/1897 seasons. M Dreier, "Years of terrible drought: Surviving the 1895-1897 supply-crisis in the Limpopo area", *Limpopo Histories*, 2005 (available at www.unibas.ch/afrika/limpopo, as accessed on 25 July 2011).

41 BNA, Reference RC. 3/2/1, Moffat's eye witness report on loss by Rinderpest, 1896.

therefore 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)”.⁴² These metaphors – which continue to galvanize talk about years of hunger in present Botswana – were expressions of the resilience and creativity of rural communities faced with famines. They were often aptly used to emphasize the magnitude of the food crisis. *Go boha mala ka tukwi* reflects the ability to suppress and endure hunger as well as survive under trying circumstances while *motsetse o ja ka lebogo* denotes a serious decline in the food supply.

In Tswana tradition, 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 famine, such restrictions were relaxed as the *batsetse* had to fend for themselves. Thus famine undermined even the most hitherto adhered to public health practices. The relaxation of rules governing certain cultural practices and values, such as pediatric health care, illuminates the eastern Protectorate Batswana’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 Batswana, cattle were not only a reproducer of social relations.⁴³ 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 them 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.⁴⁴ Unfortunately, during the period under study, the whole region was experiencing agropastoral decline, making it difficult to exchange cattle for food or use them for cultivation. The policy of “stamping out” also contributed to the already high mortality rates of cattle thus compounding the subsistence crises. One

42 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, K Phuthego (family matriarch, Mogapi), 23 December. 2013/M Makgoba (traditional midwife/farmer) Sefhophe, 24 December 2013/M Mashaba (community elder/farmer, Molaladau), 15 January 2014.

43 PP Molosiwa, “The tragedy of the Ababirwas”: Cattle herding, power and the socio-environmental history of the ethnic identity of the Babirwa in Botswana, 1920 to the present” (Ph.D, UMN, 2013).

44 “King Khama interviewed by a lady”, *Christian World*, 12 September, 1895. Cited in N Parsons, *King Khama, Emperor Joe and the Great White Queen: Victorian Britain through African eyes* (Chicago & London, University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 125.

impoverished Tswana chief is understood to have responded with dejection to the culling exercise, asking the veterinary surgeon: "They tell me that you are a doctor, and that you are a great doctor, but can you do nothing but kill?"⁴⁵

Until 1899, locusts colluded with drought to destroy 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, many people saw the locusts more as a nuisance than as a source of food.⁴⁶ These denudations caused widespread hunger and malnutrition, particularly among the women, the elderly and children. As historian Megan Vaughan aptly demonstrates, famine is a gendered phenomenon, disproportionately affecting women and children who have limited opportunities to accumulate social capital.⁴⁷ The destructions caused by locusts and drought were graphically described by the Assistant Commissioner at Palapye, Bangwato Reserve, in 1895:⁴⁸

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.

The impact of these ecological shocks was more profound on the women. For the Batswana 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.⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰ By undermining arable agriculture, drought and locusts eroded the power of women over the environment and exposed entire households to hunger. By 1896, missionaries

45 C van Onselen, "Reactions to Rinderpest...", *Journal of African History*, xiii(3), 1972, p. 482.

46 BNA, reference RC 3/2/1, Moffat account on failure of crops due to drought and locusts, 1895.

47 M Vaughan, *The story of an African famine...*, pp. 119-147.

48 BNA, reference RC 3/2/1: Moffat account on failure of crops due to drought and locusts, 1895.

49 NJ Jacobs, *Environment, power, and injustice: A South African history* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 29.

50 See among others, M Kinsman, "Beasts of burden": The subordination of Southern Tswana women, ca. 1800-1840", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 10(1), 1983, pp.39-54; J Comaroff and JL Comaroff, "Goodly beasts, beastly goods: Cattle and commodities in South African context", *American Ethnologist*, 17(2), 1990, pp. 199-2002.

were already talking of a state bordering starvation in the eastern Protectorate.⁵¹ But they also saw the loss of livelihoods as an opportunity for industrialising South Africa to procure cheap labour from the African areas and inculcate a work ethic in the “lazy” Batswana men.⁵²

The lazy Bechuanas?: Wage work, colonial taxation and local agency

In 1896 the Reverend Howard Williams proclaimed:⁵³

The loss of their cattle has driven large numbers to seek work. 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. A generation will pass before this country will recover its lost wealth in cattle.

