

A CLASH OF ECONOMIES: EARLY CENTRALISATION EFFORTS IN COLONIAL ZIMBABWE, 1929-1935

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Abstract

Centralisation was inaugurated in 1929 by the Native Affairs Department. It was largely a response to the passage of the Land Apportionment Act in 1930, and the consequent increased population pressure in the reserves. It became essential to increase the carrying capacity of these areas. To this end, agricultural demonstrators preached intensive cultivation using four course crop rotation. Centralisation went further than this and actually altered the traditional system of landholding. Lands were divided into permanent arable and grazing areas. The two areas were separated by the village which was built in a long line through the middle. The initial success of the scheme was shortlived, and a number of factors were to lead to its revision in the mid-1930s.

but my forebears and I could teach him (the white man) a thing or two if only he would listen and allow himself to feel. Africa is no more for the white man who comes here to teach and to control her human and material forces and not to learn.

Ezekiel Mphahlele

INTRODUCTION

CENTRALISATION BEGAN IN 1929. It entailed a change in the traditional system of peasant landholding. Peasants were to abandon their time honoured extensive methods of rotational cultivation, and adopt an intensive system on permanent allocations of land. This entailed creating permanent grazing and arable lands. The two areas were separated by a road which ran through the centre and the village was built in a line along this road.

The issue of centralisation needs to be examined from a number of angles.¹ The focus here is the Shurugwi (Selukwe) Reserve, because this is where the scheme was first implemented in 1929, and as such represents not only the blueprint, but the 'purest' implementation of the policy. From here the ideals tended to be diluted, and then corrupted, culminating finally in the Native Land Husbandry Act in 1951. This is attributable to

¹ For a broader definition of centralisation, see below.

changing government policy, pressure on the land, changing ideals as to the role of both the reserves and the peasant farmers themselves. Centralisation operated on many levels and cannot be separated from the implementors of the scheme, as individuals, as well as representatives of a society, culture and set of beliefs. Peasant response, both positive and negative, is also vital to an understanding of White reactions during the period in question. The Native Affairs Department was officially responsible for development in the reserves. According to Alexander

the Native Affairs Department evolved ideologies and practices which reflected the changing requirements of the national political economy, regional and international influences, as well as its own interpretations of its mandates.²

The main thrust of government policy with regard to peasant farmers during the 1920s underwent a fundamental shift, and so accordingly, did Native Affairs Department policy.

Prior to the decade of the 1920s, the reserves had been seen as temporary enclaves which would ultimately vanish as the peasantry was drawn into the exchange economy.³ After responsible government in 1923, however, these areas came to be seen as a permanent answer to the 'Native problem', that is, areas wherein Africans could develop in their own manner. According to Alexander, at this time a policy of 'traditionalism' was adopted. This included the increased involvement of chiefs and headmen in the administration of the reserves. 'The move marked a significant change from earlier versions of a "detribalised" and proletarianised African population in which "tribal communism" would be replaced by the individualism of the European.'⁴ According to McGregor, this changing role envisaged for the reserves was in part a response to successful passive resistance on the part of peasants in regard to the collection of taxes:

In rural areas the dominant strategy for dealing with the state was non-co-operation: tax evasion and the avoidance of wage labour were common on adjacent white farms. Some oral histories collected in Shurugwe attribute the new state intrusion into their life in the 1920s partly to the success of these strategies of resistance.⁵

² J. Alexander, 'The State, Agrarian Change, and Rural Politics in Zimbabwe: Case Studies of Insiza and Chimanimani Districts, 1940-1990' (Oxford, Univ. of Oxford, PhD thesis, 1993), 6.

³ E. Punt, 'The Development of African Agriculture in Southern Rhodesia with Particular Reference to the Inter-war Years' (Durban, University of Natal, M.A. thesis, 1979), 43-44.

⁴ J. Alexander, 'The State, Agrarian Change, and Rural Politics in Zimbabwe', 7.

⁵ Jo-ann McGregor, 'Woodland Resources: Ecology, Policy and Ideology: An Historical Case Study of Woodland Use in Shurugwe Communal Area, Zimbabwe' (England, Loughborough University, PhD. Thesis, 1991), 83.

