

URBANISATION OF THE RHODESIAN POPULATION

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IN COMMON WITH many other African countries, the beginnings of urban life in Rhodesia can be precisely dated. Urban forms were not a feature of the pre-colonial landscape and even to this day are associated only with those parts of the country which are economically and culturally a part of the twentieth century. Again, like other African countries, Rhodesia is characterised by a dual economy; parts of the country are economically and developmentally an integral part of the modern world while other areas are dominated by a primitive subsistence economy. The process of urbanisation is inextricably linked with this dual nature of the economy, and it is the transition from the rural to the urban, and the associated economic and cultural transition, that is the chief concern of this essay.

The word 'urbanisation' is frequently understood to mean two quite distinct, though associated, processes. In a quantitative sense urbanisation is that process whereby an increasing proportion of a country's population is recorded as resident in urban areas whilst, qualitatively, urbanisation is seen as an ever-extending influence of the urban way of life. In the latter sense urban *mores* and values may reach far into the countryside via mass media and facilitated by modern transport systems. In both the quantitative and the qualitative sense, however, the processes of urbanisation in Rhodesia provide interesting contrasts both with neighbouring African territories and with other Third World countries. Of particular interest is the low level of urbanisation and its very low rate of increase.

Prior to the colonial era the only form of settlement in Rhodesia was composed of groups of African huts. The smallest settlement consisted of four or five of these mud-walled and thatched-roofed huts forming the homestead of an extended family. Larger groupings of huts were normally found in association with those of a tribal chief but such settlements rarely contained more than a few hundred people and exhibited no urban characteristics. There was virtually no occupational specialisation and the entire settlement was dependent on subsistence agriculture.

The explorers and missionaries of the late nineteenth century thus entered an entirely rural country in which the only foci of the indigenous population were the few relatively dense groupings of people around tribal authorities; there was no established framework of settlements on which the trappings of colonialism could be hung. The first mission station was established at

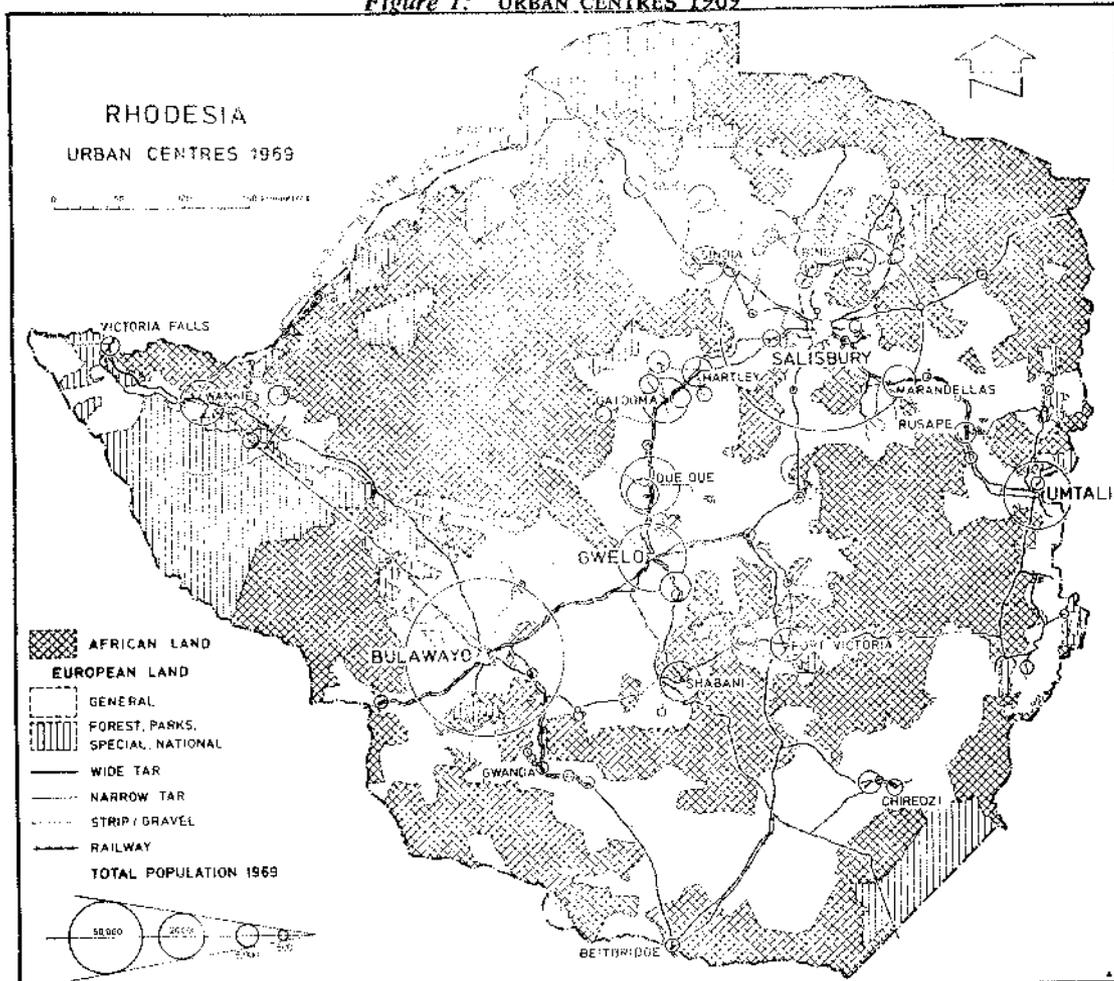
Inyati some 50 km north-east of Bulawayo in 1859 and a general quickening of interest in the region was experienced after the discovery of primitive gold workings first near Hartley in 1865 and later near Gwelo and in the Hunyani area in the early 1870s. The British South Africa Company, founded by Rhodes, was granted its Royal Charter for 'lands north of the Limpopo' in October 1889, and in 1890 the Pioneer Column and B.S.A. Company Police entered the present area of Rhodesia at Tuli in the south-west. Thereafter Fort Victoria, Fort Salisbury and Fort Umtali were established in quick succession. All three have become important centres in modern Rhodesia although only the first named retains its title of 'Fort'.

