

**“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**

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DEDICATIONS

In loving memory of my late mother and brother.

ABSTRACT

I tell here a story of the multiple arenas in which a marginalized frontier community creatively shaped its pre-colonial pastoralist ethnic identity to adapt to change across colonial and post-colonial times. This dissertation is a socio-environmental history of the Babirwa of eastern Botswana who transitioned from sheep and goat herders into cattle herders from the second half of the nineteenth century to the present. Broadly, the dissertation examines the Babirwa's multiple engagements with social and environmental change in Botswana to shape their ethnic identity amid colonial and post-colonial states' modernist beef production policies. By ignoring the socio-cultural aspects of the Babirwa's pastoralist ethnicity, these modernist policies became part of a broader political ideology that circumscribed ethnic difference and promoted a homogenized citizenship based on Tswana national identity. To contest this Tswana-centric national project, the Babirwa re-appropriated cattle raising to give social meaning to their ethnic identity as the *Bakgomong* or "people of the cow." As a result, the evidentiary basis of this dissertation consists of their lived and learned experiences of fluctuations in cattle populations since pre-colonial times. Personal testimonies, rumor, vernacular expressions and folkloric texts are central to this story of change and continuity as the Babirwa creatively engaged with transformative and co-constitutive social and environmental landscapes and contested an elitist beef industry that threatened to dispossess them of their cattle herds across colonial and post-colonial temporal spaces. Written here is therefore an academically neglected history that explores the struggles of one of Botswana's obscure border communities over the control of cattle in a country where climate variability is high, droughts are recurrent, crop production is fragile and epidemics of cattle diseases are frequent.

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A NOTE ON ORTHOGRAPHY

The language of the Babirwa is Sebirwa. This language is a branch of the Sotho-Tswana, a group of mutually intelligible Southern Bantu languages spoken in Southern Africa. Due to the historical frontier location of the Babirwa, Sebirwa is spoken in eastern Botswana, western Zimbabwe and the northern Transvaal in South Africa. The Sebirwa used in this dissertation is closely related to the Tswana languages spoken in present-day Botswana. For this reason, some of the Sebirwa words I use here have great resonance with Sengwato, one of the mainstream Tswana languages spoken in central Botswana. Unlike Sengwato, however, Sebirwa is a very tonal language. Nonetheless, due to my lack of training in linguistics, I was not able to convert its tones into writing. In fact, there is not yet a comprehensive study that documents and analyzes the speech sounds of Sebirwa. Finally, I have not written a glossary of Sebirwa terms and concepts because such are explained and defined throughout the text.

ACRONYMS

| | |
|-------|---|
| BDP | Botswana Democratic Party |
| BNA | Botswana National Archives |
| BNARS | Botswana National Archives Records and Services |
| DC | District Commissioner |
| FMD | Foot and Mouth Disease |
| HC | High Commissioner |
| HMSO | Her Majesty's Stationery Office |
| NPAD | National Policy on Agricultural Development |
| OXFAM | Oxford Committee for Famine Relief |
| RC | Resident Commissioner |
| RM | Resident Magistrate |
| S | Secretariat |
| TB | Tuberculosis |
| TGLP | Tribal Grazing Land Policy |
| V | Veterinary |

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: Ethnic Identities, Cattle and Socio-environmental History in Southern Africa

*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.*¹

An Historical Overview

In 1920, *Kgosi* (plu. *dikgosi*), or chief, Khama III of the Bangwato (a Tswana speaking ethnic group),² under instruction from the colonial administration, ordered the Babirwa of Malema to move out of the Tuli Block in eastern Botswana.³ This followed complaints from the British South Africa Company (BSAC) that the Babirwa in the Tuli Block were squatters and inveterate cattle thieves, to which Khama responded by telling the Resident Commissioner that the Babirwa had to be brought under his authority to check their recalcitrant behavior.⁴ When Malema defied Khama's authority and refused to leave, Khama sent his armed *mephato* (regiments) to crush the resistance of Malema's people, plunder their cattle, and forcefully drive them to Bobonong.⁵

¹ David L. Schoenbrun, *A Green Place, A Good Place: Agrarian Change, Gender and Social Identity in the Great Lakes Region to the 15th Century* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998), p. 4.

² As a point of clarification on orthography, different scholars have used varying terminologies to describe the Bangwato. Terms such as bamaNgwato and Ngwato are predominant in missionary and colonial accounts. For purposes of clarity, I simultaneously use the terms, "Bangwato" and "Ngwato", which are the official terminology in present-day Botswana.

³ Diana Wylie, *A Little God: The Twilight of Patriarchy in a Southern African Chieftdom* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England in collaboration with Wesleyan Press, 1990) pp. 149-155; M. Bobeng, "Bangwato-Babirwa Conflict in the Late 19th and 20th Centuries," (BA dissertation, University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland, 1976), p. 13.

⁴ Botswana National Archives (hereafter BNA), S40/7, Khama to R.C., August 7, 1920.

⁵ Bobonong remains the administrative center of Bobirwa (land of the Babirwa) today.

Malema himself, however, managed to escape to South Africa where he enlisted the services of an English attorney, Emanuel Gluckman, to represent him in his claims for losses and damages.⁶ But the case was dismissed and Malema was exiled from the country. Following the dismissal of the case, Gluckmann defined the plight of Malema's Babirwa as tragic. Criticizing the conclusion to the case as a travesty of justice, Gluckmann launched a press campaign to influence public opinion in South Africa against Bechuanaland's violation of human rights. Gluckmann's newspaper article, "The tragedy of the Ababirwas and Some Reflections on Sir Herbert Sloley's Report," published in the *Rand Daily Mail*, May 1922, amassed public support and sympathy for Malema and his people from South Africa's black population. But this support could do nothing to stop the resettlement and centralization of the Babirwa in the Bangwato Reserve.

The foregoing story captures the process of consolidation, subjugation and dispossession of subject peoples by the dominant Tswana-speaking groups in Botswana. It also represents the mapping of disparate ethnic identities into stable political units, or "tribes", by the colonial administration. The forceful relocation of Malema's people and the consolidation of all the Babirwa into an ordered colonial space constituted the colonial government's attempts to consolidate, in a bounded locality, disparate peoples who, despite some of them tracing their origins to a common ancestor, were hitherto politically autonomous. While the brutal eviction of Malema's people, may rightly, as Gluckman said, have constituted a tragedy, this dissertation is not about forceful removals of the Babirwa from the Tuli Block. It is a tale of creative adaptations to tragic

⁶ Jeff Ramsay, "Resistance from Subordinate Groups: BaBirwa, BaKgatla Mmanaana and BaKalanga Nswazwi", in Fred Morton and Jeff Ramsay (eds.), *The Birth of Botswana: A History of the Bechuanaland Protectorate from 1910 to 1966* (Gaborone: Longman Botswana, 1987), p. 67.

socio-economic and ecological transformations across colonial and post-colonial Botswana.

Tragedy, as Jennifer Wallace aptly notes, is a process of sharing the “capacity to suffer, when suffering offers a communality of meaning”, leading to the formulation of creative strategies to resist oppression.⁷ It involves choice and agency as people’s personal and moral decisions lead to their suffering. This will to suffer opens opportunities for self-contemplation and enables people to creatively adapt to change as a collectivity. I weave together a complex socio-environmental history of the Babirwa’s ethnic identity production as they collectively negotiated an unstable environment and their subordination to Ngwato hegemony in colonial and post-colonial Botswana. A socio-environmental history captures people’s multiple interactions with their differentiated natural environments. This mutually constitutive interaction between environmental and social landscapes produces varied social identities.⁸ In such a relationship, the biophysical environment interacts with itself as much as it does with human beings. As a result, production plays a very important role as people and natural environments interact through crop cultivation, hunting, foraging and pastoralism.

For the Babirwa, cattle, as part of the domesticated natural environment interacted with the *dinaga* (spaces beyond human settlements), or the wilderness, and therefore created a link between the human and the non-human realms. The *badisa*, cattle herders (predominantly young men), were required to follow the cattle closely while in the veld grazing. This herd management system was eulogized through the expression: *go*

⁷ Jennifer Wallace, *The Cambridge Introduction to Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 6.

⁸ Nancy Jacobs, *Environment, Power, and Injustice: A South African History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

ditshwara ka mogata (lit. to hold onto cattle tails or being at cattle's tails). "Holding onto cattle's tails" created a bond between the *badisa* (sing. *modisa*) and their herds, in the process enabling them to access the *dinaga* through the pathways that cattle created as they made grazing sojourns between human spaces and the wilderness.

Broadly, this dissertation examines the socio-environmental history of cattle keeping in Botswana in the face of "social engineering" policies pursued by the colonial and post-colonial governments.⁹ The idea of "social engineering" is used here to describe colonial and post-colonial attempts at suppressing self-recognition through the reordering of hitherto fluid ethnic identities into stable political entities under the leadership of Tswana speaking groups. James Scott teaches us that the "social engineering" policies of the modern state are intent on homogenizing society, and therefore, never take the varied local practical knowledges that diverse communities possess about their biophysical environments into account.¹⁰ In the modern state, Scott argues, "there is an elective affinity between modernist ideology and the interests of state officials," and hence social engineering is the work of political elites who depend on "state action" to fulfill their personal interests.¹¹

As modern nation-states, colonial and post-colonial Botswana were intent on circumscribing individual ethnic identities. The interests of these states lay in homogenizing society through policies, such as the colonial tribal reserve model and the post-colonial tribal grazing land policies, both of which centralized disparate groups

⁹ The concept, social engineering, is borrowed from James Scott, *Seeing Like A State: How Certain Schemes to Improve Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998).

¹⁰ James Scott, *Seeing Like A State*.

¹¹ James Scott, *Seeing Like A State*, pp. 4-5.

under an increasingly dominant Tswana national identity.¹² Such grand designs were based on state epistemologies about national unity and therefore disregarded the varied local practical knowledges that defined cattle raising in a country where the rural population almost entirely lived off pastoral resources. These social engineering policies represented a stark continuity in policy and power of the colonial and post-colonial states. Such continuity thus unsettled the dividing line between temporality and changing state epistemologies about rural farming methods. But local knowledge about cattle herding is not primordial. It keeps changing and adapting to official interventions due to social and natural diversity, leading to the failure of state-imposed policies.

This project therefore studies the Babirwa's creative adaptations to the homogenizing modernist plans of both the colonial and postcolonial states, which were aimed at reordering society and nature in the name of Tswana national unity. I argue that the concept of national unity in Botswana is not primordial. It is a state construct. The diversity of languages and cultures in the country attest to ethnic differentiation.¹³ Even within the Tswana speaking groups, upon which Botswana's national identity is modeled, Setswana (Tswana language and culture) is not homogenous.¹⁴ The re-appropriation and politicization of Tswana nomenclature, *popagano* (as an idiom of national unity), to promote nationhood also makes citizenship based on Tswana identity a state project that

¹² The notion of the cultural and linguistic homogeneity of Botswana has recently been challenged. See, for example, Mavis B. Mhlaui, "The Paradox of Teaching Citizenship Education in Botswana Primary Schools", *European Journal of Educational Research*, vol. 1, no. 2, (2012), p. 86; Lydia Nyati-Ramahobo and Andy Chebanne, "The development of minority languages for adult literacy in Botswana: Towards cultural diversity", *Southern African Review of Education with Education with production*, vol. 9/10 (2004), pp. 78-92.

¹³ Lydia Nyati-Ramahobo and Andy Chebanne, "The development of minority languages for adult literacy in Botswana, pp. 78-92.

¹⁴ Isaac Schapera, *The Ethnic Composition of the Tswana Tribes* (London: London School of Economics, 1952).

fails to take into account historical, linguistic and cultural diversity in the country.¹⁵ State-constructed national identity has been the feature of many post-colonial African countries. In East Africa, for instance, the post-colonial national space was constructed upon ideologies, promoted extensively by nationalist leaders, which sought to homogenize society.¹⁶

Botswana's historiography has largely reified official conceptions of the organic dominance of the Tswana.¹⁷ For this reason, the broader theoretical import of my dissertation is to challenge the notion of the natural evolution of an ethnically homogenous Botswana. I explore the differentiated ways through which the Babirwa (the only ethnic group in Botswana to use cattle as a marker of social identity) used cattle herding to build a relationship with a harsh environment of drought and disease in order to give social meaning to their ethnic identity. I examine their knowledge of ecological disasters, particularly cattle and human diseases and droughts, and the differentiated strategies they employed to understand nature and produce symbolic meanings of their landscapes in the face of modernist state policies that increased livestock and human vulnerability to ecological collapse.