However, there is no archival record showing that the ruinous impact of the pandemic caused a mass exodus of Batswana men to the mines. In fact other missionary reports indicate that the Batswana men abhorred wage work.⁵⁴ Linguistic analysis also demonstrates this point. In the Setswana language, the verb *go bereka* (to work), or *mmereko* (derived from the Afrikaans word, *werk*, whose English equivalent is “work”) refers to wage labor whereas *go dira* (to do) refers to work within a kin-based mode of production (farming and herding). These differences are crucial to understanding the social and cultural impacts of industrial labour within families in the Protectorate. Agro-pastoral work (*tiro*, from *go dira*) “inculcated values of social discipline and reinforced the authority of the sociopolitical hierarchy, something *go bereka* threatened”.⁵⁵ Isaac Schapera, the doyen of Botswana studies, also observed how male elders in the 1930s in the Protectorate did not believe *go bereka* had value.⁵⁶ 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

51 BNA, reference RC 3/2/1, Moffat to Resident Commissioner, 1896.

52 BNA, reference RC 3/2/1, Moffat Account on Relief, 1896.

53 *Bechuanaland Protectorate Annual Reports. Report for Molepolole*, 1896.

54 London Missionary Society (LMS) Letters, Willoughby to Cousins, June 1897.

55 J Livingston, *Debility and the moral imagination in Botswana* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2005), pp. 118-119.

56 I Schapera, *Migrant labour and tribal life: A study of conditions in the Bechuanaland Protectorate* (London, Oxford University Press, 1947), pp. 60-64.

work is not deemed by most to be “doing” anything at all”.⁵⁷ Thus, “doing” in the countryside 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 Batswana 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 Batswana's lack of keenness to seek wage work, Europeans summarily labelled them with a one-word description: “lazy!” As a result, they seldom employed the few that availed themselves. The railway contractors “would not be anxious to employ the Bechuanas who do not work well and are too fond of going home at short notice”,⁵⁸ said missionary John Moffat in 1896. Contrary to European stereotypes of indolent Batswana men, evidence suggests that the Batswana 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 Batswana 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 and their European employers for tying them to wage employment at the expense of their households' subsistence needs.⁵⁹

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.

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 Batswana engaged in wage work. Such condescending assumptions of the lazy breed may have framed the railway construction's “unremunerative” pay structure for Africans as evidenced by “unfortunate misunderstandings between sub-contractors and headmen as to [low] wages”.⁶⁰

57 H Alverson, *Mind in the heart of darkness: Value and self-identity among the Tswana of Southern Africa* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1978), pp. 118-122.

58 BNA, reference RC 3/2/1, Moffat account on relief, 1896.

59 N Parsons, “The economic history of Khama's country in Botswana, 1844-1930”, R Palmer and N Parsons, *The roots of rural poverty in central and Southern Africa* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1977), p. 124.

60 Bechuanaland Protectorate, *Annual Reports, 1896-1897*.

Because of low wages, the extermination of cattle eroded the power of wealthy men and relegated them to a perilous social position of *bohumanegi* (cattlelessness) regardless of whether or not they “worked” in the so-called “projects of civilization,” such as road and railway construction,⁶¹ and thus collapsing pre-existing hierarchical boundaries pertaining to wealth.⁶² These tribulations forced the *dikgosi* (sing. *kgosi*), kings, to appeal to the missionaries for *namola leuba*, which literally translates into “a gesture that relieves people from drought.”⁶³ Missionary John Moffat reports that *Kgosi* Sebele of the Bakwena implored him to help his people secure food.⁶⁴ When addressing this question of food aid, the Reverend William Willoughby opposed general food relief for Batswana, arguing that giving men free food encouraged indolence. Echoing his contemporary, Howard Williams, he explained Rinderpest as a visitation from God to teach the lazy Batswana men the importance of work: “Relief should only be accorded the less able, while the able should seek work or starve. They are the most laziest set on earth, especially the men,”⁶⁵ he emphasized. As a result, the food aid became highly gendered with the aim of feeding only women and children. By 1898, for instance, over one thousand four hundred women and children in Molepolole were receiving food aid.⁶⁶ While missionaries and colonial officials could determine who had to get food relief in public, they could not influence the distribution of food inside private spaces. This meant that the food was never enough because of the traditionally large families of Batswana and the fact that men were also partaking in such food rations beyond the purview of colonial authorities and missionaries.