The basic pattern of urban centres in Rhodesia was laid in the last decade of the nineteenth century. By 1892 embryonic settlements were in existence at Hartley, Sinoia, Mazoe, Marandellas, Rusape and Melsetter. It remained only for the coming of the railway line which linked South Africa to the Mozambique port of Beira via Bulawayo and Salisbury in 1902, to fix the pattern of major settlements for all time. The line to the Victoria Falls was completed in 1904 and it permitted the exploration of the massive Wankie coalfield as well as providing a further link in Rhodes's dream of 'Cape to Cairo' rail route.

The twentieth century has witnessed the formation of only a few centres most of which are related to the exploitation of a particular primary resource. Railway routes have had a major effect on development of the country (Fig. 1). Generally, routes aimed to link known terminals and were laid for speed and economy over the easiest terrain, usually along watersheds. Deviations from the main watershed were, however, made to link up existing settlements such as Gwelo and the goldfields at Que Que and Hartley. Further extensions to the railway network included lines to the north-east and north-west of Salisbury linking the capital with rich farming and mining areas. These lines have favoured the growth of towns along their routes but have not given rise to any new centres. In more recent times the Gwelo-Shabani link has been extended, first to Maputo (Lourenço Marques) in 1955 and then to South Africa via Beit Bridge in 1974. Both of these routes traverse areas with low levels of development and, with exception of the branch line reaching to Chiredzi and the extensive irrigation lands of the south-eastern lowveld, neither is associated with urban development.

Other than railway routes the main influence on the spatial pattern of urban centres has been the division of the country between the two main racial groups. Details of the Land Tenure Act of 1969 and earlier legislation on Land Apportionment are not relevant to the present discussion. Suffice it to note that the origins of land division along racial lines can be traced back to the Lands Commission of 1894 which recommended the setting aside of land for the exclusive use of the Ndebele; and that the two main racial groups (African and non-African) now hold some 46 per cent each of the land area of the country with the remaining 8 per cent being designated as National Land which consists chiefly of wild-life reserves.

Figure 1: URBAN CENTRES 1969



The present pattern of land allocation between the races is shown in Figure 1, from which it is immediately apparent that there are no centres of any importance in the African areas. By contrast the close association between railway routes, urban centres and non-African land is quite clear. The dearth of urban development in African areas results not only from the lack of indigenous urban forms but also from legislation which has until recently, prevented non-African capital and entrepreneurial skills from investing in such areas. The intentions of this legislation, to prevent the exploitation of a simple rural people by sophisticated speculators, are laudable, but the net result has been to condemn the African areas to a permanent state of backwardness. Many Africans have therefore had to move out of traditional areas and away from family and friends to a new and culturally alien environment. Urbanisation of the indigenous population thus occurs by their being drawn into 'white' cities rather than through any urban development in the traditional African areas.

THE NON-AFRICAN POPULATION

The long urban tradition from which the non-African population is descended contrasts strongly with that of the indigenous Africans and necessitates a separate treatment of the history of urbanisation of each of the main racial groups. Although referred to as 'non-Africans' this section of the population consists of three distinct ethnic divisions; the Europeans or Whites, the Coloureds and the Asians. At the latest estimates (December, 1974) there were approximately 275 000 Europeans, 20 000 Coloureds and 10 000 Asians who together comprise only 5 per cent of the total Rhodesian population. It is, however, this small section of the population with its urban tradition and initiative which has laid the foundation of urban development in Rhodesia.