Methodologically, the dissertation is based on the lived and learned experiences of the Babirwa of eastern Botswana who became cattle herders following their adoption of cattle herding from the Bangwato State of central Botswana in the mid-nineteenth century. It relies primarily upon the personal testimonies of the Babirwa men and women,

¹⁵ The concept of *popagano*, as defined by a recent Tswana dictionary, entails having a common goal. See J. Otlogetswe, *Tlhalosi Ya Medi Ya Setswana* (Gaborone: Medi Publishing, 2012), p. 485.

¹⁶ See for example, Priya Lal, "Militants, Mothers, and the National Family: Ujamaa, Gender, and Rural Development in Post-colonial Tanzania", *Journal of African History*, vol. 51, no. 1 (2010), pp. 1-20.

¹⁷ See for example, Thomas Tlou, *A History of Ngamiland, 1750-1906: The Formation of an African State* (Gaborone: Macmillan, 1985); Pnina Motzafi-Haller, "Historical Narratives as Political Discourses of Identity", *Journal of Southern Africa Studies*, vol. 20, no. 3. Special Issue: Ethnicity and Identity in Southern Africa (1994), pp. 417-431.

herders and ethno-veterinary medicine specialists. I also draw on the Babirwa's other modes of expression, such as rumor and gossip, sayings and folkloric texts to weave together this complex story of struggle and adaptation to environmental and social change across colonial and post-colonial temporal and geographical spaces in Botswana.

This dissertation contributes to the growing literature on the socio-environmental history of ethnic identity production in Southern Africa.¹⁸ It reveals the struggles and survival strategies of marginalized groups against harsh environments and social, economic and political transformations. Broadly, I build on recent attempts to address questions of marginality, subordination and exploitation of minorities in Southern Africa and the differentiated ways in which such groups have given social meaning to their ethnic identities.¹⁹ I also fill the gap in Botswana's historiography, which has focused on the political economy of the national beef industry and therefore obscured the historical, ecological, social and cultural significance of cattle herding to self-identity.²⁰

Beyond its significance to the history of Botswana and Southern Africa, this study addresses the highly contentious question of ethnic identities. The "creation of tribes" thesis, popular in the 1980s and 1990s, argued that ethnic identities were colonial inventions disseminated through African elites.²¹ Contrary to such constructivist

¹⁸ Nancy Jacobs, *Environment, Power, and Injustice*; Allen F. Isaacman and Barbara S. Isaacman, *Slavery and Beyond: The Making of Men and Chikunda Ethnic Identities in the Unstable World of South-Central Africa, 1750-1920* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004); Emmanuel Kreike, *Recreating Eden: Land Use, Environment, and Society in Southern Angola and Northern Namibia* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2004).

¹⁹ Allen F. Isaacman and Barbara S. Isaacman, *Slavery and Beyond*; Nancy Jacobs, *Environment, Power, and Injustice*.

²⁰ Pauline Peters, *Dividing the Commons: Politics, Policy and Culture in Botswana* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1994); Jack Parson, "Cattle Class and the State in Rural Botswana", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2 (1981), pp. 236-255; Louis Picard, "Bureaucrats, Cattle and Public Policy: Land Tenure Changes in Botswana", *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 13, no. 3 (1980), pp. 313-356.

²¹ Leroy Vail (ed.), *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1989); Terence Ranger, "The Invention of Tradition Revisited: The Case of

assertions, African ethnic identities are fluid and contested social markers dating back to the pre-colonial period, and were redefined and reconfigured under colonial rule.²² This idea of fluid identities tied to shifting perimeters deconstructs notions of stable social boundaries between peoples.²³

I begin this project in 1920 when the British colonial government, following the implementation of the tribal reserves in 1899, centralized the hitherto scattered Babirwa communities under the Bangwato rule.²⁴ The tribal reserve was a form of social engineering that reordered colonial subjects into stable political units called tribes in which Tswana speaking states were recognized as the subordinate sovereigns of the British Monarchy. This domination of Tswana speakers continues to date as manifested in the post-colonial state's emphasis on a national unity based on Tswana-ness.²⁵

But ethnic identities cannot be simply undone by state policies that profess uniformity. For this reason, I end my narrative in the present, not because the Babirwa have ceased to exist as an ethnic group or have lost a sense of ethnicity. Rather, I end this dissertation with an account of new social engineering policies aimed at producing a uniform society, and which have dispossessed many Babirwa of their herds. Such designs include land policies devised to serve the interests of the cattle-owning political elites,²⁶ and the emphasis on an alien western justice system in the adjudication of livestock theft cases. Like the colonial state, post-colonial Botswana tailored its cattle industry strictly to

Colonial Africa”, in Terence Ranger and O. Vaughn (eds.), *Legitimacy and the State in Twentieth Century Africa* (New York: Palgrave, 1993), pp. 62-111.

²² Allen F. Isaacman and Barbara S. Isaacman, *Slavery and Beyond*.

²³ Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic groups and boundaries: The social organization of culture differences* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1969).

²⁴ For more information on the tribal reserves, see Tribal Territories Proclamation No. 9, March 29, 1899. Available at the University of Botswana Special Collections section.

²⁵ Mavis B. Mhlauli, “The Paradox of Teaching Citizenship Education”, p. 86.

²⁶ Louis Picard, “Bureaucrats, Cattle and Public Policy.”

beef production and thus disregarded community uses of cattle, such as for milk, traction (pulling sledges and plows), social networking and spirituality. By commercializing much of the formerly communal lands, elite based grazing land policies implemented from the 1970s therefore concentrated cattle into fewer hands, leading to loss of pastoral investments for many households.²⁷

Continued emphasis on western forms of justice also brought uniformity in terms of dealing with cattle theft cases. Livestock theft was declared a statutory offense in the 1930s and was therefore removed from the jurisdiction of the diverse community laws, which could not be easily standardized.²⁸ The uniform application of western justice has since disadvantaged many local farmers in Bobirwa for several reasons. Most importantly, many of them are not literate and, therefore, translation back and forth between English and the local languages often distorts evidence. Also, the common law courts do not accept some local forms of evidence, particularly vernacular terms for cattle colors, which are not easily translatable to English. For these reasons, and for the Babirwa, state law only serves the interests of elite commercial farmers and thieves.

To support my argument that African ethnic identities antedate colonial rule, however, this dissertation starts with a historical background beginning in the nineteenth century, long before colonial rule. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, the Babirwa were politically distinctive groups of transhumant agriculturalists and herders of black sheep who straddled the Shashe and Limpopo watersheds between South Africa, Botswana and Zimbabwe. Their original ethnic name was the *Bapirwa* (people of black sheep), which is derived from the term, “*pirwa*”, a color designation for black sheep.

²⁷ Pauline E. Peters, *Dividing the Commons*.

²⁸ BNA, S359/4, Proclamation (Native Tribunals) no. 75 of 1934.

Eminent figures and the elderly in Bobirwa claim that white settler farmers in the Tuli Block could not properly pronounce the word, “*pirwa*,” and had to say “*birwa*.”²⁹

Late eighteenth century European travelers’ narratives also make reference to the sheep-herding kingdom of Bri or Briena or Briequa, in present South Africa.³⁰ Europeans’ inability to pronounce African languages, so evident in the two sources (travelers’ narratives and Babirwa oral sources), as well as consistent references to sheep herding, may provide insights into the murky history of pre-nineteenth century Babirwa history. This subject needs further historical inquiry. Due to time constraints, lack of sources, and my interest in the production of a centralized Babirwa’s ethnic identity from the early twentieth century, however, this earlier history falls outside the scope of this work.

The history of the Babirwa becomes clearer in the nineteenth century because available sources do not go beyond this period. During the first half of the nineteenth century, the Babirwa lived in small and scattered politically autonomous groups, which interacted with other ethnic groups straddling the Shashe-Limpopo watersheds across present Botswana and Zimbabwe.³¹ Such groups included the Basarwa (later assigned the ethnic designation, “bushmen”, by colonial anthropologists),³² Shona and Kalanga.³³ The

²⁹ Interview with, headman of arbitration, Tsetsebjwe, June 2, 2011; Kgosi Mmirwa Malema, Bobonong, February 9, 2011; Gabatshabe Baipidi, Mogapi, December 25, 2010.

³⁰ John Burrow, *An Account of the Travels into the Interior of Southern Africa in the Years 1797 and 1798* (London: T. Cadell Jun. and W. Davies, 1801), pp. 403-404; R.J. Gordon, *Cape Travels 1777 to 1786*, vol. 2, in E. Raper and M. Boucher eds. (Houghton: Brenthurst, 1988), pp. 300-354. Cited in Nancy Jacobs, *Environment, Power, and Injustice*, p. 35.

³¹ Per Zachrisson, *Hunting for Development: People, Land and Wildlife in Southern Zimbabwe* (Goteborg University: Department of Social Anthropology, 2004), pp. 23-40; E.O.J. Westpal, “Notes on the Babirwa”, *Botswana Notes and Records*, vol. 7 (1975), pp. 191-194.

³² E.N. Wilmsen, *Land filled with flies: A political economy of the Kalahari* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

³³ The Kalanga and Shona are language groups in present Zimbabwe and Botswana respectively. David Beach identifies Kalanga as a collectivity of people, among them Shona, who were incorporated into the

mixing of diverse ethnic groups produced a frontier population. I define a frontier as a social and geographic space that brings together peoples of diverse life ways and their interactions with biophysical environments beyond the modern-day rigid boundaries associated with the countries of Botswana, South Africa and Zimbabwe.³⁴

The Babirwa also built a frontier relationship with an environment both harsh with disease and drought and plentifully endowed with wild animals. This environment of abundant game thus made hunting an important activity to their lifeway. During this time, the Shashe-Limpopo watershed was, however, infested with tsetse flies and *trypanosomiasis* was endemic.³⁵ The forests on the riverbanks in this region provided a suitable habitat for the breeding of the tsetse fly.³⁶ These forests were also habitats for large animals, especially buffalo, which were the hosts for the tsetse flies. As a result, the expansion and withdrawal of the fly belts was a recurrent and influential historical phenomenon during much of the nineteenth century.³⁷

The extensive fly belt in the low-lying areas of the Limpopo and the Zambezi valley therefore made the region between western Zimbabwe and eastern Botswana unsuitable for extensive cattle farming because cattle were susceptible to *trypanosomiasis*.³⁸ As predominantly grazers, cattle do not do well in tsetse-infested environments because they generally keep to open grasslands, which are not suitable habitats for tsetse flies. Conversely, the Babirwa hunters and cultivators and their flocks

Changamire 'Rozwi' state in southwestern Zimbabwe. David Beach, *The Shona and their Neighbours* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 139.

³⁴ Nancy Jacobs, *Environment, Power, and Injustice*, p. 29.

³⁵ John Ford, *The Role of Trypanosomiasis in the African Ecology: a Study of the Tsetse Fly Problem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 283-301.

³⁶ R.D. Bigalke, "The Important Role of Wildlife in the Occurrence of Livestock Diseases in Southern Africa", in J.A.W. Coetzer, et al (eds.), *Infectious Diseases of Livestock, With Special Reference to Southern Africa* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 155.

³⁷ John Ford, *The Role of Trypanosomiasis in the African Ecology*, pp. 283-301.

³⁸ John Ford, *The Role of Trypanosomiasis*.

of sheep and goats (generally browsers) developed a certain degree of immunity to *trypanosomiasis* by regularly entering the tsetse-infested thickets of bush but keeping controlled contact with the pathogens.³⁹ Thus, to a certain degree, the controlled use of the tsetse-infested Shashe-Limpopo confluence produced some equilibrium in the ecosystem as people's bodies got conditioned to the pathogens in what one *ngaka* (traditional medical practitioner) called “*mmele o twaela bolwetse* (the body getting used to disease).”⁴⁰

From the second half of the nineteenth century, however, the Babirwa's way of life became intricately tied to cattle herding. This period saw the decline of wildlife populations in the Shashe-Limpopo confluence due to commercialized hunting, leading to the retreat of the tsetse flies.⁴¹ As a result, the now relatively tsetse-free Shashe-Limpopo confluence was appropriate for extensive cattle farming because of its abundant water and palatable grasses.⁴² The decline of hunting and tsetse flies also coincided with the expansion of pre-colonial Botswana's most cattle wealthy state of the Bangwato into areas with greater potential for cattle farming.⁴³

However, due to the Babirwa's resistance, the Bangwato could not employ the ruinous “smash-and-grab” tactics, which they used to conquer other non-cattle herders

³⁹ Interview with Dikgang Montsosi, Bobonong, July 10, 2011; Kgosi Mmirwa Malema, February 6, 2011.