A policy of segregation, therefore, came to dominate settler politics in the following decades. The 1930 Land Apportionment Act was a culmination of this line of thought. It included a clause stipulating that all Africans living on White land were to move into reserves within a period of six years. This led to a change in philosophy regarding the reserves. It was decided that they would now need to be developed so as to increase carrying capacity, and not merely maintained as had been the previous policy. Alexander asserts that:

These policies led to extensive and coercive interventions into the way Africans lived and farmed. Each policy was justified in different ways, reflecting changes in the national political economy and regional and international policy influences, but all were premised on a set of beliefs regarding the superiority of Western culture and science and the laziness, conservatism and irrationality of African farmers.⁶

Drinkwater maintains that with the passage of the Land Apportionment Act 'the most controversial phase of the colonial agrarian policy, the phase of technical development had begun'.⁷

It was this changing role envisaged for the reserves that persuaded Alvord, the Agriculturalist for Natives, to implement his policy of centralisation. In keeping with the tenets of the Land Apportionment Act it was essential that the reserves be made to accommodate more people and as a result demonstrator effort was stepped up. Centralisation, when it was introduced, went one step further in the 'war' against extensive cultivation. Although centralisation was not coercive in the early years, once land had been demarcated, peasants were obligated thereafter, to cultivate intensively. Failure to do so, in the mind of officials, would be to their peril because

If they are going to use their old wasteful methods of agriculture on a limited piece of land, with nothing else to go onto, in 4 or 5 years time they will not be able to get a return out of the land: it will be worn out.⁸

This sentiment reflected the feeling of the decade of the 1940s, but was no less true of the situation arising at the outset of the 1930s.

The rural areas then, were to be 'developed' simultaneously with the movement towards segregation, and the removal of the potential threat of the peasant farmer to the newly established settler farming community.

⁶ J. Alexander, *The State, Agrarian Change, and Rural Politics in Zimbabwe*, 8.

⁷ M. Drinkwater, *The State and Agrarian Change in Zimbabwe's Communal Areas* (London, Macmillan, 1991), 40.

⁸ NAZ, ZBJ 1/1/1, Vol. 2, Native Trade and Production Commission: Oral evidence: Mr Beck, ANC, Mrewa, 280.

BACKGROUND TO CENTRALISATION

Alvord had started a scheme of agricultural improvement in the 1920s. He used a method whereby trained demonstrators (Black extension officers) were located in the reserves and showed the villagers how to farm their land more intensively and thus achieve higher yields per acre.

Shurugwi Reserve was one of the first reserves to receive a demonstrator. The Native Commissioner (NC) Selukwe had been persistent in his complaints about the deteriorating condition of the reserve.⁹ Once early success of the demonstration scheme was assured, Alvord had demonstrators located in reserves throughout the rural areas. It was clear, however, that this would not solve the problem of insufficient land for the people. It was hoped that centralisation would go somewhat further in alleviating this problem, particularly now that the Government was disregarding all pleas for the allocation of more land for the peasants, and indeed the problem was soon to be exacerbated once the Land Apportionment Act came into effect. The carrying capacity of the reserves needed to be increased to accommodate all those entering them once the Land Apportionment Act was implemented.

The theoretical concept of centralisation had been contemplated before 1929. Indeed in 1927, C. L. Carbutt, then Superintendent of Natives, later to be Chief Native Commissioner, discussed the issue in an article published in *Native Affairs Department Annual* (NADA). He alludes to four primary causes of congestion in the reserves. Firstly, the plough which had led to the cultivation of vast areas of land; secondly,

The extensive patches of grassland which the owners of contiguous cultivated land leave between their gardens, which are entirely wasteland during half the year, for they are not of sufficient size to be grazed without danger of damage to crops in the adjoining fields.¹⁰

The third factor mentioned is overstocking; and the fourth, the 'waste of land due to the uncontrolled location of Kraals'.¹¹ Carbutt offered a tentative solution to this problem: the allocation of grazing and arable lands, the creation of villages, and destocking. Alvord too, had experimented with the idea of centralisation in the early 1920s when he was still living at Mt Silinda Mission: 'I had already centralised land at Mt Silinda, that is, putting your arable lands together, and your grazing lands together'.¹² It is not clear from whom the original idea came, although it is likely that the Chief Native Commissioner was commenting on something he had at some point, discussed with Alvord.

⁹ NAZ, S235-504, District Annual Reports, NC, Selukwe, 1926.

¹⁰ C. L. Carbutt, 'Communal land tenure', *Nada*, 5 (1927), 43.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² NAZ, ZBJ, 1/1/1, Vol. 1, E. D. Alvord, 113.