In the Bangwato Reserve, *Kgosi* Khama had initially opposed food aid. But as many households found it increasingly difficult to secure food, he accepted aid on condition that his people pay the wholesale cost of the rations provided.⁶⁷ Khama’s decision is puzzling considering that people almost had no cattle and crop production was severely undercut by rain variability. Khama, however,

61 BNA, reference RC 3/2/1, Moffat’s eye witness report on loss by Rinderpest, 1896.

62 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, B Phuthogo (pastor/farmer, Mogapi), 28 December 2013/K Moagi (farmer, Maunatlala), 6 January 2014.

63 In Setswana, both famine and drought are referred to as *leuba*. *Leuba* denotes a prolonged period of little or no rainfall and subsistence crises when both crop and cattle farming are compromised and food is scarce and diets poor.

64 BNA, reference RC 3/2/1: Moffat eye witness report on loss by Rinderpest, 1896.

65 LMS Letters, Willoughby to Cousins, June 1897.

66 BNA, reference RC 3/2/1: Moffat account on relief, 1896. The food relief was provided by the Bechuanaland Relief Committee, which was sponsored by official and military personnel.

67 N Parsons, “Khama III, the Bamangwato, and the British, with special reference to 1895-1923”, (Ph.D, UE, 1973), p. 157.

felt that colonial food aid “was a threat to economic independence [of his state] and royal prerogative in famine relief”.⁶⁸ Probably true because this new form of coping mechanism did very little to provide reprieve amid relentless ecological collapse. Locusts and drought weakened people materially and made them vulnerable to the scourge of Rinderpest. The death of cattle also eroded the purchasing power of many households since they now had no cattle to sell or trade for food.⁶⁹ The means of transport was unavailable due to the death of cattle thus making it more difficult to secure food from surplus areas.⁷⁰ 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.⁷¹

Despite increasing problems of food insecurity, the government introduced taxation.⁷² 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. But the Tax was followed by widespread defaults and evasions as people resisted or simply did not have the means to pay.⁷³ As Schoenbrun teaches us:⁷⁴

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.

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,

68 N Parsons, “The economic history of Khama’s country...”, R Palmer and N Parsons, *The roots of rural poverty in central and Southern Africa* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1977), p. 126.

69 Pre-colonial Batswana lived in a fragile ecology, susceptible to droughts and cattle diseases. However, they had mechanisms, such as the storing of surplus, to cope with famines. With household subsistence becoming increasingly integrated into the market economy at the end of the 19th century, however, surplus was sold for cash instead of being stored. During times of subsistence crises, such surplus would be bought back, but at inflated prices. However, it appears that by the time Rinderpest struck, selling had become increasingly common.

70 BNA, reference RC 3/2/1, Moffat eye witness report on loss by Rinderpest, 1896.

71 D Wylie, *Starving on a full stomach...*, pp. 58, 71, 77-118.

72 CJ Makgala, “Taxation in the tribal areas of the Bechuanaland Protectorate, 1899-1975”, *Journal of African History*, 45(1), 2004, pp. 279-303.

73 BNA, RC 3/2/1, Moffat account on relief, 1896; *Blue Book on Native Affairs*, 1899, p. 65.

74 DL Schoenbrun, *A green place, a good place: Agrarian change, gender and social identity in the Great Lakes Region to the fifteenth century* (Portsmouth NH, Heinemann, 1998), p. 4.

famine and the loss of cattle. They also feared that colonial taxation would eclipse their own efforts at taxing their people. But they later, after being offered ten per cent as commission for the tax they collect from their communities, relented and started colluding with colonial officials to “persuade” men to migrate to the mines, though with little success.⁷⁵ But the tax revenue did not benefit the Batswana. For instance, no medical services were provided despite a rise in disease incidence.⁷⁶ Eventually, lack of medical services had reverberating demographic effects as human mortality escalated and population growth was considerably arrested.⁷⁷ Human mortality during this period was estimated at about twenty per cent of the total population.⁷⁸ Despite the rising mortality, the tax revenue continued to be siphoned away to finance general administration, most of it going into veterinary services and police activities.⁷⁹ No wonder colonial taxation came to be imagined as a form of “state-sanctioned banditry”, in the Batawana Reserve labelled: *mphahela* (give me for nothing).⁸⁰

Taxation, limited wage work opportunities and “slavery” wages profoundly impacted on peoples’ inability to secure food even for those families whose male members were employed. The inability to command food, however, did not completely erode people’s resilience. As central pillars of cultural life failed to cope with the ensuing subsistence crisis, old traditions were reconstituted while new strategies were devised.