⁴⁰ Interview with *ngaka* Sekonopo, Mahalapye, August 22, 2011. Also interview with Dikgang Montsosi, Bobonong, July 10, 2011.

⁴¹ Several European hunters, missionaries and travellers have documented the intensity of commercialized hunting in Southern Africa during the second half of the nineteenth century. See among others, Gordon Cumming, *Five Year's of a Hunter's Life in the Far Interior of South Africa* (London: John Murray, 1851); William Burchell, *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, 1822-1824); Frederick Elton, “Journal of an exploration of the Limpopo River”, *Journal of the Royal Geographic Society*, vol. 42 (1873), pp. 1-48; David Livingstone, *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1858); Frederick Selous, *African Nature Notes and Reminiscences* (London: Macmillan, 1908), pp. 46 and 151-152.

⁴² Neil Parsons, “Settlement in East-central Botswana, circa 1800-1920”, in Renee Hitchcock and Mary R. Smith (eds.), *Proceedings of the Symposium on Settlement in Botswana: The Historical Development of a Human Landscape* (Gaborone: The Botswana Society, 1982), pp. 115-128.

⁴³ Neil Parsons, “Settlement in East-central Botswana”, p. 119.

and take their lands.⁴⁴ Instead, they offered their cattle to the Babirwa in return for pastures, water sources and herding labor, through the institutions of *mahisa* and *kgamelo*. These were patronage systems that operated through the loaning out of cattle to communities and individuals with no or small cattle holdings. In such contracts, the loanees gradually built herds of their own through periodical gifts of cows. On the other hand, by farming out part of their holdings to far off areas, wealthy herd owners spread the risks of disease and drought.

The Babirwa, who were looking for new sources of sustenance, readily entered into this patron-client relationship with the Bangwato through which they were loaned cattle as herders and retainers. This relationship of patronage enabled the Babirwa to borrow and retain Bangwato herding practices, institutions, words and concepts to which they assigned new meanings to rework their ethnic identity as the *Bakgomong*, or “people of the cow,” a praise name that today distinguishes them from other pastoralist ethnic groups in Botswana. Linguistic innovations are a field of power.⁴⁵ They enable people to control their physical environments and construct social landscapes. By acquiring the Bangwato cattle, the Babirwa were not only able to build considerable herds of their own. They were also able to negotiate the formerly untamed tsetse-infested wilderness and, as Emmanuel Kreike demonstrates about colonial refugees in Southern Angola and Northern Namibia, reconstruct them into human ecologies.⁴⁶ The second half of the nineteenth century would therefore mark the beginning of the Babirwa’s extensive cattle herding, culminating in the emergence of a Babirwa bovine worldview.

⁴⁴ For insights into nineteenth century Bangwato conquest, subjugation and dispossession of other communities, see Pnina Motzafi-Haller, “Historical Narratives as Political Discourses”; Thomas Tlou, *A History of Ngamiland, 1750-1906*.

⁴⁵ David L. Schoenbrun, *A Green Place, A Good Place*.

⁴⁶ Emmanuel Kreike, *Re-creating Eden*.

The term, “bovine worldview,” as used here, refers to a cultural, socio-economic, and political universe or lifeway that revolves around cattle. The rise of a bovine worldview among the Babirwa thus ushered in a period where cultural, socio-economic and political systems rested on the accumulation of cattle herds. Cattle herding became a significant cultural status symbol, a reproducer of social relations, a source of economic power and a new way of negotiating environmental change. Through working for the Bangwato, the Babirwa invented new daily practices, language, rituals and beliefs and socio-economic and political institutions, which they used to develop new ways of negotiating domination as well as the socio-economic and ecological conditions of the colonial and post-colonial times.

The relationship of patronage between the Babirwa and the Bangwato opens up an avenue to understanding the way power is deployed and contested in the construction of the “other.” According to David Schoenbrun, power is mercurial and therefore can never remain consolidated in the same authority and institutions forever.⁴⁷ While those in positions of authority can use the instruments of power at their disposal to maintain their privileged positions, ordinary peoples have the capacity to invent new sources of power to negotiate their subordination. Schoenbrun’s insights are important to this story because they reveal the creative ways in which the Babirwa, as subordinates of the Bangwato, were able to deploy the power of their position of weakness to negotiate cultural attempts at assimilation, exploitation and oppression. By loaning terms and imbuing them with new meanings, for instance, the Babirwa were able to re-appropriate and reconfigure the Bangwato’s herding institutions and cultures to become successful pastoralists in their

⁴⁷ David L. Schoenbrun, *A Green Place, A Good Place*, p. 12.

own right until their prosperity was temporarily disrupted by colonial rule at the beginning of the twentieth century.

During the early twentieth century the colonial administration consolidated the hitherto politically distinctive Babirwa groups within the orbit of the Bangwato rule under the colonial system of indirect rule.⁴⁸ This mapping of disparate groups of people into fixed political units was an administrative tool devised to control and exploit Africans throughout British colonies.⁴⁹ In colonial Botswana, the *dikgosi* from dominant Tswana groups, designated colonial sovereigns of the British Monarchy, were tasked with enforcing law and order, imposing colonial policy in their “tribal” territories, as well as recruiting labor and collecting taxes from “their” subjects on behalf of the colonial administration.⁵⁰ These “social simplifications” (taxation and conscription), Scott argues, produced a “cadastral map”, which the state used for political surveillance of the colonial subject.⁵¹ Such standardizing mechanisms did not only make administration of the colony easy. They also generated revenue and helped the state to maintain financial prudence and therefore produce a self-financing colonial model.

⁴⁸ The British policy of indirect rule worked by consolidating disparate ethnicities under one Tswana ethnic group, thus constructing a rigid political unit called a “tribe.” See. Christian John Makgala, “The Policy of Indirect Rule in Bechuanaland Protectorate, 1926–1957” (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2001).

⁴⁹ Sekibakiba Peter Lekgoathi, “Colonial Experts’, Local Interlocutors, Informants and the Making of an Archive on the Transvaal Ndebele”, *Journal of African History* vol. 50, no. 1 (2009), pp. 61-80.

⁵⁰ Recently, colonial encounter narratives have argued that African elites were cultural brokers who formed a bridge between African traditions and European modernity. This historiography plays down conflict in the colonial society. It focuses primarily on the role of African elites as creators of harmonious relationships between the colonizer and the colonized, and ignores the conflict that ensued as these “cultural brokers” imposed colonial policy and exploited subjects for personal gain. For insights about colonial encounter narratives, see for example, Diana Wylie, *A Little God*; Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, “Rethinking Colonial Encounter in Zimbabwe in the Early Twentieth Century”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 33, no. 1 (2007), pp. 173-191.

⁵¹ James Scott, *Seeing Like A State*, pp. 1-7.

By the 1930s, colonial Botswana's economy was becoming increasingly monetized due to labor migration, taxation and a commercialized cattle industry.⁵² At the same time, recurrent foot and mouth disease outbreaks and periodical droughts, together with growing rates of migrant labor (which siphoned away herding labor), dispossessed the Babirwa of their pastoral investments.⁵³ The cash nexus and the colonial development policies of privatized pastoral land and water combined to undermine many of the cattle raising skills and knowledge, which the Babirwa had developed over generations since the nineteenth century.⁵⁴ However, as James Scott argues, "far from being timeless, static and rigid, indigenous [farming] practices were being revised and adapted." This adaptability, he continues, derived from a "broad repertoire of techniques that could be adjusted, for example, to difficult patterns of rainfall, market opportunities and labor supplies."⁵⁵

Faced with the continued loss of their cattle, the Babirwa therefore re-appropriated their epistemologies and creativity to adapt cash into their pastoral domain. They invented the token currency, *dikgomo tse di senang maoto* or "cattle without legs", with the prime objective of imbuing cash with social meaning. Cash has been theorized about before with ethnographic studies showing that it has adaptability over time and space. Ideas on the boundary between cash and cattle, in Southern Africa, for instance,

⁵² For insights into the benefits and evils of labor migration in colonial Botswana, see Isaac Schapera, *Migrant Labour and Tribal Life: A Study of Conditions in the Bechuanaland Protectorate* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1947); Wazha G. Morapedi, "Migrant Labour and the Peasantry in the Bechuanaland Protectorate, 1930-1965", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 25, no. 2 (1999), pp. 197-214.

⁵³ Diana Wylie, "The Changing Face of Hunger in Southern African History, 1880-1980", *Past and Present*, vol. 122 (1989), p. 122; BNA, V4/4, Bechuanaland Protectorate Colonial Development Fund, annual reports, 1933-1939.

⁵⁴ Pauline Peters, *Dividing the Commons*; Pauline Peters, "Struggles Over Water, Struggles Over Meaning: Cattle, Water, and the State in Botswana", *Africa*, 54 no. 3 (1984), pp. 29-49.

⁵⁵ James Scott, *Seeing Like A State*, p. 285.

have evolved over time, and despite Jean and John Comaroff recently concluding that the two value systems are convertible to each other, emphasis remains on Africans' use of cattle to resist the corrosive power of cash.⁵⁶

For the Babirwa, however, the boundary between cash and cattle was fluid. By the end of colonial rule, faced with a declining pastoral resource base due to recurrent droughts and a privatized commonage, the Babirwa had produced a frontier between cash and cattle as they imbued cash with symbolic meaning and forced it to bear the imprint of human relations. The “cattle without legs” had become an important player in the reproduction of poverty and wealth, in the weaving of social networks – as bridewealth - and in the reconfiguration of the rite of passage to manhood since mine wages were a man's domain. This centrality of the symbolic “cattle without legs” in social life was further buttressed by a severe and prolonged drought that wiped out almost all the Babirwa cattle during the 1960s.⁵⁷

By the 1970s, following independence, the Babirwa's pastoral resource was declining at an accelerated rate. Nor did the post-colonial state attempt to halt or slow down that decline. Rather, the new grazing land policies and borehole technology – which followed the colonial blueprint of privatization – increased vulnerability to droughts, disease and cattle thefts.⁵⁸ The commons property and land degradation theories of the 1970s argued that communal land users consciously overexploited natural

⁵⁶ James Ferguson, “The Bovine Mystique: Power, Property and Livestock in Rural Lesotho”, *Man*, New Series, vol. 20, no. 4 (1985), pp. 647-674; Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, “How Beasts Lost Their Legs”: Cattle in Tswana Economy and Society”, in John Galatay and Pierre Bonte (eds.), *Herders, Warriors and Traders: Pastoralism in Africa* (Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford: Westview Press, 1991), pp. 33-61; Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, “Beasts, Banknotes and the Colour of Money in Colonial South Africa”, *Archaeological Dialogues*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2006), pp. 107-132.

⁵⁷ Alec Campbell, “The 1960s Drought in Botswana”, in Madalon T. Hintchey (eds.), *Proceedings of the Symposium on Drought in Botswana* (Gaborone: The Botswana Society and Clark University Press, 1979), pp. 98-109; *Bechuanaland Protectorate Annual Reports*, 1960; 1961/63; 1964-66.