From the outset the European population has been a highly urbanised one (Fig. 2). The first Census of 1904 recorded 58 per cent of the non-Africans as resident in urban areas and with only minor fluctuations this proportion has climbed to its present high level of nearly 88 per cent. The drop in percentage in 1911 reflects the early successes in agriculture and the attractiveness of the low prices of rural land.

The very high level of urbanisation of the non-African group results from several factors. Firstly, most immigrants have come from cities in their home countries and bring with them urban skills rather than rural ones. The city dweller has always possessed a greater propensity to migrate than his rural cousin and this is evidenced by high levels of urbanisation amongst immigrant populations. Furthermore, agriculture in the European areas of Rhodesia occurs on a relatively extensive scale especially in the drier areas which are characterised by cattle ranching; thus the European farming community is well spread out, and, as almost all farm labour is African, it is common for ranches of 3 000 hectares or more to possess only one European family.

In absolute terms, the rural non-African population has never been large and at its peak in 1956 reached only 42 812 persons (Fig. 2). This section of

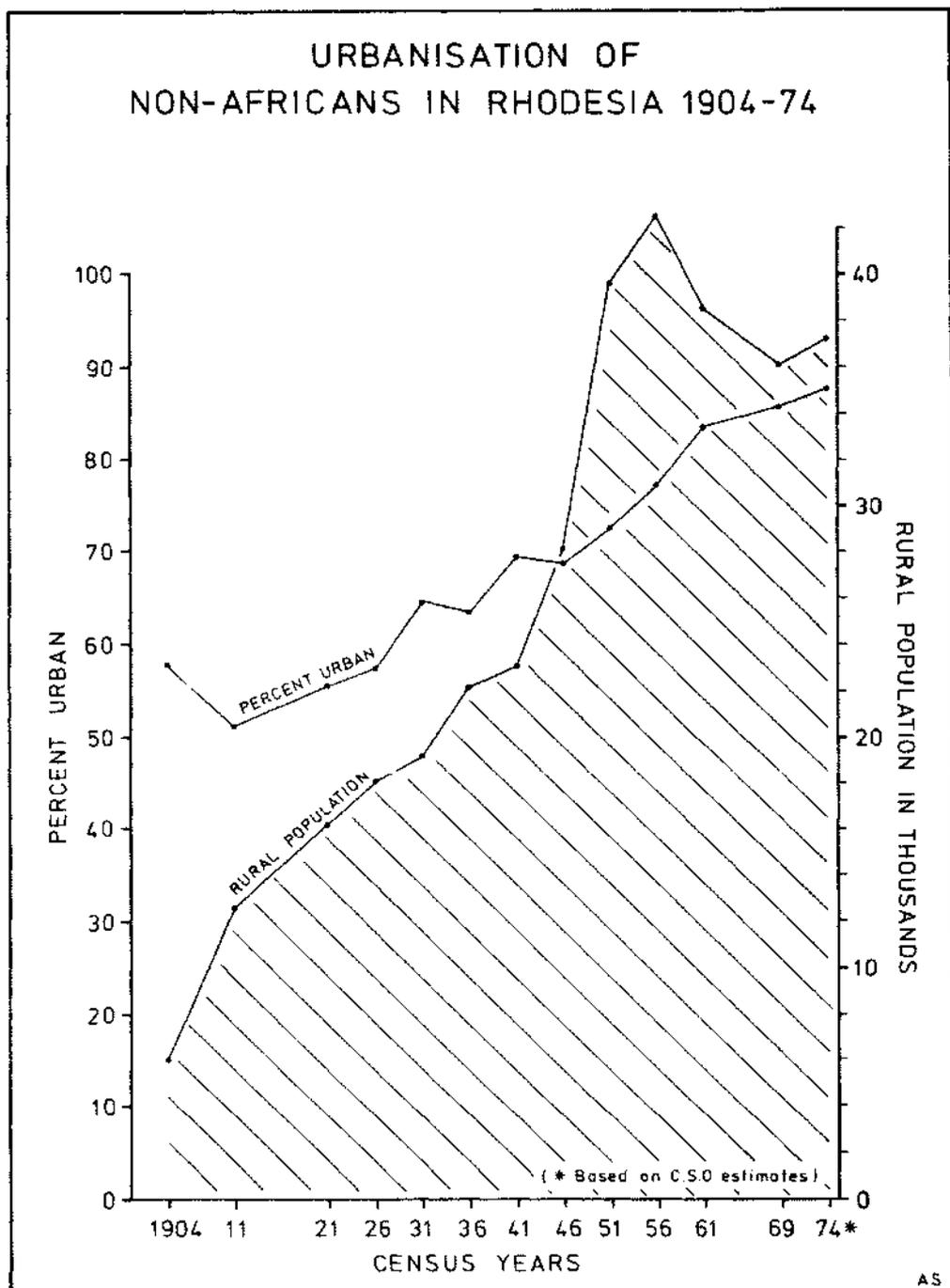


Figure 2: URBANISATION OF NON-AFRICANS 1904-74

the community showed steady growth until the end of the Second World War when the main wave of immigration from Britain nearly doubled the rural population in a single decade. However, the last twenty years have seen a decline in the absolute numbers of the non-African rural population as farm sizes have increased and agriculture becomes more modernised. No doubt the size of this section of the population will fluctuate in the future but a significant increase is unlikely. The greater part of the increase of the non-African population will take place in the urban areas and in a numerical sense the rural population will decline in relative importance. The present high level of urbanisation of the non-African population can thus be expected to reach even higher levels.