Centralisation as a policy was officially inaugurated in 1929, and was implemented by Alvord as a panacea to what he saw as the deficiencies in the 'traditional' system of landholding. Alvord viewed rotational cultivation as wasteful and low yielding. But as was the case with most authorities at the time, he appeared to be ignorant as to what constituted traditional techniques. Historians have pointed out the deficiencies in colonial attitudes to peasant agricultural methods. During the colonial era 'Villages spread out everywhere . . .', Palmer observed. He attributed this to increasing population density and greater use of the plough. This 'resulted in lands becoming all mixed up and in frequent destruction of crops by cattle'.¹³ This opinion has found support from other writers. According to McGregor:

Whilst many officials held that shifting cultivation was 'traditional', and made use of methods passed down through the ages, it seems that, in fact, shifting agriculture became dominant as a strategy between 1910 and 1930.¹⁴

McGregor argues that shifting cultivation 'followed the adoption of the plough . . . and was used as a way of avoiding the invasion of weeds'.¹⁵ Furthermore, the opening up of more fertile virgin land by the plough resulted in higher yields, this encouraged rotational cultivation.

Alvord, like most Whites at this time, was convinced of the superiority of Western civilisation, and of course, its agricultural techniques. 'In fact, as many writers have shown, technical development policies were based on profound misunderstandings of production and ecology in the reserves, often exacerbating problems they were ostensibly intended to solve.'¹⁶ The general belief was that Europe had experienced its agricultural revolution and had moved on to an industrial phase of society. Africa, however, was still in the grips of a feudal type agriculture. Consequently, it was believed, Whites had little to learn from the peasant farmers. They simply witnessed what they saw as primitive, 'shifting' cultivation which they viewed as wasteful. The urgency to increase the carrying capacity of the land would be that much greater with the imminent implementation of the findings of the Morris Carter Commission in the form of the Land Apportionment Act of 1931. As a consequence, something needed to be done to change the *status quo*.

As early as 1924, some Native Commissioners were also thinking in terms of a policy not dissimilar to that which was later embodied in the centralisation scheme. The NC, Charter, remarked:

¹³ R. Palmer, *Land and Racial Domination in Rhodesia* (London, Heinemann, 1977), 203.

¹⁴ Jo-ann McGregor, 'Woodland Resources', 79.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁶ Alexander, 'The State, Agrarian Change and Rural Politics in Zimbabwe', 11.

Improved methods of cultivation are still confined to the plough and until natives are restricted to small and limited areas they will not adopt other methods nor is there any necessity at present since they achieve such remarkably good results . . . Keeness amongst some of the progressive natives continues but unless they fence the lands their efforts cannot meet with success, the green crop in the winter months being a great attraction for stock, buck and hares.¹⁷

Naturally, the cost of fencing made this suggestion prohibitive, but under centralisation, the need for fencing was done away with by the erection of houses in between arable and pastoral land. The Native Commissioner, Charter, did see the ultimate need for both intensive cultivation of a smaller area, and protection of arable lands. The Native Commissioner for Hartley added an observation that most peasant farmers 'have not done anything towards increasing the productivity of the soil',¹⁸ and goes on to say: 'Speaking to one of the most intelligent Natives recently, as to why they did not do so, he stated that the extra work entailed in weeding lands which had been manured did not make it worth while.'¹⁹ These words are echoed elsewhere in the Native Commissioner reports and indicate a general impasse and lack of understanding between Native Affairs Department staff and the peasant population. McGregor indicates that the Native Affairs Department did not understand peasant motivations:

The planting of large areas and low yields per unit area were seen as highly wasteful of land. This criticism was linked to the settlers' demand for land from Africans, as well as to a failure to understand a system which valued returns to labour rather than returns to land.²⁰

Drinkwater also comments on this lack of understanding and empathy:

this lack of comprehension was denigrated by the colonial administration as the outcome of being primitive. Likewise, the reluctance of the Shona peoples to accept the rightness of this imposed approach was taken as evidence of their adherence to irrational superstition.²¹

Further, Drinkwater mentions that

The Shona peoples had virtually no previous cultural exposure to the values of capitalist modernisation, and hence the purposive-rational approach of the new bureaucratic administration was incomprehensible to them.²²

¹⁷ NAZ, S235 502, Annual Reports, NC, Charter, 1924.

¹⁸ NAZ, S235 502, Annual Reports, NC, Hartley, 1924.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Jo-ann McGregor, 'Woodland Resources', 81.

²¹ M. Drinkwater, *The State and Agrarian Change*, 12.