⁵⁸ Pauline Peters, *Dividing the Commons*; Pauline Peters, “Struggles Over Water, Struggles Over Meaning.

resources leading to diminishing returns.⁵⁹ When applied to African pastoral pursuits, the commons property theory prescribed a scientific carrying capacity model whereby a piece of land was required to hold only a given number of animals without causing structural degradation. Environmental historian, Emmanuel Kreike has recently challenged narratives of the scientific validity of calculations of carrying capacities for their failure to provide botanical evidence of synergistic relationship between livestock hoarding and land degradation.⁶⁰

The carrying capacity theories, Kreike argues, were mainly concerned with saving natural resources from man's exploitation without regard to the plight of local communities who lived on and off such resources. By privatizing the commonage, post-colonial Botswana's land policies intensified herd ownership inequalities, benefitting the cattle-owning political elite (mostly commercial beef producers) and depriving small herd owners who raised their cattle in the commonage, or communal farmers, of their dry land grazing areas.⁶¹ The lands of marginal quality, to which the communal farmers who could not afford borehole technology and commercial ranches were pushed, exposed their cattle to the whims of nature, particularly droughts and disease, thus as Richard White has demonstrated, producing the "tragedy of the commoners" rather than the "tragedy of the commons."⁶²

⁵⁹ Garrett Harding, "The Tragedy of the Commons", *Science*, vol. 162 (1968), pp. 1243-1248. For Botswana, see Lionel Cliffe and Richard Moorson, "Rural Class Formation and Ecological Collapse in Botswana", *Review of African Political Economy*, no. 15/16, The Roots of Famine (1979), pp. 35-52.

⁶⁰ See, for example, Emmanuel Kreike, "De-Globalisation and Deforestation in Colonial Africa: Closed Markets, the Cattle Complex, and Environmental Change in North-Central Namibia, 1890-1990", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vo. 35, no. 1 (2009), pp. 83-86.

⁶¹ Pauline Peters, *Dividing the Commons*; Jack Parson, "Cattle, Class and the State in Rural Botswana", pp. 236-255.

⁶² Richard White, *Livestock Development and Pastoral Production on Communal Rangeland in Botswana* (Gaborone: The Botswana Society, 1993).

Added to the dispossessions produced by land policies was the western form of justice, which the Babirwa saw (and still see) as alien because of its inability to deal effectively with theft, particularly since it did not recognize “traditional” forms of evidence, such as earmarks and animal colours, which cannot be translated into English. With epidemics of cattle thefts becoming a fixture of public life, the Babirwa criticized the country’s laws for benefiting the thieves and contributing to losses for farmers. Expressions of discontent at the injustices of the law are replete in local newspaper reports. Many of my informants were also explicit about the inconsistencies of an alien justice system, which they perceive to be in cahoots with thieves against law-abiding farmers. This perceived marriage between the justice system and thieves has found expression in a new saying: *molao o ja le magodu* (lit. the law eats with the thieves).

Despite the weakening of the material fabric of the Babirwa as a pastoralist society, however, the symbolic representation of cattle remains very strong. The Babirwa continue to venerate their cattle and their self-praise as the *Bakgomong* or “people of the cow”, remains as strong as ever because cattle are an important social marker of their ethnic identity. This continued veneration of the symbolic value of cattle amid a declining pastoralist fabric has driven the Babirwa towards *angst*. *Angst* is a collective state of mind where people are aware of the harsh realities of life but continue to have hope that somewhere in the future they will regain their previous prosperity.

For the Babirwa, the state of *angst* is expressed through the saying, *kgomo ga e lathwe* (lit. a cow can never be thrown away). This expression metaphorically represents the notion that cattle keeping cannot be abandoned because it is the lifeblood of society. Having consistently experienced dramatic fluctuations in herd numbers since the end of

the nineteenth century, it is understandable to me as a Mmirwa (a native of the Babirwa) that the Babirwa continue to imagine a future recovery. It is because of this collective imagination of a future prosperity in the face of unabated decline that I end this dissertation in the present rather than somewhere in the past.

The Location of Bobirwa

Present Bobirwa is the most easterly region of Botswana situated on the confluence of two converging river systems (or *dikgathong*); that of the Shashe and the Limpopo (see maps 1& 2). This region is roughly triangular in shape, bounded to the northeast by the Shashe River, which forms the border with the Southwestern tip of Zimbabwe. Given the overreliance of farmers in many parts of the semi-arid Botswana ecology on rain, Bobirwa's location at the confluence of two major river systems makes it one of the best environments for cattle raising.

To the southeast, Bobirwa is bounded by a cadastral boundary dividing communal land from a freehold farm area known as the Tuli Block along the Limpopo River on the border with South Africa.⁶³ Bobirwa has an area of 4 200 sq. km.⁶⁴ It contains the villages of Bobonong, Gobojango, Mabolwe, Mathathane, Molaladau, Mothabaneng, Semolale, Semolale, Tsetsebjwe, Lentswelemoriti and the surrounding land used for grazing and ploughing. It is today a smaller in area than the much larger area occupied by the Babirwa by the time they were brought under the Bangwato rule in the 1920s.⁶⁵

⁶³ N.J. Mahoney, "Rural Competition and Social Changes in Botswana: Birwa Traders and Neighbours" (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Manchester, 1997), pp. 27-28.

⁶⁴ N.J. Mahoney, "Contact and Neighbourly Exchange among the Birwa of Botswana", *Journal of African Law*, vol. 21 (12?), no. 1 (1977), p. 41.

⁶⁵ BNA, S468/16, Report of the DC, Serowe, on tour of Bobirwa area, Oct 30, 1936.

In terms of physiographic features, Bobirwa is a region of generally subdued relief with numerous hilly outcrops. It is characterized by open *mophane* tree savanna (*cholophospermum*). The seasonal *mopane* worm or *phane* (a nutritious worm that lives on and feeds of *mopane* trees), has for a long time formed part of the subsistence and economic activity of this region. *Phane*, as it is called in vernacular parlance, is also palatable to cattle. Hence cattle often forage on *mopane* leaves to get protein from the larva. Bobirwa, like other parts of Botswana, has a hot dry environment in summer with cool to cold winters. In some places pastureland is marginal due to the domination of *mophane* bushveld. Added to this vegetation are numerous hill outcrops extending from the border with Zimbabwe to the southeastern part of the country.

Despite being located on the junction of two river systems this region is prone to drought due to erratic rainfall. For this reason, I define, following Stanford, drought as “a rainfall-induced shortage of some economic good brought about by inadequate or badly timed rainfall.”⁶⁶ The Shashe-Limpopo region lies in a drought prone climate belt characterized by erratic rainfall. This “drought trough” extends from southern-western Zimbabwe, through eastern and western Botswana and into Namibia.⁶⁷ Rainfall averages less than 350mm, with a variability of less than 40%.⁶⁸ As a result, both crop and livestock production are carried out under semi-arid conditions.

Given this low average rainfall and the considerable variation in the quantity of yearly rainfall severe and prolonged droughts are common. This erratic rainfall is, however, partly compensated for by a more river based settlement pattern and livestock

⁶⁶ S. Stanford, “Towards a Definition of Drought”, in Madalon T. Hinchey (ed.), *Proceedings of the Symposium on Drought in Botswana, June 5th to 8th, 1978* (The Botswana Society, 1979), p. 34.

⁶⁷ John Reader, *Africa: A Biography of the Continent* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1997), p. 306.

⁶⁸ Nicolas Mahoney, “Contract and Neighbourly Exchange”, p. 41.

keeping system⁶⁹ rivaled only by the systems of the riparian ecologies of the Okavango and Chobe regions in the north. Cut off from the Limpopo River by the Tuli Block farms, the majority of the population is thus concentrated near the major ephemeral rivers such as Shashe, Motloutse and Thune from which they can sink wells during drought periods.

Present State of Knowledge: Historiographical Insights

There is a remarkable paucity of historical scholarship on cattle and ethnic identity production in Botswana. This historiographical lacuna is, however, not surprising given the predominance of Setswana (Tswana language and culture in the country). The word “Botswana” itself is a catchall phrase meaning the land of the Tswana people. In their official pronouncements, made on behalf of the state, the ruling elites also represent the country as a homogenous society. One of the highlights of President Ian Khama’s 2011 state of the nation address was his emphasis on the promotion of national unity before ethnic identities. Khama said: “as Botswana, we have one country, one citizenship, which should always come first.”⁷⁰ The emphasis on “Botswana,” “one country” and “one citizenship” in Khama’s speech is part of a longstanding political ideology, which promotes an assimilationist Tswana national unity and thus circumscribes non-Tswana ethnic identities.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Nicolas Mahoney, “Contract and Neighbourly Exchange”, p. 41.

⁷⁰ State of the Nation Address by His Excellency Lt. Gen. Seretse Khama Ian Khama, President of the Republic of Botswana to the Third Session of the Tenth Parliament, 7th November 2011; “President warns against ethnicity”, *Mmegi online*, November 8, 2011.

⁷¹ In several of his speeches, the first President, Sir Seretse Khama, consistently referred to non-Tswana ethnic groups as “smaller tribal units” which need to be absorbed into “larger tribal organization.” See quotations in Gordon M. Carter and Phillip Morgan, *From the Front-line: Speeches of Sir Seretse Khama* (London: Rex Collins, 1980), pp. 291-292.

This perception of Botswana as an ethnic monolith is also reflected in a corpus of literature, which has consistently underscored the dominance of Tswana chiefly elite in the nation-state politics and therefore obscured ethnic differentiation in the country.⁷² On closer analysis, however, there are a number of contexts in which this perceived monolithic make up of ethnicity in Botswana should be problematized, and I have chosen to use cattle herding as a prism through which to explore the existence of historical, social and cultural difference in Botswana.

Others have examined and documented questions of ethnicity in Botswana, and my dissertation contributes to this existing scholarship. Available ethnicity literature, however, consists primarily of elite ethnographies that recognize only the Tswana-speaking groups' power to construct ethnic identities. I have decided to divide these works into two groups for purposes of clarity. The first set of works focuses primarily on language as the primary social marker of ethnic identity.⁷³ The second set of narratives puts emphasis on the domination of the cattle-wealthy Tswana speaking elites and their subjugation of non-cattle herding ethnic groups.⁷⁴

With the notion of homogeneity in mind, it is important to start with the earliest efforts by the doyen of Botswana studies, Isaac Schapera, who, despite ignoring non-Tswana ethnicities at the time, pioneered studies on Botswana's ethnicity. Schapera's 1952 monograph, *The Ethnic composition of the Tswana tribes* defined the territorial

⁷² See for example, Olufemi Vaughan, *Chiefs, Power and Social Change: Chiefship and Modern Politics in Botswana, 1880s-1990s* (Trento, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 2003); Christian John Makgala, *Elite Conflict in Botswana: A History* (Pretoria: Africa Institute of South Africa, 2006).

⁷³ See for example, A.M. Chebanne, "Shifting Identities in Eastern Khoe: Ethnic and Language Endangerment", *Pula: Botswana Journal of African Studies*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2002), pp. 147-157; Edwin Wilmsen, "Mutable Identities: Moving Beyond Ethnicity in Botswana", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 28, no. 4 (2002), pp. 825-841.

⁷⁴ Thomas Tlou, *A History of Ngamiland, 1750-1906*; Pnina Motzafi-Haller, "Historical Narratives; Diana Wylie, *A Little God*; Edwin Wilmsen, *Land Filled with Flies*

organization and historical background of the so-called “major tribes”.⁷⁵ “Major tribes,” in his reading, are the Tswana-speaking ethnic groups whose names, in alphabetical order, have found their way into the Botswana constitution:

The ex-officio members of the House of Chiefs shall be such persons as are for the time being performing the functions of the office of Chief in respect of the Bakgatla, Bakwena, Balete, Bangwato, Bangwaketse, Barolong, Batawana and Batlokwa Tribes, respectively.⁷⁶

The Ethnic composition of the Tswana tribes is, however, colored by the colonial politics of Schapera’s time. It was a result of Schapera’s commissioning by the colonial government to produce taxonomies of African “tribes” for administrative purposes. For this reason, he used language and geographic positioning of the “tribes” as ethnic identity markers. As a result, other ethnic groups – the so-called “minor tribes” – do not receive treatment in their own right but appear as ethnic elements subsumed under Tswana territorial chiefs of any of the eight designations. Writing long before the time that ethnic studies had exploded the classic tribal model in anthropology, Schapera thus offers little more than an elaborate ethnic taxonomy on historical principles. His work obscures questions of changing boundaries and society-nature relationships, which recent studies have argued are important components of relational and socially constructed ethnic identities.⁷⁷

What followed Schapera’s ethnographic work was a hiatus as far as work on identity formation in Botswana was concerned. It was not until the mid-1980s that small, but insightful, strides were made in the direction of ethnicity studies. This followed the

⁷⁵ Isaac Schapera, *The Ethnic Composition*.

⁷⁶ The Chieftainship Act (Cap.41:01), Botswana Constitution, ch. 78:76, p. 2.