A study of the population growth rates of the main centres in Rhodesia evidences a remarkable similarity in patterns of growth. Based on the non-African population, Figure 3 illustrates growth rates for the ten largest centres along with those of the total population and that proportion of it that is urban.¹ In general the main centres have experienced steady population growth over the last seventy years and the minor variations shown in Figure 3 result in the main from the changing fortunes of mining centres such as Shabani and Wankie. The rather spectacular variation in the population of Fort Victoria at the 1946 Census is because of a large Italian prisoner-of-war camp. Several other centres also showed wartime fluctuation in population (Norton housed a R.A.F. training camp) but these are only minor interruptions in the long-term trend.

The population sizes of the smaller mining centres have undoubtedly changed most and the variation in the number and name of centres recorded as 'urban' at each Census is chiefly a reflection of changing employment at the smaller mines. The situation has also been aggravated by several changes in the definition of 'urban area'. Throughout Rhodesia's history small mining settlements have sprung up, struggled along for a few years and then faded out of existence and the extent to which this has occurred is seldom appreciated. For example the Census of 1961 listed 39 'urban areas' which were not listed in the 1969 Census. Most of these were small mining centres which fell within the 1961 definition of an urban area: 'any centre with a population of more than 25 non-Africans, where individual land holdings are less than 15 acres in extent and at least half of the adult male inhabitants are employed in industrial sectors other than agriculture'. However, such centres contain only a negligible proportion of the total non-African population and have no effect on the overall trends described earlier.

¹ The exclusion of African population statistics from Figure 3 is necessitated because only the 1962 and 1969 census returns took account of the African population. Details of the growth of the African population in the main urban centres do not exist. However, fluctuations in urban growth as shown by the non-African statistics are likely to have been reflected in the African population totals and the former are considered a fair reflection of growth trends. For full details and bibliographical citation of the Census Reports, see R. S. Roberts, 'An historical bibliography of Rhodesian demographic data. Part I: Non-African Census Returns'; 'Part II: African Census Returns', *The Rhodesian Librarian* (1977), 9, (i and ii, in press).