Turning desperation into survival: Local famine coping strategies

Hunting and foraging as traditional famine coping mechanisms

As the famine intensified and people became desperate, old traditions and practices were re-appropriated, reconstituted and, some of them, discarded to offset the crisis. New survival strategies were also invented. Most of these changes, however, were temporary and contingent upon the devastation wrought by the pandemic. To understand such temporality of strategies, this paper utilizes Tswana nomenclature, such as proverbs, to examine linguistic

75 CJ Makgala, “Taxation in the tribal areas...”, *Journal of African History*, 45(1), 2004, p. 286.

76 RKK Molefi, *A medical history of Botswana, 1885-1966* (Gaborone, Botswana Society, 1996), p. 9.

77 BNA, reference S 43/4, High Commissioner to Hon. Lewis Harcourt MP, 6 November 1904.

78 J Ramsay, “The establishment and consolidation...”, WA Edge & MH Lekorwe (Eds.), *Botswana politics...*, p. 72.

79 RKK Molefi, *A medical history of Botswana...*, pp. 66-88.

80 CJ Makgala, “Taxation in the tribal areas...”, *Journal of African History*, 45(1), 2004, p. 298.

shifts and the coping strategies that various households employed to survive the famine. It argues that indigenous epistemologies about famines shaped many people's decisions about what temporary coping mechanisms to adopt for the duration of the famine.

Many people first sought recourse to pre-existing coping strategies, some of which Europeans questioned their sustainability. A white farmer, for instance, talked of Africans "postponing death by eating caterpillars, bark, roots and long-decayed corpses [of cattle]".⁸¹ 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 eastern Protectorate Batswana 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.⁸² Thus, hunting occupied a marginal position in household subsistence, and was therefore a supplementary measure as the Batswana lived on a diet of cereal, milk, vegetables, and occasionally, meat from domesticates.⁸³ Conversely, during famines hunting was carried out extensively.⁸⁴ For the Rinderpest period, however, hunting was not much useful as the preferred cloven-hooved wild game was as affected as cattle.⁸⁵

On the other hand, foraging, a female domain, was an important component of the traditional diet, particularly for poor families, as it added to the nutritional value of the meals.⁸⁶ At the end of the nineteenth century, there was a phenomenal rise in gathering, with some men becoming gatherers and whole families relying on wild food plants, worms and insects.⁸⁷ One

81 "Rotting carcasses and ruined men", *Farmers' Weekly*, 26 December 2003, p. 32.

82 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, E Basupi (cattle herder, Dau-e-meja-leebana), 15 December 2010/M Rashasho (former cattle herder, Mogapi), 26 December 2010.

83 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, Onketsetse Serumola (headmen of arbitration)/A Masilo (headman of arbitration), Bobonong, 9 February 2011.

84 Bechuanaland Protectorate Game Proclamation no. 19 of 1940.

85 FC Selous, *African nature notes and reminiscences* (London, Macmillan & Co. Limited, 1908), pp. 131-137; CA Spinage, *Cattle plague...*, p. 533.

86 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, M Makgoba (traditional midwife/farmer, Sefhophe) 25 December 2010/M Montsosi (farmer, Bobonong), 9 February 2011.

87 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, G Mooketsi (community elder, Ramotswa), 15 January 2014/K Moatswi (herbalist, Molepolole), 23 January 2014/M Mashaba, 15 July 2011.

most relied upon food of the wilderness were the *mopane* worms, which though seasonal, added nutritional value to the diet.⁸⁸ These are caterpillars that seasonally occur and feed on the leaves of the *mopane* 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.⁸⁹

Plentiful meat, prevalent deficiency disease

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:⁹⁰

[Its] characteristic pattern is that if you have 100 cattle in the kraal the night before, you wake up the next morning with nothing left. Then 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.