⁷⁷ See for example, Allen F. Isaacman and Barbara S. Isaacman, *Slavery and Beyond*; Nancy Jacobs, *Environment, Power, and Injustice*; Leroy Vail (ed.), *The Creation of Tribalism*; Edwin Wilmsen, *Land Filled with Flies*; Terence Ranger, “The Invention of Tradition Revisited”, pp. 62-111.

publication of Ranger and Hobsbawm's volume, *The Invention of Tradition*, which viewed traditions, and by extension ethnicities, as creations of external political forces.⁷⁸ Ranger and Hobsbawm claimed that many traditions were invented to serve the ideological and economic interests of a hegemonic colonial authority. By hypothesizing about involuntary ethnicity, the invention model represents political subjects as passive followers of their rulers.

From the late 1980s, scholars applied the invention model to Africa and reified the binaries of African tradition and European modernity.⁷⁹ These narratives portrayed African traditions as something that belonged to a timeless pre-colonial past. They argued that twentieth century African cultures and traditions were constructs of colonial administrations. It is within the context of the invented ethnicities theories that ethnic identity studies in Botswana developed. Thomas Tlou published the first historical work on ethnic identity formation in Botswana in 1985.⁸⁰ This work explores the process of subordination and ethnic labelling of the disparate Okavango Delta peoples by the Batawana, a breakaway group of the Bangwato, at the end of the nineteenth century. In Ngamiland, argues Tlou (with his impressive reading of oral texts, missionary and travelers' reports), the expansionist Batawana lumped together the disparate Delta peoples into one subordinated group, which they disparagingly called *makuba*, or trotters, because they were forced to trot behind the horses of their Batawana masters.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Terence Ranger and Eric Hobsbawm (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

⁷⁹ For insights into the idea of invented ethnicities in Southern Africa, see contributions to Leroy Vail (ed.), *The Creation of Tribalism*; Edwin Wilmsen, *Land Filled with Flies*; Terence Ranger, "The Invention of Tradition Revisited", pp. 62-111.

⁸⁰ Thomas Tlou, *A History of Ngamiland*.

⁸¹ Thomas Tlou, *A History of Ngamiland*.

By the 1990s, constructivist/invention scholarship had made serious inroads into Botswana's ethnicity studies. Writing about the Basarwa of the Kalahari, Wilmsen argued, such ethnic labels as "San" were constructed identities applied by hegemonic groups as a "result of class categorizations on people becoming marginalized as a result of transformation in relations of production."⁸² Motzafi-Haller also catalogued a process of subjection of east-central Botswana peoples by the Bangwato between the 1850s and the early colonial period. She argues that the Bapedi, Bakaa and Bakhurutshe were resettled and centralized under the Bangwato rule in the Tswapong Hills where the ethnic designation, *Batswapong*, or "those who reside on the Tswapong Hills," was imposed on them as a mark of their collective subordinate ethnicity.⁸³

While other scholars preached homogeneity in both the dominant and subject groups, Diana Wylie argued that cattle produced a fluid social stratification in the Bangwato state as individuals and groups of people could easily negotiate and renegotiate new alliances through marriage and systems of patronage.⁸⁴ Unfortunately, like the other studies on ethnic identity, Diana Wylie saw subordinate groups as bounded entities that, once incorporated into the Bangwato state, lost a sense of ethnic identity. Most recent ethnicity scholarship has built upon Wylie's ideas of social differentiation within ethnic groups. Fred Morton's work, *When Rustling Became an Art*, for instance, examines cattle rustling as an instrument of wealth accumulation among the Bakgatla.⁸⁵

⁸² Edwin Wilmsen, *Land Filled with Flies*, p. 322.

⁸³ Pnina Motzafi-Haller, "Historical Narratives as Political Discourses", pp. 417-431.

⁸⁴ Diana Wylie, *A Little God*.

⁸⁵ Fred Morton, *When Rustling Became an Art: Pilane's Kgatla and the Transvaal Frontier, 1820-1902* (Claremont: David Philip, 2009).

Morton's work is an identity narrative that demonstrates the importance of power, class and generation as young men worked under the supervision of kings and the elderly to rustle cattle for community building. While fascinating, this frontier story of nineteenth century conflict between the Bakgatla and the Boers provides only a partial account of the vicissitudes of the Bakgatla's ethnicity building. It focuses on the kings as the nation-builders and therefore obscures the important role played by those in the frontline of cattle rustling and war, the young men, in the production of a pastoralist Bakgatla ethnicity. Young men in Morton's narrative show little agency or ability to produce their own power dynamics, only behaving according to the whims of those above them in the hierarchy of authority. My dissertation diverges from such ideas of the all-powerful elites by devolving power and history to the less powerful members of society. By placing them at the forefront of herding, for instance, I give authority to the voices of young men in the production of a pastoralist Babirwa ethnic identity.

I also engage with another body of Botswana's elitist scholarship, which has stressed the political economy of the Tswana elite dominance of the colonial and post-colonial beef industry almost to the point of a cliché.⁸⁶ The privatization of water and grazing land, Jack Parson, Louis Picard and Pauline Peters demonstrate, has produced an elite class of cattle barons, caused the degradation of the commonage and thus dispossessed the communal farmer.⁸⁷ This political economy scholarship provides important insights into questions of herd ownership inequalities in an elitist beef industry. By narrowly focusing on Tswana elite control of the pastoral resource base, however, this

⁸⁶ Jack Parson, "Cattle, class and the state in rural Botswana", pp. 236-255; Louis Picard, "Bureaucrats, Cattle and Public Policy", pp. 313-356.

⁸⁷ Jack Parson, "Cattle, class and the state in rural Botswana", pp. 236-255; Louis Picard, "Bureaucrats, Cattle and Public Policy", pp. 313-356; Pauline Peters, *Dividing the Commons*.

master narrative has obscured the diverse ways in which the communal farmers from local communities have negotiated the harsh realities of environmental and climatic changes to reconstitute and give social meaning to ethnic identities other than mainstream Tswana.

Overall, Botswana's ethnic identity narratives illuminate power dynamics as they resonate across questions of marginality, weakness, subordination and dominance. They provide insights into the dominance of Tswana groups and their conquest and subjugation of non-Tswana groups across pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial temporal spaces. They also illuminate a continuing state ideology of Tswana national unity whereby grazing land policies have empowered the wealthy Tswana cattle owning elites to expand into communal lands. These "big men"⁸⁸ narratives also expose the vagaries of elitist beef industry policies that disadvantaged non-Tswana speaking groups, whom the country's constitution labels as "minority" despite the fact no population census has ever been carried out along ethnic lines since 1946. In fact, colonial records show that the so-called "minor tribes" greatly outnumbered the "major tribes" in some cases. According to the 1946 census the Bangwato Reserve was composed of a diverse range of ethnicities, and out of a total population of 100,987, there were only 17,850 Bangwato.⁸⁹

For this reason, Botswana's ethnic identity narratives are useful in demonstrating that Botswana is not an ethnically homogenous society as claimed by the colonial and post-colonial governments. On the other hand, their emphasis on the decline of non-Tswana languages and cultural practices obscures, more than it reveals, the resilience of

⁸⁸ This terminology is borrowed from Emmanuel Kreike who uses it to describe kings who used their cattle wealth to attract refugees for purposes of building the social capital with which to transform the Namibian and Angolan wilderness into human settlements. See Emmanuel Kreike, *Recreating Eden*, pp. 9-11.

⁸⁹ BNA, DCS33/10, extract from census for the year 1946. See also Isaac Schapera's *Ethnic Composition of the Tswana Tribes*, p. 141, for census returns on other ethnic groups in the Bangwato Reserve.

ethnic identities.⁹⁰ This silence occurs because of the tendency of existing narratives to ignore the relationship people often built with their biophysical environments. Such a socio-environmental approach to ethnic identity production would reveal the differentiated ways in which people's readings and constructions of nature shaped their sense of ethnicity.⁹¹

Given the historical salience of cattle in the socio-economic and cultural landscapes of many communities in the country, I argue, there is no better prism to examine questions of ethnic self-identity than through cattle farming. This dissertation uses cattle herding to challenge the notion of a homogenous Tswana society (and a dominant way of conceptualizing ethnicity in Botswana) and therefore emphasizes resilience and adaptability of ethnicities to ecological and social change, rather than extinction of "subordinate" cultures as opined by linguistic and cultural "genocide" scholarship, which I cite above.

The dearth of historical work on the relationship between people and their biophysical environments in Botswana is thus surprising considering the amount of ground already covered in other parts of Southern Africa. This dissertation is therefore an important addition to recent socio-environmental histories of Southern Africa.⁹² These works are ethnic identity narratives because they respectively illuminate the multiple

⁹⁰ Allen F. Isaacman and Barbara S. Isaacman, *Slavery and Beyond*.

⁹¹ Laura J. Mitchell, "Appraising Nature: Pastoralist Practice, Hunting Logics and Landscape Ideology in Southern Africa", in Toyin Falola and Emily Brownell (eds.), *Landscape, Environment and Technology in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 42-61; Emmanuel Kreike, *Re-creating Eden*.

⁹² Allen F. Isaacman and Barbara S. Isaacman, *Slavery and Beyond*; Emmanuel Kreike, "De-Globalisation and Deforestation in Colonial Africa"; Nancy Jacobs, *Environment, Power, and Injustice*; Emmanuel Kreike, *Recreating Eden*; Henrietta L. Moore and Meghan Vaughan, *Cutting Down Trees: Gender, Nutrition, and Agricultural Change in the Northern Province of Zambia, 1890-1990* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann; London: James Currey; Lusaka: University of Zambia Press, 1994).

ways in which diverse communities have creatively adapted to and negotiated varied ecological landscapes and transformations and therefore produced social change.

Socio-environmental history argues for internal production instead of external construction or invention of ethnicities. The works of Isaacman and Isaacman, Nancy Jacobs, Emmanuel Kreike, and Henrietta Moore and Megan Vaughan are particularly important because they illuminate the intricate link between social change and people's environments.⁹³ In *Slavery and Beyond*, Allen and Barbara Isaacman use gender as an organizing principle to show that ethnic identity formation is a fluid, differentiated and reversible process. Most importantly, their work recognizes the agency of exploited peoples, demonstrating that the Chikunda of South-central Africa appropriated the instruments of their subjection, guns, to navigate a rugged biophysical terrain and produce a militaristic and masculinized identity articulated through gender, work (hunting), mobility and religion.⁹⁴

Nancy Jacobs' socio-environmental history of Kuruman in South Africa offers a more revealing narrative of the role of gender, class and generation in defining people's historical and environmental experiences. Jacobs' argument resonates with mine in the sense that she demonstrates that ethnic identities are not bounded entities. In her account, different actors encounter and experience the biophysical environments in varied and sometimes nuanced ways.⁹⁵ This idea of the intersection between social and environmental change reverberates in other socio-environmental histories in the region.⁹⁶

⁹³ Allen F. Isaacman and Barbara S. Isaacman, *Slavery and Beyond*; Emmanuel Kreike, "De-Globalisation and Deforestation in Colonial Africa"; Nancy Jacobs, *Environment, Power, and Injustice*; Emmanuel Kreike, *Re-creating Eden*; Henrietta L. Moore and Meghan Vaughan, *Cutting Down Trees*.

⁹⁴ Allen F. Isaacman and Barbara S. Isaacman, *Slavery and Beyond*.

⁹⁵ Nancy Jacobs, *Environment, Power, and Injustice*.

⁹⁶ Emmanuel Kreike, *Re-creating Eden*.

The strength of this scholarship lies in its ability to demonstrate the adaptability and change of ethnic identities in the face of environmental shocks and social transformations. It shows that Southern African ethnic identities were enlarged and sustained by the differential ways in which people experienced environmental and social change. “The accumulation of cattle”, Nancy Jacobs aptly notes, marked the transformation of “Fish and Goat People into a Sotho-Tswana chiefdom” in an environment prone to recurrent outbreaks of “anthrax and bovine botulism, the two endemic environmental stock diseases in the area.”⁹⁷ This ability of human beings to produce social change through multiple negotiations of the biophysical environment in a state of flux provides an important corrective to narratives that link societal decline to environmental vulnerability.⁹⁸ While rightly pointing to the destructiveness of colonial policies on African environments, the land degradation and societal decline theories have obscured the varied strategies Africans have adopted to adapt to change and therefore sustain their identities.