²² *Ibid.*

By 1929 the position had deteriorated, and large areas of fertile land were no longer there for the taking. Intensive cultivation, although more labour intensive and time consuming, was rapidly becoming a necessity. What was wrong was the approach adopted over the years and the lack of communication and understanding between the parties involved. Very few of the authorities gave the peasant farmer any credit for the type of land usage he had practised in pre-colonial times. According to Alvord:

They had no idea of proper tillage or planting methods. Usually they planted five crops in mixtures without any idea of keeping them properly spaced, with the result that the land was supporting a larger number of plants per square yard than it should support for the best production of crops.²³

And further:

The Native had an assortment on every patch. Sometimes he would mix groundnuts with maize, or rapoko with maize, or half a dozen other crops. There were various arrangements with no particular rule.²⁴

During the Native Trade and Production Commission the efficacy of previous Shona cultivation systems was pointed out. Koch was scathing about the lack of attention paid to such by men, such as Alvord, in a position of authority:

Actually, the mixed interplanting that Mr Alvord objects to, it is as old as the hills and is commonly practised in the East. You are introducing nitrogen into the soil. It is only bad in that it makes difficulties in reaping and cultivating.²⁵

Unfortunately, such words of wisdom were few and far between, and were generally dismissed or brushed aside.

Alvord saw the centralisation policy as a new phase in his work: it marked a radical departure from all previous policies. All previous attempts at popularising a more intensive system of cultivation had been undertaken within the existing framework. Centralisation required a shift in the system of landholding. 'In this way the area of arable land was fixed, and settled agriculture replaced shifting cultivation.'²⁶

Once again Shurugwi was selected as the testing ground. There appear to have been two primary motivating factors behind this decision. Firstly, because of the already congested nature of the reserve. Alvord commented in connection with this:

²³ NAZ, ZBJ, 1/1/1, Vol. 1., Native Trade and Production Commission, E. D. Alvord, 107.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 112.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, Mr D. T. Koch, 359.

²⁶ M. E. Bulman, 'The Native Land Husbandry Act of Southern Rhodesia, A Failure in Land Reform' (London, University of London, Msc. Dissertation, Agricultural Economics, 1970), 5.

Selukwe Reserve at present is an area of old worn out Native lands, heavily populated and greatly overstocked with cattle. The people themselves now realise the seriousness of the situation and so are quite ready to join in a practical scheme to relieve it.²⁷

And secondly, with the passage of the Land Apportionment Act there would ensue an exodus to the Shurugwi Reserve because a

considerable number of Natives reside on the alienated farms and crown lands in this district specified in schedule 5 of the act for whom provision will have to be made when the allotted time arrives for their removal from these areas.²⁸

This would make the already overcrowded reserve uninhabitable. Furthermore, the Native Commissioner for the district was eager to co-operate and enthusiastic about the idea of centralising the lands, and he made this known in his correspondence with the Superintendent of Natives:

The Selukwe Reserve, pure sandveld throughout, is far too small for the Natives settled therein, and this position is accentuated by the wasteful methods of native agriculture. There being no more land available, we are obliged to meet the constant applications of these natives to settle elsewhere by endeavouring to cut down the wastage to an absolute minimum, and utilise every available yard of the reserve by an undertaking which to my mind is rendered possible by this scheme alone.²⁹

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SCHEME

Alvord started the scheme in July 1929. He was very enthusiastic about it; 'I started a job . . . which developed into a policy pregnant with meaning for the enrichment of African life.'³⁰ Under the methods advocated by demonstrators, plottolders would cultivate a portion of their land in accordance with the rotation methods devised by Alvord. These plots were usually one acre each. However, these plots were strewn around the reserve, and as a result much good quality land was unutilised. According to Alvord

It was the custom of Africans everywhere to have small lands and gardens scattered throughout the reserve like small islands in a sea of grass. They also had their individual huts scattered and hidden away in the bush and rocks.³¹

²⁷ NAZ, SRG1/INT4, Annual Report of Agriculturalist, 1928.

²⁸ NAZ, S235/508, 1929, NC, Selukwe Reserve.

²⁹ NAZ, S1007/7, Miscellaneous, Selukwe Reserve, NC, Selukwe, to Superintendent of Natives, Bulawayo, 3/2/31.

³⁰ NAZ, E. D. Alvord, 'The Gospel of the Plow' (Unpubl., 1950).

³¹ *Ibid.*

Such extensive methods were no longer feasible given the current situation.