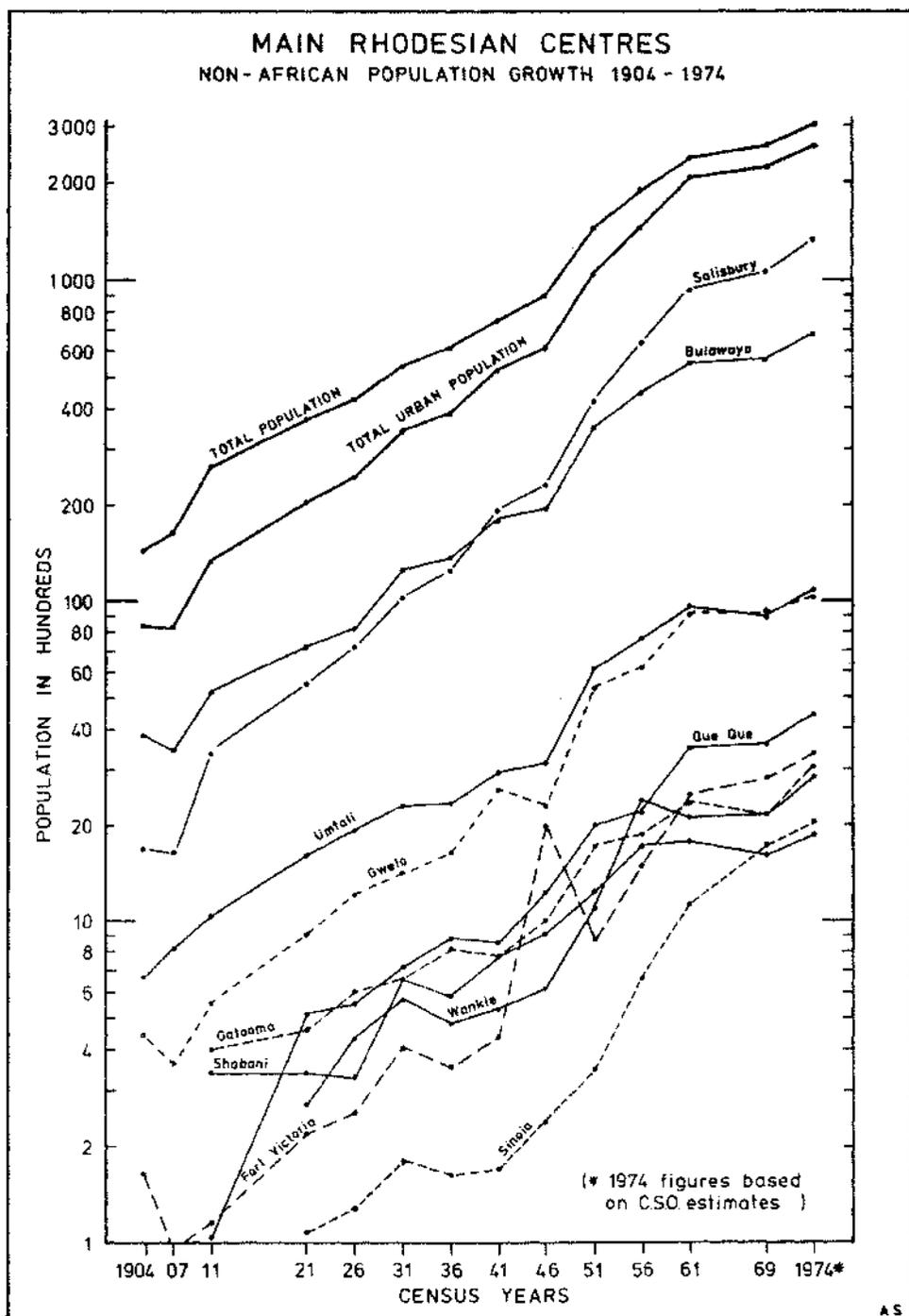


Figure 3: MAIN URBAN CENTRES: NON-AFRICAN POPULATION GROWTH 1904-74

THE AFRICAN POPULATION

The movement of rural Africans into the early settlements occurred immediately upon their founding. Contact with early travellers and explorers made some of the indigenous population aware of the attractions of the basic consumer goods of the late nineteenth century which now lured the first Africans away from their subsistence agriculture and into urban employment. In the first years of African urbanisation this movement constituted no more than a short-term labour migration, for most Africans, having acquired the goods they initially set out for, would return to their tribal homes.

In the first few decades of this century the true 'urban African' did not really exist although the oscillatory migration between the rural and urban areas did expose a large number of Africans to the urban way of life. However, with the passage of time the work period spent in town has steadily lengthened and at the same time an increasing number of Africans have become urban based. Even though second and third generation urban Africans are no longer a rarity the great bulk of the African population resident in urban areas has its true home in the traditional tribal lands. The common lot of the African working male is to spend much of his life oscillating between his rural home and urban job. Part simple agriculturist and part industrial labourer these are the 'men of two worlds'.²

In so far as the urbanisation of the African population has been closely tied to migrations for work, the process has been dependent on the rate of expansion of employment opportunities in the urban centres; and this in turn is a direct reflection of the numbers, financial capital and entrepreneurial skills of the non-African population of the towns and cities.

Tracing the growth of the African population of Rhodesia poses special problems as the only full censuses of Africans were in 1962 and 1969. Fortunately a count of Africans in urban areas with details of employment and sex is also available for the first three censuses — those of 1904, 1911 and 1921 (the interim Census of 1907 did not provide any data on the African population). Data on urban Africans is therefore missing for the years between 1921 and 1962. However interpolation of population levels of urban Africans in this forty-year period is aided by the census enumerations of Africans in employment. At each census of non-Africans, questionnaires have recorded information on the number of Africans in employment and the nature of work performed. It is therefore possible to derive an accurate estimate of the number of Africans in urban employment in the census years. This was achieved by eliminating employment in agriculture and mining and including only a proportion of those in domestic service according to the percentage of non-Africans resident in urban areas at each period. There are two main areas of inaccuracy which result from this method. Firstly the exclusion of all miners results in artificially low figures whilst the assumption that all persons

² D. H. Houghton, *The South African Economy* (Cape Town, Oxford Univ. Press, 1964), 85.

in occupations other than mining and agriculture are resident in urban areas boosts the estimates. However, these two errors are relatively minor and have a self-cancelling effect. If urban working populations calculated by this method are compared with census data in the years for which it is available, the estimates are found to lie very close to the real figures and none exceed an error of five per cent.