Recognizing the adaptability of human beings to environmental and social change resonates with the idea that ethnic identities are never cast in stone because of the differentiated nature of society. Through a history of human interactions with their environments, I demonstrate how the disparate peoples of eastern Botswana adapted cattle herding to give social meaning to a hardened ethnic category, “Babirwa”, imposed on them during colonial times. Ethnic politics are by their very definition attributes of marginality and relative weakness. But weakness itself can be transformed into power

⁹⁷ Nancy Jacobs, *Environment, Power, and Injustice*, pp. 43-44.

⁹⁸ See for example, William Beinart, “Soil Erosion, Animals and Pasture Over the Longer Term: Environmental Destruction in Southern Africa”, in Melissa Leach and Robin Mearns, *The Lie of the land: Challenging Received Wisdom on the African Environment* (Oxford: James Currey, 1996), pp. 54-72
Emmanuel Kreike, “De-Globalisation and Deforestation in Colonial Africa”, pp. 81-98.

and self-recognition. In this dissertation, I emphasize the adaptability of ethnic identity. I examine the ways in which subordinated people's construction of the "self" and the "other" relate to their shifting relations of power and domination within and beyond their social and geographic area. Such power dynamics manifested themselves in questions of gender, class, age and generation, which form an important part of this dissertation.

For the Babirwa, social institutions of patronage and marriage accounted for the fluidity of identities and shifting nature of boundaries between groups initially thought to be completely distinct. These institutions were fields of power that determined how gender relations influenced the making of the Babirwa ethnic identity. Gender, Dorothy Hodgson argues, "is produced, maintained, and transformed through the cultural and social relations of power between women and men (but also among women and men)."⁹⁹

Among the Babirwa, the loaning of cattle was a gendered practice. The institutions of *mahisa* and *kgamelo* ensured that the wealthy spread the risks of their wealth, accessed the herding labor of the poor and brought the poor under the orbit of their protection. In other words, *mahisa* and *kgamelo* were not only economic institutions. They were political and social institutions in which poverty symbolized both dependence and lesser masculinity. John and Jean Comaroff teach us that in nineteenth century South Africa, a Tswana man's wealth was measured according to the size of his herd, and the poor were obliged to rely on the wealthy for their survival just like children depended on their parents.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Dorothy L. Hodgson, *Once Intrepid Warriors: Gender, Ethnicity and the Cultural Politics of Maasai Development* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 14.

¹⁰⁰ John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, "Goodly Beasts, Beastly Goods: Cattle and Commodities in a South African Context", *American Ethnologist*, vol. 17, no. 2 (1990), p. 196.

Between men and women, these gender relations were imbedded in domestic politics. Unfortunately, the enduring influence of structural-functional accounts of the “cattle complex”¹⁰¹ of pastoralist peoples has led to continued presumptions that men have always had unmitigated control of all spheres of life, including women. Margaret Kinsman’s work, for instance, has assumed that Tswana men’s control of cattle gave them *de facto* control of women, who were so subordinated that an independent identity of women as a productive force was non-existent.¹⁰² Diana Wylie’s examination of gender relations in Botswana is even more damning: “At best, [women] were spectators; at worst they were exploited,”¹⁰³ she opines. Recently, Fred Morton has completely excluded women in his brilliantly written history of cattle wealth accumulation among the Bakgatla of the South-eastern Botswana. Despite showing that rustling was the work of young men, Morton credits only large cattle holding men, particularly the royalty, with the building of Bakgatla ethnicity.¹⁰⁴ Such narratives obscure the role of women, commoners and other categories of the underclass, such as young men, in imagining and shaping a pastoralist identity.

Babirwa women, I argue, played a major role in the pastoral economy of their communities. In a society where production rested on both cattle herding and cultivation, women as cultivators were producers in their own right. As a result, they deserve all the attention and respect accorded to men in existing agrarian histories. Nancy Jacobs’ insights provide motivation for a serious examination of gender in this dissertation:

¹⁰¹ Melville Herskovits, “The Cattle Complex in East Africa”, *American Anthropologist*, vol. 28 (1926), pp. 230-272; E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940).

¹⁰² Margaret Kinsman, “Beasts of Burden”: The Subordination of Southern Tswana Women, ca. 1800-1840”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1. (1983), pp. 39-54. See also John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, “Goodly Beasts, Beastly Goods”, pp. 195-216.

¹⁰³ Diana Wylie, *A Little God*, p. 5.

¹⁰⁴ Fred Morton, *When Rustling became an Art*.

More than a sphere of female exploitation, cultivation was a sphere of female autonomy. It was a hedge against male failure within the ecological cycle. Children and women were particularly vulnerable during hard times, and growing crops gave women their own source of food. Supplying the household provided a motivation for women's work that was independent of the dictates of men.¹⁰⁵

Thus, the prosperity of a family as a cattle holding unit depended on the care that men received from their womenfolk. As Zeleza concludes: "livestock property, which was owned by men, was channeled through the institution of the house, controlled by women."¹⁰⁶ James Ferguson has shown that, despite rules prohibiting women from having contact with cattle in Southern Africa, the acquisition and disposal of cattle has always been a dialogical process involving men and women.¹⁰⁷

To this category of the less masculinized, who worked the fields, I have added poor men, or the *bakhumanegi*, who, as John and Jean Comaroff say of nineteenth century Tswana, were reduced to the social status of boys, with the obligation of herding the cattle of the wealthy cattle owners, or working in the fields alongside women.¹⁰⁸ This dissertation therefore challenges androcentric assumptions and accounts of pastoralist gender relationships. It places gender within the broader context of work in the production of ethnic identities. Many scholars before have emphasized the idea of work as an important aspect of the making and remaking of ethnic identities and their ideas provide a platform upon which I deal with questions of gender, generation and class among the Babirwa between 1920 and the present.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ Nancy Jacobs, *Environment, Power, and Injustice*, p. 52.

¹⁰⁶ Tiyambe Zeleza, *A Modern Economic History: Volume 1, The Nineteenth Century* (CODESRIA, 1993), p. 151.

¹⁰⁷ James Ferguson, "The Bovine Mystique", pp. 647-674.

¹⁰⁸ John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, "Goodly Beasts, Beastly Goods", p. 202.

¹⁰⁹ Allen F. Isaacman and Barbara S. Isaacman, *Slavery and Beyond*; Emmanuel Kreike, *Re-creating Eden*; Henrietta Moore and Megan Vaughan, *Cutting Down Trees*.

Design and Methodology

Very little about subject peoples in colonial and post-colonial Botswana appears in the official records. Much of what is available in these archives deals with matters affecting the dominant Tswana-speaking groups of the Bangwato, Bangwaketse, Bakwena, Batawana, Bakgatla, Balete, Batlokwa and Barolong. This practice of documenting only the Tswana groups emanated from the colonial tribal model, which had the objective of building an ethnically monolithic society. The result has been the obscurity of subject groups (the so-called “minor tribes,” as defined in the constitution) in the country’s archives.

For this reason, the evidentiary basis for my dissertation primarily consists of oral histories of the Babirwa. Challenging land degradation theories that place African farming methods at the center of environmental vulnerability, socio-environmental histories have stressed the need to place the lived experiences of local peoples at the center of studies on the dynamics of interrelationships between people and their biophysical environments.¹¹⁰ Most importantly, they argue, the histories of obscure peoples are imbedded in the stories they tell. In his portrait of a black South African sharecropper, social historian, Charles van Onselen, brings our attention to a history told from the perspective of marginalized people.¹¹¹ Such emphasis on people’s voices has shaped this dissertation’s choice of methodology for dealing with questions of identity, power and socio-environmental change. I used the multiple voices of Babirwa men and women, herders and ethno-medicine specialists to give perspectives on ethnic identity

¹¹⁰ See among others, Melissa Leach and Robin Mearns, *The Lie of the Land: Challenging Received Wisdom on the African Environment* (Oxford: James Currey, 1996); Emmanuel Kreike, *Re-Creating Eden*; Henrietta Moore and Meghan Vaughan, *Cutting Down Trees*.

¹¹¹ Charles van Onselen, *The Seed is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, a South African Sharecropper, 1894-1985* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1996).

narratives, cattle herding and natural resources use.¹¹²

Oral histories, or stories that emerge from people's voices, provide access to obscure communities speaking for themselves. These stories are imbedded in personal testimonies, folk tales and songs, idioms and proverbs, rumor and gossip, which are different ways of telling the history of a people. I treat these modes of expression as identity narratives because they reveal the varied ways in which the Babirwa have, over generations, represented how they experienced environmental and social change. These texts – personal testimonies, folk tales and songs, idioms and proverbs, rumor and gossip – represent oral testimony transfigured into unconventional forms, which can only be retrieved by listening to the voices of the local people.

My fieldwork started with a series of interviews. In all, I conducted forty-five formal interviews in the villages of Bobonong, Molaladau, Tsetsebjwe, Mogapi, Mabile and Gobojango where men and women, herders and *dingaka tsa dikgomo*, or ethno-medicine specialists, respectively shared their experiences of being Babirwa. I also recorded wide ranging informal conversations with many people across the social spectrum and in many other Bobirwa areas, taking into consideration their social locations such as gender, class and profession. I refer to these storytellers as local historians because they were at the center of deciding key variables in their daily experiences, thus giving their voices authority in this dissertation.

The Interview constitutes a storied account of the past recounted in the present. It is an act of memory, which is shaped as much by the moment of telling as by the history

¹¹² As a note of clarification, the majority of the men whose testimonies are cited in this dissertation were once cattle herders during their youth.

being told.¹¹³ My interviews focused on questions about the Babirwa's engagements with social and environmental change over time. Conversations moved from herd management systems, coping strategies with disease and drought, belief systems, and the effects of commercialization and migrant labor on social relations, to post-colonial land policy. Such questions prompted my local historians to draw upon an interesting repertoire of both personal and social explanations as they put the histories, traditions and cultures of the Babirwa into words. Words and voices are symbols of people's social experiences and are therefore a form of testimony important in the reconstruction of their pasts.¹¹⁴ My interviews thus reflected a representation of change and continuities in the social worlds of these local historians.

Knowledge production is a social terrain. It is contingent upon gender, generation, class and profession. The Babirwa women, men and other social classes narrated differing experiences about change and continuities in their varied interactions with each other and with their biophysical environments. Women's stories mostly focused on their care of the home and crop production. They talked much about how they provide(d) food, shelter and companionship to fatigued and hungry men, who often were unable to manage their lives. On the other hand, men talked a lot about cattle, and their days as herders, migrant workers and later as public figures. Their stories focused much on the "first person and their accomplishments while women tended to disguise statements of personal power."¹¹⁵ Proud former migrants to the South African mines, for instance,

¹¹³ Robert Perks and Alistair Thompson, *The Oral History Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

¹¹⁴ Luise White, Stephan Miescher, and David William Cohen, *African Words, African Voices: Critical Practices in Oral History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001).

¹¹⁵ Gwen Etter-Lewis, "Black Women's Life Stories: Reclaiming Self in Narrative Texts", in Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (eds.), *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 48.

talked much about their work at the mines and how it transformed them from boys to men as they reinvested their earnings into cattle herds. The *dingaka tsa dikgomo*'s testimonies revolved around an array of indigenous practices of herd management, with special reference to their knowledge, skills and practices of ethno-botany, livestock illnesses, as well as the doctoring of cattle.

These interviews were, however, not without challenges. The challenges emanated from changing power relations. Sometimes my interviews turned into impassioned conversations across generations. This happened when I interviewed elderly men about their colonial experiences. They would emphatically lecture me on the hardships they went through. To them, I represented the generation of their children and grandchildren, who are in the dark about the harrowing experiences of the colonial period when they lost grazing lands to skewed policies that disproportionately benefitted the wealthy Tswana elites. The shifting power relations were very uncomfortable as I felt that I was losing grip of the interview process. But among the Babirwa, old people are emporiums of wisdom. Drawing on the old adage: *mogolo ga tsenwe ganong* (it is forbidden to interrupt elders while they speak), I listened attentively and patiently. That feeling of being in a position of power encouraged the narrators to be more open about their experiences. An old *ngaka* even volunteered to teach me the art of producing aphrodisiacs by mixing fat from a bull's testicles with special herbs. My positionality as a native of Botswana and a Mmirwa (one of the Babirwa) therefore became very important in these interpretive complexities of the oral text.