Alvord drew attention to the fact that the scattered arable lands in the midst of pasturage meant that cattle could not be let into these areas during the growing season for fear of damage to crops. This meant, then, that cattle grazed in areas set aside specifically for this purpose, and these areas became overgrazed and barren long before harvest time. According to Weinmann:

By the time the crops were harvested and the cattle could be allowed to graze freely, the herbage of the surrounding veld had matured and lost most of its nutritive value. The cattle, therefore, entered the dry winter season in a state of poverty and every year there were many deaths due to starvation. Alvord reports that in 1927 alone, 25,000 head of cattle died from poverty.³²

Moreover, after centralisation cattle need no longer traverse arable land in order to reach water supplies or dip tanks as these were now located in the grazing area.

What spurred Alvord to initiate the scheme were requests from peasant farmers for more land. Alvord then indicated to them that there was abundant fertile land which was underutilised, due to what he saw as inadequate land management in the current circumstances of increased population pressure on the land. He then put his proposal to them:

I pointed to the waving miles of uneaten grass and told them that the only way to have fat cattle was for people under headmen to centralise their scattered crop lands together into large arable blocks and to set aside large stretches of other land to be used as communal grazing lands where cattle could graze freely during the growing season. Then, after the crops are harvested the cattle could graze freely in the arable areas to clean up crop residue for a month or two while the grazing land had a rest.³³

This was an apparently simple solution to a pressing problem. However, it was to prove to be a far from simple task persuading people to adopt this approach. Traditional peasant farmers, existing as they did so close to the poverty line, were reluctant to indulge in untried and untested, risky ventures. Furthermore, they had no reason to trust the motivations of the government which, they thought, could be encouraging such a scheme in order to deprive them of more land once it was found that they could subsist on less.³⁴

³² H. Weinmann, 'Agricultural Research and Development in Southern Rhodesia, 1924-1950' (Salisbury, University of Rhodesia, Series in Science No. 2, 1975).

³³ NAZ, E. D. Alvord, 'The Gospel of the Plow'.

³⁴ R. Palmer, *Land and Racial Domination*, 219, quoting E. D. Alvord.

Nevertheless, Alvord embarked on the centralisation project. An endeavour was made to use land for the purpose to which it was best suited. For example, vlel land, steeply gradiated land and land near rivers or streams which was not suitable for tillage, was designated pasturage.

Under the centralisation scheme, all arable holdings and grazing lands were consolidated into block systems. These were separated by the village which was laid out in straight lines on the boundary lines between the two areas. After this the separated arable lands were re-allocated into family holdings whose acreage depended on the size of the individual family.³⁵

The Demonstrator for the area, Mapolisa, was very enthusiastic and when Alvord arrived in the area in September 1929, he already had a list of names of thirty two headmen who wanted their arable lands centralised. According to the Native Commissioner Selukwe, before the scheme had even been implemented many more villagers were anxious to have their lands centralised. The potential benefits were obvious even before the scheme was fully operational.³⁶ The Native Commissioner made the suggestion that only those who had already begun the procedure on their own, and had separated arable and grazing areas, should have their lands surveyed initially. At this point Alvord discovered that only fourteen headmen, along with their people had made a definite start. These fourteen areas accommodated 1 200 people. They had centralised their lands in large blocks and they had already winter ploughed.³⁷

During the early years of centralisation no coercion or force was employed in the exercise:

It was with the view to relieving congestion in the reserves that the scheme of centralisation of lands, coupled with instruction in farming methods has been adopted, and no areas were demarcated except where the residents of the locality specifically requested it.³⁸

Alvord surveyed the land and laid out the villages. He demarcated the boundaries of arable and pasture land. Each land had a road down the centre along which the huts were built, and these separated the two areas which were located on either side of the middle boundary. Cattle pens were to be placed at a suitable distance away from human dwellings. Each new village was to have its granaries also built in a line behind human dwellings. The villages were to be built on ridges so as to assure proper drainage, 'it is a long line of huts stretching for miles and they are 30 or 40 yards apart'.³⁹ For easy access, compost pits were placed at regular intervals along the line.

³⁵ NAZ, ZBJ, 1/1/1, 1944 Production and Trade Commission.

³⁶ NAZ, Annual Reports, NC, Selukwe, 1929.

³⁷ NAZ, S1007/7, 1930-1933 Miscellaneous, Selukwe Reserve, Alvord to Director of Native Development, Survey of Centralised Arable Lands, Selukwe, 15/10/29.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ NAZ, ZBJ, 1/1/1, Vol. 2, Native Trade and Production Commission, D. T. Koch, 355.