Once an accurate estimate of the working population had been obtained it remained to convert this into a total urban population in order to account for dependents and the unemployed. Between 1921 and 1962 the proportion of the urban population at work had dropped from 80,2 per cent to 58,1 per cent, a change of 22,1 per cent in a period of 41 years. In the absence of any more sensitive data it was then assumed that the proportion of urban Africans at work had changed evenly through time, i.e. at a rate of 0,54 per cent per annum. The dependency ratio of urban Africans has increased with the passage of time as the period spent at work in town has lengthened and as housing facilities for urban Africans have expanded; and it is unlikely that any major fluctuations have occurred in this trend at the national level. No doubt growth in the African population of individual towns has been markedly influenced by local policies but estimates of such data were not attempted.

The growth of the urban African population is illustrated in Figure 4 which also provides two indicators of the social evolution of this population; the sex composition of the population and the proportion in employment. The number of urban Africans has increased at a remarkably steady rate since the first census in 1904 with slightly more than a doubling every decade. To some extent this remarkable growth has resulted from a steady drop in the proportion of urban Africans in employment — a trend which reflects an improving balance in family structure as more women and children reside in town. Fortunately for city authorities whose housing programmes always seem to be in arrears, the proportion of Africans in employment is unlikely to decline much further and would appear to be levelling out between 35 and 40 per cent (Fig. 4). Future increases in the urban African population will relate more closely to increases in employment opportunities although the time may soon come when urban job vacancies are filled by those already resident in town. At this point rural-urban migration would be reduced to a minimum and the flow of cash from urban to rural areas would decline dramatically with dire results for those rural areas in which agriculture is at a sub-subsistence level and partly dependent on cash remittances from urban workers. However, further exploration of this topic must await a later discussion.

It is pertinent to note that the ratio of males to each female among urban Africans has changed from 18,0 in 1904 to 3,0 in 1936 and 1,5 according to the population estimates at December 1974 (Fig. 4). Most of these women are wives and mothers and are not in employment, for women have never constituted a significant proportion of the urban African labour force; between the 1921 and 1969 Censuses this proportion rose from 1,9 per cent to