In addition, my competency in and knowledge of Sebirwa (Babirwa language and cultures) enabled me to interpret certain cultural conventions to attract respect and a

certain degree of acceptability. This insider position made me acceptable among a broad spectrum of social categories, including men, women herders and the *dingaka tsa dikgomo*. I was able to elicit information relating to herding practices and healing rituals, some of which could not be revealed to less masculine men (particularly unmarried and childless men) or foreigners. Thus age and marital status are variables that transcend all social backgrounds in Bobirwa. My linguistic and cultural resumes therefore made me an insider among the Babirwa in these respects.

On the other hand, I was also an outsider. Often, I found myself unable to access certain information, particularly from elderly women, who saw me not just as their grandchild, but also as a man. These were very uncomfortable talking to me about intimate, personal details of their lives, such as the sexual abuses they or their relatives were subjected to during the 1920s relocation of the Babirwa from the Tuli Block. “Discomfort with a difficult or taboo subject” often leads to mistrust of the interviewer by the interviewee, thus reproducing silences.¹¹⁶ In Bobirwa, rape is highly stigmatized. The Babirwa women are therefore generally loathe to give graphic details about sexual abuses, especially to men, for fear of becoming socially disgraced. For this reason, I was deprived of a deeper understanding of the sexual depredations perpetrated on women during the forced evictions of the Babirwa in the 1920s. This painful aspect of the Babirwa women’s experiences of their ethnicity forms part of the silences in this dissertation.

Issues relating to cattle thefts and belief systems, particularly, witchcraft and theft, were even more difficult to get at through formal interviews. Whenever I raised questions

¹¹⁶ Linda Shopes, “What is Oral History”, *History Matters*. The US Survey on the Web, p. 7. <http://historymatters.gmu.edu>. Accessed 10/17/2011.

about witchcraft and theft, the narrators would talk about such issues in general terms and any attempt to elicit information on perpetrators made them uncomfortable. Different reasons accounted for this discomfort. First, the Babirwa have deep-rooted belief in witchcraft. Many people believe that cattle thieves and cattle owners work with powerful *dingaka* (or traditional medical practitioners), whose potions can be used to heal, protect or kill people. Cattle thieves are known, not only to doctor themselves for protection against the law, but also to bewitch those who are intent on interfering with their nefarious activities. People are easily dissuaded from revealing certain information if they feel vulnerable to witchcraft. Secondly, accusing someone of thievery or witchcraft without proof is a criminal offence in Botswana and aggrieved people have a legal right to litigate against their accusers and demand reparations from them. Whenever I tried to solicit names of thieves or of *dingaka* who worked with thieves, I would always be told: “*leina la motho kgomo*”, or “revealing a person’s name can cost one a cow.” This means that revealing names has the potential to lend the teller in serious trouble with the law.

It was when information became hard to access that I broadened the scope of my sources so as to obtain information in other formats. I tapped more into my experiential knowledge, informal conversations with relatives and friends and other channels of alternative information such as rumor and gossip, songs and folk tales. It was via these avenues that I gained insights into the belief systems of the Babirwa, which form an important source of evidence for my section on witchcraft in chapter 4. In Bobirwa, we utilize informal channels of information more than we do the formal channels such as radio and television. Rumor and gossip, in particular, permeate all forms of communication at all levels of community. In this sense, each piece of information is

always interpreted in various ways, thus producing multiple truths. They also play an important part in explaining and conceptualizing the unknown.

Inequalities in cattle ownership have always existed among the Babirwa. But the increasing gap between the *bakhumi* (poor people who do not own cattle) and *bakhumanegi* (cattle owning elites) since the 1930s to the present has continued to lend itself to multiple explanations through rumor and gossip. Despite their lack of secure standards of evidence, I argue, rumor and gossip are reliable sources of alternative histories,¹¹⁷ and in Bobirwa, they dominate public discourses on ambiguous phenomena, such as the world of witchcraft, as people try to develop intellectual resources with which to interpret and come to terms with such events.

In her study of the colonial East Indies, Ann Stoler places rumor within the broader context of cultural knowledge. She demonstrates that colonial subjects used rumor and gossip as modes of conceptualizing colonial rule and expressing their discontent with colonial domination.¹¹⁸ Luise White's study of blood sucking and vampirism in colonial East Africa argues that rumor and gossip are valuable historical source materials. They constitute the voices and experiences of the colonial subject and are therefore stories telling the hidden social realities, anxieties and expectations of the victimized.¹¹⁹ Drawing from Stoler and White respectively, I have used rumor and gossip to produce a particular genre of the Babirwa history; a history told from the perspective of obscure marginalized communities.

Linguistic innovations were also central to the varied ways in which the Babirwa

¹¹⁷ Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumour and History in Colonial Africa* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), p. 5; Ann Stoler, "In Cold Blood: Hierarchies of Credibility and the Politics of Colonial Narratives", *Representations*, vol. 37 (1992), pp. 151-189.

¹¹⁸ Ann Stoler, "In Cold Blood", pp. 151-189.

¹¹⁹ Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires*, p. 5.

expressed their experiences and struggles with change. The folk songs and tales, and vernacular concepts and expressions cited throughout this dissertation do not only express people's anxieties, fears and expectations about their real and imagined socio-economic circumstances. They also reveal the hidden transcript of social life, such as belief systems, that cannot be gleaned from official and documentary sources. As a native of Bobirwa, and with my knowledge of Sebirwa (Babirwa language, history and cultural practices), I was able to use linguistic evidence to gain access into sensitive and secretive questions of witchcraft, the rise of promiscuity and prostitution, and the healing practices of the *dingaka tsa dikgomo*.

Deciphering such hidden expressions of social reality and change would be very challenging for a complete outsider. As a graduate student from an American university, I was an outsider. As a result, there were numerous possibilities where the narrators would have withheld important information since they had suspicions that I was an educated man from a foreign university with the intent to transfer their knowledge systems to foreign lands. One *ngaka ya dikgomo*, for instance, asked me: "why did you have to go and study about us and our cattle in a foreign country where people don't even know that we exist?" "Do Americans even have cattle?" These questions are complex, politically charged statements. They resonate across subaltern literature, particularly the notion of the colonial nature of the interview.¹²⁰ But my knowledge of the cultural conventions of the Babirwa as they pertain to cattle herding convinced them that my intention was to learn from them and document their indigenous knowledge systems for future generations. Not only am I a Mmirwa (one of the Babirwa). I am also a herd owner in my

¹²⁰ See Rosiland Morris (ed.), *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea* (New York: Columbia University, 2010).

own right. I was born in a cattle-owning family where I grew up herding cattle. For these reasons, I possess some botanical knowledge important in treating many of the cattle illnesses from injuries to birth defects. I also have an awareness of the rituals, such as *go thaa lesaka* (fortifying a kraal), which is central to raising a successful herd.

Retention of words and construction of new meanings, David Schoenbrun has demonstrated, help in the retrieval of memories that would otherwise have been lost when people died or forgot.¹²¹ Such retrievals of memories bring the social histories of people into the present and help them to deal effectively with contemporary challenges. In this dissertation, I have used a number of words and concepts, such as *dithogo* (heads), *go loma* (to have a first bite of the harvest), *rrakgadi* (paternal aunt), *dikgomo tse di senang maoto* (cattle without legs), and *matholwane* (the living dead), to demonstrate the varied ways in which linguistic innovations have helped the Babirwa adapt to social and ecological change.

Quite often, information about a people's pasts is remembered in altered states – and by different people – depending on their present socio-economic and ecological experiences. Because it is not always remembered in its original form, this kind of cumulative knowledge represents alternative multiple histories of a people. In employing oral histories, I build on social historians' creative usage of this kind of historical source, which, for the purposes of this project, provides an interior view into the Babirwa's lived experiences. This methodological approach has enabled me to challenge the common tropes of Botswana history, which focus on a master narrative of state control and elite

¹²¹ David Schoenbrun, *A Green Place, A Goof Place*.

men's experiences.¹²² As the richest evidentiary base for this thesis, oral histories capture the Babirwa's own perspectives on their history. Through gendered testimonies of cattle herding, household subsistence production, labor migration, and encounters with disease, drought and witchcraft, the Babirwa tell stories of their creativity and adaptability to environmental and social change.

Through oral texts, this dissertation has captured their socio-economic struggles in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Botswana, as well as their experiences, cultural practices and changing worldviews. Oral histories capture both changes and continuities in their work patterns in the ordered space today called Bobirwa where they selected aspects from their fluid pasts and identities, and added new ones to adapt to their hardened ethnic identity. They tenaciously coped with the humiliation of forced relocation and subjection to Bangwato rule from the 1920s as they focused on building their herds to negotiate recurrent droughts and disease, and social changes, such as migrant labor, the monetization of the country's economy and the commoditization of the pastoral resource base. Although I had to read these oral narratives with awareness that like other sources they have their silences and are sometimes too subjective, self serving and personal, they remain the most important evidentiary basis for documenting the history of obscure, borderlands communities in Botswana, who hardly appear in the colonial and post-colonial official documents.

This dissertation has therefore employed unconventional methodologies to tease out information about those parts of Babirwa pasts that do not appear in formal sources. Such unconventional sources are a very important aspect of oral histories. Interviews

¹²² See among others, Christian John Makgala, *Elite Conflict in Botswana*; Pauline E. Peters, *Dividing the Commons*.

provided information about everyday life and insights into mentalities about the underclasses, such as women, herders and young men and women. But rumor and gossip, folk songs and stories, and idioms and proverbs provided information that was simply unavailable from traditional sources.

Despite scarce archival documentation of the Babirwa, I have used the little material available to support some of my arguments in my third and fourth chapters. This dissertation has utilized documents housed at the Botswana National Archives (hereafter BNA) in Gaborone, Botswana. The BNA is a section of the Botswana National Archives and Records Services (BNARS), which is a government department established by the National Archives Act of 1978, and amended in 2007. The main function of the Department is to provide records and information management service to government agencies; and to collect, preserve and access the nation's documentary heritage. Beyond benefiting from these archives, my project will, by documenting the history of one of Botswana's ethnic minorities, also make an addition to the country's documentary heritage.

The fact the BNARS has the role of preserving the country's documentary heritage makes the department a national project, which is laudable. But lack of documentary evidence about minorities at the archives confirms my argument that Botswana's national identity is an assimilationist project with the objective of defining citizenship within the context of Tswana dominance. Throughout Southern African colonies subject groups only entered official discussion once their behavior was deemed to be subversive to colonial policy. Proposing a reconceptualization of postapartheid South African History, historian, Premesh Lalu, argues that the colonial archive is a

selective field of power used primarily for surveillance against espionage and subversion by the colonial subject.¹²³ The Babirwa who occupied the Tuli Block, particularly Malema's Babirwa, provide a good example of a subject people who dominated colonial who only entered the colonial record for their perceived rebelliousness.

In addition, with their policy of Indirect Rule, the British considered corporate tribal responsibility to be essential to the administration of Bechuanaland. Indirect rule in British colonies, Mahmood Mamdani rightly argues, was an instrument of "incorporating natives" into a rigidly ordered form of customary law. According to Mamdani, colonial governments subsumed disparate ethnic groups into a rigid category called a tribe and subjected them to the whims of a native authority whose sole responsibility was to enforce the colonially imposed custom.¹²⁴ The concepts of tribal affiliation and tribal custom rationalized the myth of a classless African society and therefore hindered the entrance of the Babirwa into colonial records. The incorporation of the Babirwa into the Bangwato "tribe" in the 1920s had thus made the Babirwa almost invisible to the colonial eye as they existed only as a sub-set of the Bagwato tribe. As a result, there is hardly any specific mention of the Babirwa from the 1930s in the colonial archive.

Nonetheless, this dissertation utilized legislative and related papers, secretariat and district commissioners' records, and minutes of the African and Advisory Council. I also benefitted from published official documents, such as annual reports and commissioned studies about the cattle industry, disease and drought, particularly for the period between 1930 and independence in 1966. All these colonial sources said little to

¹²³ Premesh Lalu, "Grammar of Domination and the Subjection of Agency: Colonial Texts and Modes of Evidence", *History and Theory*, vol. 39, no. 4. "Not Telling": Secrecy, Lies, and History (2000), pp. 45-68.