Centralised lands tended to vary in size. A number of factors came into play when determining the size of a landholding. Current family size was taken into account as well as possible future requirements. It was estimated that each family would require between 10 and 15 acres of arable land.⁴⁰ Pendered was later to state:

Mr Alvord was of the opinion that a man and his wife, if efficient and hardworking, could farm up to ten acres of arable land in the high rainfall area and correspondingly more in the medium and low rainfall areas.⁴¹

Some landholdings, such as those belonging to village headmen, were the largest as these men often had more than one wife, and many children all of whom represented a source of labour. At the other end of the scale were the smallest divisions of land: that belonging to single people, for example, the elderly, or the unmarried.

On centralised land four course crop rotation was to be undertaken. It was anticipated that yield per acre would increase as a result of these cultivation techniques. 'People were also shown how to build up and maintain soil fertility — a measure previously unnecessary under traditional methods. The manuring of lands was made easier by the now close proximity of grazing lands.'⁴² On this point Bulman mentions that,

With settled cultivation, the collection and spreading of manure was introduced. It was found that 5–10 tons per acre once in four years maintained soil fertility. Separation of crops was encouraged . . .⁴³

Once the arable land had been surveyed and marked out, land was allocated to individual families, at which time they relinquished all former lands they had cultivated. This relocation was left to the village leaders. This was in keeping with the new policy of giving more authority to the traditional leaders. As time passed the size of landholding tended to decrease in size from the original size of 10–15 acres.

RECEPTIVITY TO CENTRALISATION

As centralisation proceeded in the Selukwe Reserve it was inevitable that some resistance would be encountered. The most vociferous objector was Chief Nhema, the paramount chief of the area. In a letter to the Superintendent of Natives, Bulawayo, his objection was that 'The Native

⁴⁰ NAZ, S1007/7, 1930–33, Miscellaneous, Selukwe Reserve, Alvord to Director of Native Development, 15/10/29, Survey of Centralised Lands, Selukwe Reserve.

⁴¹ NAZ, S235/474, Marketing of Native Produce: Report, A. Pendered, 24/3/1945, 43.

⁴² NAZ, S1007/7, 1930–1933, Miscellaneous, Selukwe Reserve, Alvord to Director of Native Development, 15/10/29, Survey of Centralised Arable Lands, Selukwe Reserve.

⁴³ M. E. Bulman, 'The Native Land Husbandry Act', 5.

Reserve was too small to accommodate his people, and that more territory was desired.⁴⁴ In response to the Native Commissioner's letter, the Acting Superintendent of Natives went to the district in mid-1930 and held a meeting with Chief Nhema and his people. But by this time Nhema had witnessed the benefits of centralisation and was willing to co-operate with the authorities. He was made aware that he would not be given more land, and that extensive cultivation methods and large grazing areas were no longer a realistic ideal. Consequently, in September, 1930, Alvord surveyed the arable and pasture lands of Chief Nhema and his 45 sub-chiefs and headmen. He claimed to be

impressed by the unanimous enthusiasm displayed by all natives under chief Ndema (sic). This enthusiasm was largely due to the successful results which followed the centralisation of arable and grazing lands for the fourteen headmen on this reserve last year, and largely caused by the fact that those centralised lands had better crops and their cattle were in such excellent condition when compared to cattle belonging to natives who did not have centralised arable and grazing lands.⁴⁵

Alvord indicated that no coercion had been used in undertaking the centralisation of Shurugwi Reserve:

The Natives of the reserve, however, were forced by a condition of circumstances arising from dense population, worn out, defertilised lands and a condition of overstocking with cattle, and especially by the fact that many cattle were dying of poverty . . . The people decided of their own free will to try it (ie. centralisation).⁴⁶

Once the lands of Chief Nhema had been centralised in December 1930, the whole of Shurugwi reserve was under the scheme, and the Native Commissioner stated that an improvement in livestock was already apparent under the new scheme.⁴⁷

Generally speaking there is much satisfaction among all of Ndema's (sic) people concerning the centralisation of lands and they consider it to be most beneficial. Among the benefits mentioned by them are better and fatter cattle, better crops, better arrangement of kraals with ready access to lands in one direction and grazing in the other. Also headmen now know where all their men are living and where their lands and cattle are. Therefore all Headmen and chief Ndema (sic) have better control over their subjects than before. It appears that the adoption of our

⁴⁴ NAZ, S1007/7, NC, Selukwe to Superintendent of Natives, Byo, 17/7/1930, Centralisation of Lands, Selukwe Reserve.

⁴⁵ NAZ, S1007/7, Alvord to Director of Native Development, Report on Centralisation of Arable and Grazing Lands, Selukwe Reserve, 17/11/30.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ NAZ, S335/508, Annual Reports, NC, Selukwe, 1930.

centralisation scheme has helped considerably in strengthening tribal and communal life on this reserve.⁴⁸

This increased control of the chiefs was considered to be important now and part of the move to give control of the people back to the traditional leaders.