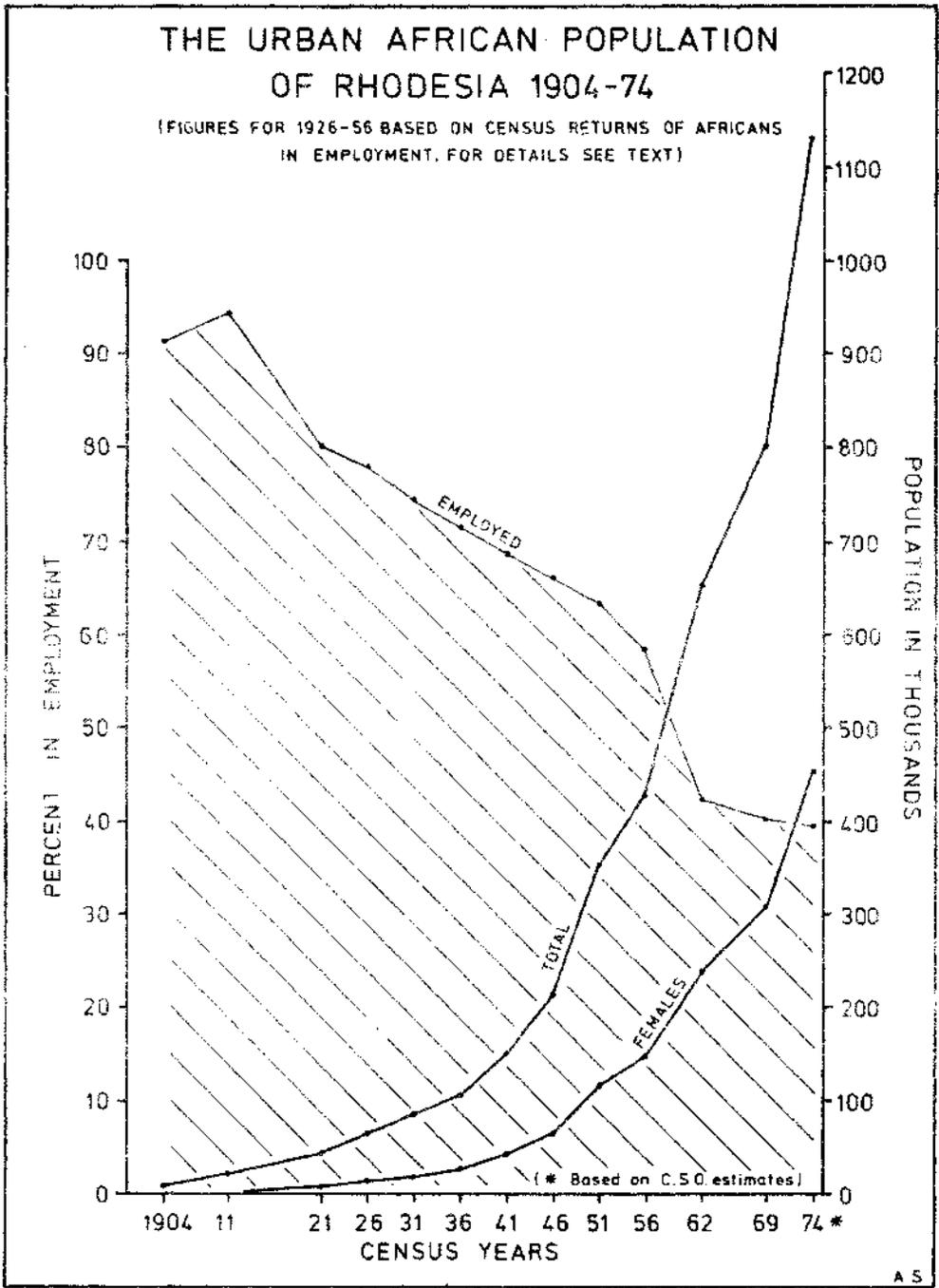


Figure 4: URBAN AFRICAN POPULATION 1904-74

only 9,6 per cent, and the majority of the working women are in domestic service.

Notwithstanding the rapid growth of the urban African population, the level of urbanisation amongst Rhodesian Africans is very low and has shown only a slight increase during the last fifteen years (Fig. 5). In 1962 the first full census of Africans shows 18,0 per cent in urban areas, but the 1969 revised estimate of the total population has the effect of reducing this to 17,5 per cent; the 1969 Census showed the African population to be 16,5 per cent urbanised, a drop of one per cent in seven years, whilst an unpublished estimate of the Central Statistical Office for December 1974 puts this percentage at 19,1.³ There are numerous problems in arriving at accurate totals for both the urban and the rural African populations partly because of the migratory nature of urban labourers and also because of the remoteness of many of the rural areas. However, there is no doubt that the current level of urbanisation of Rhodesian Africans is less than 20 per cent and has shown little increase in the last fifteen years.

Coupled to a rapid growth in the urban population this low rate of urbanisation indicates the high overall growth rate of the total African population which currently stands at 3,3 per cent per annum. The net result is a rapidly increasing African rural population (Fig. 5) which is necessarily dependent to a large extent on subsistence agriculture. In absolute terms therefore the rural population is experiencing massive increments of growth and the twelve years to 1974 saw a further 1,7 million Africans added to the rural population.

CONCLUSIONS

The levels of urbanisation of the two main racial groups in Rhodesia contrast strongly and parallel the levels of economic development of each group. Of the non-African population, nearly 90 per cent are resident in urban areas with the remainder engaged in modern, mechanised farming; all are part of a modern cash economy.

Of the African population less than 20 per cent are resident in urban areas and even if total employment in all spheres is taken into account only some 700 000 Africans can be described as 'economically active'; and of these 40 per cent are employed in agriculture and forestry, the majority as unskilled labourers.⁴ There is therefore an ever increasing number of rural Africans who are little affected by the modernising influence of urban areas and who are thus little motivated to change their traditional mode of life based on simple agricultural and pastoral systems.

The urban economy and job market in Rhodesia has expanded significantly since the Second World War but it has not been able to keep up with the rate of increase of the work-seeking population. No doubt more jobs would

³ Rhodesia, *Census of Population 1969* (Salisbury, Central Statistical Office [1976]), 6-7; private communication from the Central Statistical Office.

⁴ *Census of Population 1969*, 178, 185-6.