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.⁹¹ The loss of an important source of draught power in oxen undermined cereal production and forced communities to re-appropriate traditional coping strategies. For the first time, Batswana cattlemen, who "recognized the deadly nature of the pandemic and the certainty that whole herds [were going] to perish," slaughtered them to make biltong.⁹² As a result, plentiful meat dominated the diets of many people. Subsisting on a predominantly unbalanced diet of meat may have prevented

88 Phane is still a valuable component of the diet in central, eastern, northern and northwestern Botswana today.

89 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interviews M Mashaba, 15 July 2011/D Molebatsi (elder, Tsetsebjwe), 10 August 2011.

90 "Letter from Andreas Lefantiri", *Leselinyana* [Moriya], 15 June 1897, as cited in P Phoofole, "Epidemics and revolutions..." , *Past & Present*, 138(1), 1993, p. 127.

91 BNA, reference RC 3/2/1, Moffat's eye witness report on loss by Rinderpest, 1896.

92 BNA, reference RC 3/2/1, Moffat account on relief, 1896.

starvation, but it also caused deficiency diseases, particularly scurvy, which contributed to human mortality.⁹³ Liferantiri is likely to have conflated human mortality induced by deficiency disease with death from Rinderpest.

Some people subsisted on semi-decomposed meat of Rinderpest animals, which the Europeans conflated with “long decayed corpses”.⁹⁴ Semi-decomposed cattle meat was a traditional delicacy among men in rural communities of the eastern Protectorate. Such meat is called *nama e e dikologileng seolo*.⁹⁵ In Tswana culinary habits, meat cannot be eaten only when it is deemed to be rotten, or *bodile* in Tswana parlance. 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 ritually unacceptable for the Batswana to throw away the meat of their cattle.⁹⁶ For the Batswana, 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”.⁹⁷

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 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. Across the border, 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.⁹⁸ There is likelihood that border communities on either side, who had relatively similar experiences of the famine, may have incorporated semi-decomposed meat into their diets. But not all households and communities survived by subsisting on Rinderpest cattle.

93 Bechuanaland Protectorate, *Annual Reports, 1896-1897*, p. 10.

94 “Rotting carcasses and ruined men”, *Farmers’ Weekly*, 26 December 2003, p. 32.

95 The use of the euphemism, *nama e e dikologileng seolo* rather than *nama e e bodileng* (rotten meat) was important since nobody would fathom eating rotten meat. PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, J Galebotse (former colonial veterinary officer, Moletemane), 5. February 2014/B Sekonopo (traditional doctor/famer, Mahalapye), 23 December 2013.

96 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, O Serumola/A Masilo, 09 February 2011.

97 In 1926, anthropologist Herskovits postulated that Africans were so emotionally and spiritually attached to their cattle that the cattle were seen as sacrosanct. M Herskovits, “The cattle complex of East Africa”, *American Anthropologist*, 28(1), 1926, pp. 230-272.

98 C Ballard, “The repercussions of Rinderpest...”, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 19(3), 1986, p. 444.

Women, the primary subsistence producers, took recourse to the traditional hoe cultivation in order to produce food for their families.⁹⁹ The result was a reduction in the extent of the land prepared for cultivation. It was also during this time that some households started using the donkey as a draft animal. However, the donkey was relatively unknown in most parts of Bechuanaland, except in the Borolong.¹⁰⁰ Its slowness also meant that people failed to utilize the little moisture available in the soil as rains stopped as quickly as they came. Prospectively, the hardships would continue after the Rinderpest as people failed to produce surplus for use in successive years. Even the traditional system of rationing produce from the tribal *masotla* was suspended as it was impaired by crop failure.¹⁰¹

“Things that stop by”: The cultural politics of of guesthood

For generations prior to the end of the 19th century, the Batswana communities had drawn from their linguistic repertoire to reconstruct their social systems in order to survive during times of serious shortfalls in crop yields. Important features of cultural life were re-appropriated, reconstituted and others discarded to negotiate the subsistence crises. Generally, rural communities had traditions of sharing food. Under normal circumstances, people who would otherwise have failed to command food often benefited from expressions that denoted 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).¹⁰² The former implies that no matter how little the food, it can be shared. The latter is a teaching to siblings to always share food. 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. Most of the visitors came uninvited, but, in times of normal food supply, they could still be offered

99 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection) interview, M Mashaba, 15 July 2011/D Molebatsi, 10 August 2011.