The success of the scheme became more apparent at the cattle sales: 'the fat cattle belonging to those who centralised last year were sought after by cattle buyers and the best prices ever before realised were paid for them'.⁴⁹ It has been argued by Moyana that the Shurugwi farmers were the only ones from whom buyers purchased cattle and that the high price realised 'was intended to induce other reserves into accepting centralisation'.⁵⁰ McGregor makes a pertinent observation regarding this issue of cattle. She claims that the Shurugwi cattle had never been good, partly owing to poor grazing conditions on the sandveld.⁵¹ She claims that it was a policy of Shurugwi farmers to

trade their millet crop in exchange for the better cattle of the drier areas of the south. The fatter cattle to which the reports refer . . . may have been recent purchases or may have been grazed on commercial land. Cattle often changed hands.⁵²

The validity of both these assertions may be questioned, although it is likely that there is an element of truth in both. It is also probable that cattle did show an improvement in the early years of the centralisation programme, before increased population pressure in the reserve negated improvements made by centralisation. Nevertheless, centralisation as a policy under optimum conditions would ensure success.

The centralisation experiment in the Shurugwi reserve was, however, a success in terms of what it set out to achieve. Admittedly, the people did not achieve their aims in their requests for more land, but they were able to achieve a higher standard of living from the land they did have — in the 1930s.

SPREAD OF CENTRALISATION

Once it became evident that centralisation was proving to be successful in the Shurugwi reserve, many requests were made from adjoining farms and

⁴⁸ NAZ, S1007/7, 1930-33, Miscellaneous, Selukwe Reserve, Agriculturalist, Minute No. D9/31/1559, to Director of Native Development, April 23, 1931.

⁴⁹ NAZ, S1007/7, Alvord to Director of Native Development, Report on Survey of Centralised Arable and Grazing Lands, Selukwe Reserve, 17/11 1930.

⁵⁰ H. V. Moyana, *The Political Economy of Land in Zimbabwe* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1984), 91.

⁵¹ The major weakness of this line of thought is that it does not explain why the year 1931 was exceptional in terms of cattle weight.

⁵² Jo-ann McGregor, 'Woodland Resources', 102.

neighbouring reserves for centralisation surveys. Once the Shurugwi reserve had been surveyed, however, there was an interim period of two years during which the success of the experiment was to be evaluated. It appeared however, that fears were to be proven groundless and even some previously sceptical peasants became enthusiastic about the scheme.⁵³ Consequently, centralisation work was accelerated at this time and soil surveys were drawn up to determine suitable arable and grazing lands.

Initially Alvord found little support for his work from officials in the Native Affairs Department. From the inception of the centralisation scheme, Alvord began to take on tasks other than simply that of Agriculturalist. Pleas for additional staff fell on deaf ears. It was only in 1933 that he was given an Assistant Agriculturalist and two land inspectors. This work was originally allocated to NCs, but the Chief Native Commissioner, Carbutt, maintained that Native Commissioners had neither the time nor the technical proficiency to undertake it.⁵⁴ In 1933, the land surveyors joined the department and they assisted Alvord and Palmer, the Assistant Agriculturalist. This allowed an acceleration in the implementation of the scheme.

As the decade of the 1930s progressed, in some areas centralisation became more popular, particularly as the results became more noticeable: 'Several old men, who on most reserves are opposed to progress, got up and spoke enthusiastically in favour of the work and urged all younger men to adopt our methods.'⁵⁵ In 1937 the Agricultural Demonstrator, Mondoro said;

reserve people are thanking very much for the centralisation done in this reserve for they have now seen the good results of centralisation. Its good result is plenty of grass. Cattle are also fat and strong . . . A few years ago before centralisation cattle were poor and thin . . .⁵⁶

Gradually then, in some areas, hostility to the scheme abated. Attitudes tended to vary in different reserves; much depended on the attitude of individual NCs and the way in which they carried out this exercise. Consequently, in other areas extreme hostility and suspicion was evident. Previously Mhondoro inhabitants had expressed fear at the motivations for centralisation:

It appeared that there was a considerable amount of opposition by the natives to the movement of their villages into lines because they were

⁵³ E. D. Alvord, 'The Gospel of the Plow'.

⁵⁴ C. L. Carbutt, 'Communal Land Tenure', 44.