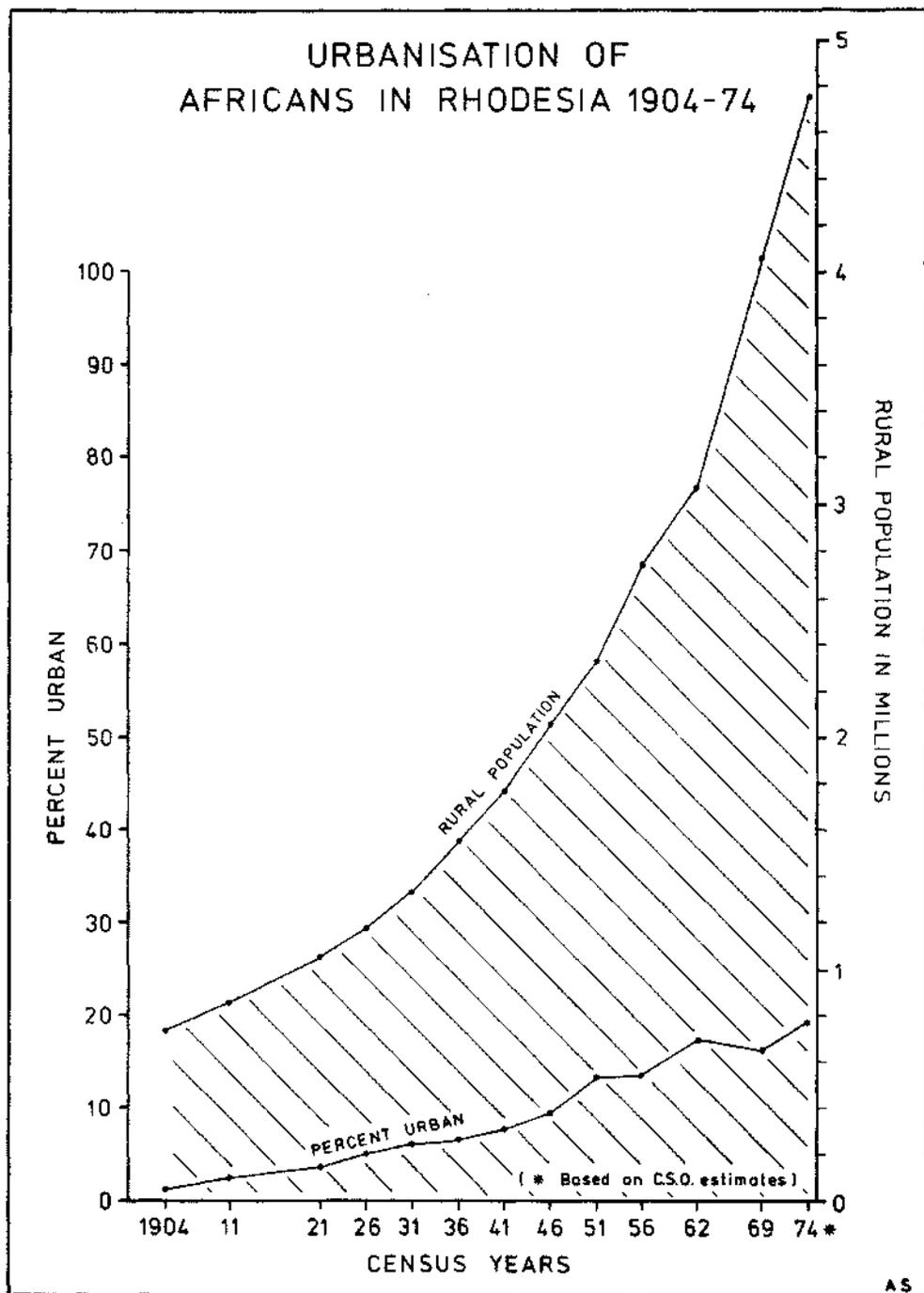


Figure 5: URBANISATION OF AFRICANS 1904-74

have been available if the inflow of foreign goods and capital had not been slowed in 1965. The main problem, however, is the very high rate of natural increase of the African population and while the growth of the urban African population remains tied to the expansion of employment opportunities, levels of urbanisation amongst the Africans can be expected to remain low.

In contrast to most Third World countries, Rhodesian cities are not scarred by shanty town and slum development, for the flow of rural migrants seeking work in urban areas has been carefully controlled since the early days of the B.S.A. Company. One can argue that persons should be allowed to choose an urban slum in preference to a rural hut but this option has not been open to Rhodesian Africans. The movement and place of residence of Africans is subject to several pieces of legislation, notably the Africans (Urban Areas) Accommodation and Registration Act [cap. 242], the Vagrancy Act [cap. 92] and the Land Tenure Act [cap. 148]. The first named requires that each resident of an African township is registered with the relevant urban authority while the Vagrancy Act enables control over the number of unemployed Africans in urban areas; those who cannot prove that they are gainfully employed may be returned to their tribal home.

Although the prediction of future trends is always hazardous especially in African countries, two possible courses of events are suggested with respect to urbanisation in Rhodesia during the remainder of this century. If the government should maintain its attitude to rural-urban migration, then expansion of the urban African population will parallel that of the country's economic development. This in turn is dependent on a variety of economic and political issues at both national and international levels, but it is unlikely that such expansion can match the growth of the African population. This would result in low and perhaps declining levels of urbanisation and the severe aggravation of an already serious over-population problem in many of the tribal areas.

More likely, however, especially in the light of current political change, is an easing of the restrictions which limit the movement of Africans within Rhodesia. For example, Zambia on gaining political independence wrote the 'right of freedom of movement' into its constitution. One of the results of this decree was a massive influx of persons into urban areas and a similar situation might result in Rhodesia, given a change in political leadership. No doubt, as in Zambia, major shanty towns would develop in and around the main centres. Conventional thinking views such developments with abhorrence but life in a shanty town often results from a free choice for it offers a greater hope of advancement than life as a subsistence farmer.

Whatever its defects, the shanty town exposes its residents to the rudiments of urban living and to urban values, and this could prove a decisive factor in the reduction of family size and growth rate of the African population. Certainly, as things stand at present, one can only regret that urbanisation should play so small a part in the modernisation and development of a country with the rich potential of Rhodesia.