

# THE ROOTS OF RURAL POVERTY IN CENTRAL AND SOUTHERN AFRICA

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This book is the latest contribution of a vigorous historical school which has grown up during the 1970's, inspired by the study of the 'development of underdevelopment', begun in Latin America in the 1960's. In Southern Africa this study was initiated by Arrighi's seminal work (1970) on the proletarianization of the Rhodesian peasantry. The research has gathered pace ever since, ranging over a wide historical field - from precolonial economic formations to the development of secondary industry. A unifying theme throughout has been the course of underdevelopment of African Precolonial societies through their contact with international capitalism. It is this theme which the present work addresses directly, and to which it makes a major contribution - not so much in the originality of all the

papers, since several of them have been published before, but in its thoroughness (there is a case study from each of the countries of Central and Southern Africa) and in the integration of the separate studies into a whole through careful editing and a detailed introduction.

Perhaps the greatest value of the work is in extending and corroborating, from the experience of a variety of Precolonial states, the essential part of the earlier findings of Arrighi (1970) and Bundy (1971) - namely that the process of underdevelopment of precolonial societies, in the face of contact with capitalism, has been uneven. In general, the pattern suggested by the majority of the studies is one of an initial stimulus to production or trade, caused by increased market opportunities (particularly during the late 19th century, as trade links became more established and colonial infrastructure was built), followed by economic collapse during the first quarter of the 20th century - resulting from conquest, or natural disasters (drought, disease, floods), or loss of markets (to imports or protected white settler production), or declining terms of trade - leading to ever greater reliance upon wage employment for earning of taxes and increased subsistence requirements, and to stagnation of rural production.

The emphasis throughout the work is on agricultural production and its fragility in pre-colonial

societies. Although the stimulus to increased production/trade in the early phase was by no means always agricultural (for example, it took the form of hunting and plunder in the case of the West Central African ivory and slave trades), the decline usually became an agricultural matter - owing in no small part to the concatenation of natural disasters during the period. The failure of agriculture to recover is the issue on which the historical details contained in the studies throw most light.

However, a further point of emphasis is not quite so fruitful. Beach, who in his paper on the Shona economy mentions that ". . . the mode of production is . . . divisible into branches of production, and it is with these that we are concerned here, rather than with the relations of production" (p. 38), seems to speak for many of the contributors. The stress is on the rise and fall of different types of production, and on the relation of the state to the outside world, via trade. But the interdependence of the organization of production, the techniques of production and the type of production indicates the importance of taking changes in each into account in the explanation of any one. Those papers which do take account of changing relations of production within the precolonial state (Young on Mozambique, Van Horn on Barotseland) illustrate how production

relations do affect the development of types of production. Further research on relations of production in the societies concerned might thus complement well many of the "Roots" studies.

A question which two of the contributors (Soremekun and Chanock) put in dealing with the impact of Western penetration is whether the stimulus to production/trade in the pre-colonial state was associated with the 'mercantile period' while the decline was a product of the 'colonial period'. The content of the papers suggests that this was the case - with the exception of Chanock's paper on Malawi, in which he claims (citing Alpers' work on ivory and slaves in East Central Africa) that ". . . the slave/ivory trade must have been malformatory long before the introduction of a cash economy oriented towards Britain and South Africa." (p. 397). Leaving aside the issue of what 'malformatory' might mean, the evidence from other contributors indicates that the decline of these Precolonial states (or their failure to recover from natural disasters) was related to their direct political subjection to another more powerful state (colonial, or settler-colonial) which demanded a continuous cash flow from them, while limiting increasingly their revenue-earning opportunities to wage labour (by removing their markets and worsening their terms of trade.)

"The Roots of Rural Poverty" is essential reading for students of underdevelopment in Central and Southern Africa.