⁵⁵ NAZ, S1534, Vol. 1, 1934, Alvord to CNC, Report on Before Harvest Meeting in Demonstrator Centres, Mtoko Reserve.

⁵⁶ NAZ, S138/72, Alvord to CNC 26/5/1937, Centralisation, Mondoro Reserve.

firmly convinced that they were being moved into lines for purposes of taxation.⁵⁷

McGregor corroborated this view by evidence collected during interviews: she was told that it was easier to find people who owed taxes if they were in one place, and further: 'We were forced into lines like being in a compound.'⁵⁸ Other, similar sentiments were voiced, revealing intense suspicion of Government motives:

They feel they have been badly treated in apportionment of land and say that if they have demonstration plots and get good yields off small lands the government will do nothing for them with regard to further lands. They are justified in feeling that they have not been given a proper proportion of land on which to live.⁵⁹

Quite naturally, villagers felt too, that if they were to show that they could subsist on smaller acreages, not only would their appeals for more lands be refused, but there was the threat that the government might take even more land away from them. As one farmer reported:

My fear is that if I were to go to a Demonstrator and be taught, my land would be cut up and I would be given a very small area to plough . . . we feel that if we follow these people there is a danger that some of our land will be taken away from us.⁶⁰

In addition, centralisation, for many, was too extreme a measure:

In the centralised reserves it is believed that many Natives regard the curtailment of their area of arable land, and the limitations placed upon their stock, as too drastic and there is increasing evidence of this in the large numbers who are applying to take up land in the Native Area.⁶¹

The CNC commented that many peasant farmers did not want to relinquish to the centralisation programme, land that they had tilled for many years, but that 'he has to submit for the benefit of the majority'.⁶² Because of sentiments such as these, and because centralisation, at this stage was voluntary, it was naturally a slow process. This was to prove to be a stumbling block in later years.

An additional setback was that most peasant farmers had neither the capital, labour, transport or even manure to make successful centralisation

⁵⁷ NAZ, S1542, A4, Vol. 3, 1937-1939, Inspector Salisbury Circuit to Director Native Education, Mondoro Reserve, 5/6/1937.

⁵⁸ Jo-ann McGregor, 'Woodland Resources', 105/106.

⁵⁹ NAZ, S138/72, Before Planting Inspection, 16 December, 1937, Umtasa Reserve.

⁶⁰ NAZ, S235/474, Report of the Native Production and Trade Commission, 25.

⁶¹ NAZ, S235/483, Secretary for Native Affairs, Memo and Plan for the Development and Regeneration of the Colonies Native Reserves and Areas, and for the Administration Control and Supervision of the Land Occupied by Natives, 1943, 3.

⁶² NAZ, ZBJ, 1/1/1, Vol. 1, Evidence of Native Trade and Production Commission, 1944, Simmonds, 45.

an obtainable ideal. Such practicalities had been overlooked in the initial rush to begin the programme, and this was compounded by the shortage of qualified men involved in implementing the policy. However, many of these problems did not become evident until the mid-1930s, and are in part responsible for the shift in policy at this time.

CONCLUSION

Centralisation had begun in 1929 in an attempt to solve the increasing pressure on the land in the reserves. Prior to 1936, centralisation proceeded largely at the pace dictated by the peasantry. Persuasive tactics were employed by both tribal authorities and by the NAD. Many peasants were willing to undertake the centralisation experiment, but there was also a lot of resentment, and in later years many Native Commissioners lost patience and simply compelled people to adopt the scheme.

A further setback in the early 1930s was that the Native Affairs Department was not fully committed to the programme, and Alvord did not receive much assistance or encouragement. His department was grossly understaffed and not fully qualified to undertake the task of centralisation. Consequently, by 1936 the total area centralised amounted to a mere 590,075 acres, out of the total reserve area of over 21 million acres.⁶³

Early efforts at centralisation then, were a success in terms of what they set out to achieve. They had shown that it was possible to farm successfully on smaller acreages, and by employing a more rational system of land organisation. However, given the meagreness of Alvord's staff and the immensity of the task at hand, it was clear that a revision of the initial policy would be needed in years to come.

In the mid-1930s attitudes to centralisation were revised. It became clear that at the existing pace centralisation was never going to be successful. As more and more people flocked into the reserves consequent on the Land Apportionment Act, there developed a growing concern with the rapidly deteriorating natural resources in the colony. It was clear that the current approach to centralisation was not keeping up with this influx. These factors were to lead to a much more authoritarian approach to centralisation in ensuing years.

⁶³ NAZ, SRG/INT4. Annual Reports of the Agriculturalist.