100 BNA, reference RC 3/2/1, Moffat Account on Relief, 1896.

101 *Masotla* were fields cultivated by ward labour. The institution of *masotla* was a system whereby the peasants cultivated fields attached to the office of chieftainship. The chief provided the seed and the peasants came out to plough using their draught animals and equipment. The produce was left in the chief's custody to distribute to the poor or use during ceremonies to feed the commonality and/or visitors. In this sense, *masotla* were tribal property.

102 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, M Mashaba, 15 July 2011/D Molebatsi, 10 August 2011.

food depending on availability.¹⁰³

Such visitors included the *bafeti*, or the passers-by. The *bafeti* were dreaded for their notoriety to *apaya ka lenao* (lit. cook by one's foot), or visiting solely to partake 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 present day northeast Botswana, visitors of any kind, upon reaching the entrance of every household they wanted to enter, would shout: "*nda pinda!*" (I am passing by!).¹⁰⁴ Courtesy required the owner of the household they were supposedly passing-by to shout back: "*pindani!*" (pass on!), 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. 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 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!), went viral as the *bafeti* tried to solicit invitations from other households to share their meals.¹⁰⁵ Subsequently, the tradition of sharing was undermined as people tried to protect household subsistence. The *bafeti* became reconstituted into the *di eta di ema*, or "things that stop by," for their notoriety in entering other households for the sole purposes of getting food.¹⁰⁶ One social theorist has termed this process of giving people the image of things as "thingfication."¹⁰⁷

103 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, G Mooketsi (farmer, Ramotswa), 15 January 2014/K Moatswi, (herbalist, Molepolole), 23 January 2014.

104 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, Z Bakani (community elder, Francistown)/C Maposa (retired teacher, Francistown), 12 November 2011.

105 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, B Sekonopo, 23 December 2013/M Makgoba 25 December 2010/K Phuthego, 25 December 2010.

106 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, M Makgoba, 25 December 2010/K Phuthego, 25 December 2010/M Mashaba, 15 July 2011.

107 A Césaire, *Discourse on colonialism*. Translated by Joan Pinkham (New York, Monthly Review, 2000 [1955]), p. 42.

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.¹⁰⁸ By "thingfying" the *bafeti*, the eastern Protectorate's Batswana 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 temporally discarded one of their important features of food sharing and courtesy. They suspended offering uninvited guests food, thus subverting the proverb: *sejo se nnye ga se hete molomo*.¹⁰⁹ 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 to your visitors."¹¹⁰ 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.¹¹¹ 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!).¹¹² 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 temporarily weakened as individuals and households resorted to clandestine mechanisms of protecting their subsistence.

The famine also produced new gendered forms of power struggles. Men uncharacteristically invaded women's spaces, particularly the cooking space. Under normal circumstances, the cooking space was the preserve of women,

108 CC Mavhunga, "Vermin beings...", *Social Text* 106, 29(1), Spring 2011, pp. 151-176.

109 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, M Maphane, 23 December 2013/M Mashaba, 15 July 2011.

110 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, M Makgoba 25 December 2010/K Phuthego, 25 December 2010.

111 BNA, reference RC 3/2/2: Surmon to resident commissioner, 1896.

112 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, C Maposa, 12 November 2011/M Makgoba, 25 December 2010/ K Phuthego, 25 December 2010.

particularly when it did not involve the preparation of large amounts of meat.¹¹³ But some men started sticking around such women's spaces, especially during meal preparation times. There are stories 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 narrative:¹¹⁴

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.

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 dominate all forms of productive resources. It also exposes the Batswana 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.¹¹⁵ In the Tswana 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 such suggestive names was 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 access to food within families had become unequal as men used their masculine power to get a disproportionately higher share of the little food available.

113 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, G Mooketsi 15 January 2014/K Moatswi, 23 January 2014/K Phuthego, 25 December 2010.

114 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, K Phuthego, 25 December 2010.

115 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, B Sekonopo, 23 December 2013/M Makgoba, 25 December 2010/G Mooketsi, 15 January 2014/K Moatswi, 23 January 2014.

Conclusion

By the late 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 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, the Rinderpest pandemic, 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. Contrary to existing narratives that put great emphasis on the ecological trajectory of the pandemic, but obscure its subsistence and socio-cultural impact, this paper focuses on rural community adaptability to famine. It has demonstrated 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 eastern Protectorate's rural communities cannot be summarily represented as hopeless victims. They exhibited their adaptability and resilience to ecological and social change, particularly by re-appropriating their idiomatic expressions to invent differentiated coping mechanisms.