¹²⁴ Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers; Cape Town: David Philip; London: James Currey, 1996), pp. 17-18 and p. 51.

nothing about the Babirwa. While I used them with a consciousness of their imbedded silences, fragmentary nature and elite-focused official biases, they still shed indispensable light on the multiple ways in which minority groups were marginalized by the colonial beef industry.

In the Bangwato Reserve, to which the Babirwa were incorporated, the colonial archive focuses primarily on elite (particularly Bangwato chiefs) control of pastoral resources, their tax collection duties and in general administration of the Reserve. The Babirwa are only explicitly documented in the early 1920s when colonial authorities perceived Malema's refusal to relocate to the Bangwato Reserve as an act of subversion against colonial policy and the authority of Kgosi Khama. As South African historian, Premesh Lalu, has argued: "the colonial archive" is a field of power "designed around several technologies of evidence gathering and surveillance" to suppress self-recognition by the Africans.¹²⁵ The British obsession with purported aggressiveness of the Babirwa was, therefore, part of the larger administrative machinery that sought to deny some Africans the capacity to shape their own identities and to homogenize the colonial subject for purposes of political control. The colonial archive's silence about the Babirwa resonates with my argument that colonial and post-colonial governments were intent on producing a Tswana national identity by erasing other ethnicities and constructing ethnic minorities.

The content of letters written between colonial officials and between Kgosi Khama and colonial officials regarding the recalcitrant behaviour of the Babirwa between 1920 and 1922, together with the expediency of relocating them to the Bangwato

¹²⁵ Premesh Lalu, "The Grammar of Domination and the Subjection of Agency: Colonial Text and Modes of Evidence", *History and Theory*, vol. 39, no. 4 (2000), pp. 52-53.

Reserve, are revealing of compatible political interests between Khama and the colonial government; those of constructing a dominant Tswana national identity and the production of ethnic minorities. Conversely, Malema's defiance of Khama's instructions to relocate, as captured in the official letters, provide important insights into the Babirwa's sense of ethnic identity and autonomy from the Bangwato State. Thus, beyond its silences about ethnic minorities, the colonial archive resounds with important echoes about identity struggles in colonial Botswana.

I also benefitted from letters between district commissioners (DCs) and the Resident Commissioner, Charles Rey, in Mafikeng during the 1930s. The letters contain information about complaints by DCs regarding exploitative tax collection methods employed by the *dikgosi* on the subject peoples. The letters also carried indications that the chiefs' tax collectors were using their position of power to divest subject groups of their cattle. By citing the subject people's loss of cattle to tax collection, these letters provide nuanced insights into the causes of herd ownership inequalities in the Bangwato Reserve. These expropriations, together with loss of pastoral resources to drought and disease, were also captured in the *Bechuanaland Protectorate Annual Reports*. Since the Babirwa were subsumed into the Bangwato community, I inferred that issues of labor migration, cattle diseases and droughts captured in the *Bechuanaland Protectorate Annual Reports*, referring to the Bangwato Reserve affected the Babirwa too.

The African voices were more audible in the African Advisory Council, a forum designed as part of the colonial policy of Indirect Rule, where chiefs from the "major" Tswana "tribes" met with colonial authorities to discuss matters affecting their Reserves. One important contribution of the meetings of this Council to my dissertation was the

chiefs' sustained calls for the administration to place an age limit on migrant laborers. Botswana's migration literature has consistently demonstrated that the majority of labor migrants between the 1930s and independence were young men from impoverished subject groups.¹²⁶ From the chiefs' calls for stay-at-home policies, I gleaned important insights into their anxieties about declining rural cattle farming economies due to the absence of the primary workers, the young men. These insights provided evidence for my fourth chapter, primarily with regard to the multiple ways in which labor migration undermined and revived cattle farming and transformed gender hierarchies and other social relations.

Added to these colonial sources were post-colonial official documents published by the Botswana Government Printers from the 1970s. Of particular importance to my dissertation were documents that carry grazing land policies, such as the *National Policy on Tribal Grazing Land* of 1975 and the 1991 *National Policy on Agricultural Development*. These documents provide important insights into the contraction of the commonage as privatized commercial beef production was given priority over rural livelihoods. By according wealthy politicians and top government officials disproportionate opportunities to acquire private farms in the communal grazing lands, these modernist policies thus confirm my argument in chapter five that post-colonial Botswana grazing land policies were designed to benefit the commercial interests of few elites, pushing small herd owners into lands of marginal quality where their animals became vulnerable to drought and disease. The loss of grazing lands thus undermined the historical, social and cultural uses for which communal farmers raised cattle.

¹²⁶ See for example, Isaac Schapera, *Migrant Labor and Tribal Life*; Wazha G. Morapedi, "Acculturation and Botswana Migrant Miners in South Africa, 1930-1980," *Afrika Zamani* (CODESRIA) Nos. 15 & 16 (2007-2008): 45-62.

This dissertation also benefits from published ethnographic texts, particularly the ethnological publications of N.J. van Warmelo, a South African ethnologist, who collected and published information on the cultures, languages and histories of the black peoples of South Africa during the 1930s and 1940s. The authors of these manuscripts were literate Africans, most of whom were schoolteachers in rural communities. They were simultaneously insiders and outsiders of the societies about which they were writing. These interlocutors collected and wrote down the oral accounts from their communities and then posted them to van Warmelo's office in Pretoria. The distinctiveness and significance of their writings lie in the intricate details of social relations within the communities and interaction with other groups, which they recorded. During this time, van Warmelo was employed by the colonial administration as a "native expert", with the express purpose of classifying Africans into "tribes", as well as of finding out how best to use indigenous political institutions (such as chieftainship, law and custom) for purposes of controlling Africans.

Being a colonial project van Warmelo's publications have tended to proffer a myopic interpretation of Africans as "tribal" societies. His manuscripts, which were published into a book, *The Copper Miners of Musina*, in 1940, provide important insights into the early histories of the Babirwa told from the perspective of the Babirwa themselves. I gleaned from this ethnological publication richly textured accounts of early nineteenth century histories and practices which bring to light some crucial insights about how the Babirwa shaped their own identities. This material provided part of the evidence, for my chapter two, about the unclear early nineteenth histories of the Babirwa of Botswana, with special reference to totemism and their way of life as hunters. As a result,

van Warmelo's manuscripts have provided me with ethnographic evidence that brings my project nearer to the early histories of the Babirwa and how they imagined and articulated their ethnic identities.

I also benefitted from a large corpus of private local newspaper reports, such as *Mmegi*, and *Sunday Standard*, particularly with regard to issues concerning cattle thefts. Newspaper reports, though sometimes colored by processes of translation and transcription, offer insights into events at the time they took place.¹²⁷ A careful reading of these reports therefore provided insights into anxieties about epidemics of cattle thefts and the different ways in which individuals and communities affected conceptualized thievery and state policy respectively. Most importantly, these reports carry the voices of the communities as they lament lack of protection from security agencies. They contain direct quotations of the Babirwa farmers, who are not literate and less wealthy to afford legal representation, expressing their discontent, regarding what they see as “the law [eating] with the thieves.” This expression is an idiom used by the Babirwa to explain cattle thefts as state-sanctioned banditry. It resonates with African banditry literature, which places rural crime within the broader context of political resistance.¹²⁸ The political nature of such opposition to government policy and the justice systems has accounted for the silence of government media, both print and electronic, about issues of cattle thefts.

There is no doubt that the above sources are of immense value to my dissertation. But documentary sources such as the colonial archive and settler histories seldom provide

¹²⁷ Helena Pohlandt-McCommick, “I Saw a Nightmare...” *Doing Violence to Memory: The Soweto Uprising, June 16, 1976* (PhD thesis, University of Minnesota, 1999), p. 41.

¹²⁸ Donald Crummey (ed.), *Banditry, Rebellion and Social Protest* (London: James Currey; Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1986).

a balanced view of African cultures and histories. Due to their lack of the voices of subject peoples, they reveal very little about internal workings, contestations and images that the Babirwa engaged in to produce their ethnic identity. The limitations imposed on newspaper reports by processes of translation and sensationalization means that newspapers, like documentary sources described above, cannot be treated as stand-alone sources.

Employing Isaacman and Isaacman's strategy of using every source available but accepting none uncritically,¹²⁹ however, I utilized, concurrently, oral and documentary sources to reveal the differentiated ways in which the Babirwa imagined and contested social and environmental change. From this collectivity of sources, I gleaned various and deeply gendered and class strategies that individuals and communities used to cope with changing economic and political situations, as well as recurring ecological misfortunes, between the colonial and post-colonial periods. I also gleaned continuities, particularly in cattle keeping traditions and how these traditions have been expressed and renegotiated over time across pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial spatio-temporal spaces. As a result, I have been able to unsettle the traditional conceptual boundaries of pre-colonial/colonial/post-colonial and tradition/modernity.

Based on the data I have analyzed, the organization and architecture of my dissertation is as follows: Chapter two sets the scene for the story told in this dissertation. It starts by providing a concise historical background to the Babirwa's early nineteenth century life ways as the mobile politically distinctive hunters and herders of black sheep, who venerated the *nare*, buffalo. These "people of the buffalo", or the *Banareng*, entered into relationships of patronage with the Bangwato in the second half of the century. This

¹²⁹ Allen F. Isaacman and Barbara S. Isaacman, *Slavery and Beyond*.

chapter discusses not only the Babirwa-Bangwato patron-client relationships. Primarily, it explores the multiple ways in which the dynamics of interactions between the Babirwa herders and their biophysical environments enabled them to reconstruct the hitherto untamed tsetse infested Shashe-Limpopo watershed into living spaces. The establishment of cattle farming in this socio-environmental frontier shaped a new pastoralist ethnic identity and therefore transformed the Babirwa into “people of the cow”, or the *Bakgomong*.

Chapter three takes over from the end of the nineteenth century, examining the impacts of colonialism on the Babirwa’s pastoral prosperity. It also examines the modest contribution of colonialism to the centralization of the Babirwa and the subsequent ossification of their ethnic identity, leading to contesting interests, ideas and knowledge about the environment. The chapter starts by examining colonial encroachment on the Babirwa lands, thus contracting their agricultural resource base. Then it discusses the impact of rinderpest at the end of the Century on the Babirwa’s pastoral resources. This chapter argues that, in the struggle for resources, different conceptions of the environment shaped and produced distinctive and overlapping ideas about the landscape between the Babirwa, the Bangwato and the British. Loss of land in the Tuli Block to the British and the Babirwa’s incorporation into the Bangwato Reserve, I argue, deprived the Babirwa of their traditional coping strategy of mobility and made them vulnerable to ecological stresses.

Chapter four connects the latter part of colonial rule with early colonialism by demonstrating the Babirwa’s adaptability and resilience to social and ecological change. It examines the multiple ways in which the Babirwa negotiated the emerging

environmental shocks of foot and mouth disease and frequent droughts, together with a monetized colonial economy, which (the money economy) was a result of increasing migrant labor and the commercialization of cattle farming. This chapter weaves together a complex mosaic of ideas about the frontier relationship between two value systems, cattle and cash, which existing scholarship has represented as mutually exclusive. The chapter demonstrates the Babirwa's ability to imbue cash with symbolic meaning as "cattle without legs", thus incorporating it into their social systems amid a declining material pastoral fabric.

The decline of the Babirwa's pastoral fabric, chapter five shows, pervaded post-colonial Botswana. In this chapter, I unsettle the traditional post-colonial/colonial divide by arguing, the post-colonial economic development strategy and administrative machinery closely followed the colonial blueprint of partial privatization of communal grazing lands and concentrating herd ownership in the hands of a few political elites. The chapter shows that post-colonial grazing land policy continued the process of the contraction of the commonage and restriction of animal movements, thus increasing the communal farmers' vulnerability to drought, disease and theft. These increasing stress levels, I argue, caused the Babirwa to draw upon their colonial epistemologies of herd ownership inequalities where witchcraft became the mode of expressing anxieties and hopes about the reproduction of poverty and wealth. They also invented new nomenclature with which to explain epidemics of theft that have engulfed their area since the late 1990s and to contest the country's justice systems. Thus, this chapter acts as a corrective to decolonist narratives, which have argued that loss of land and its resources

directly leads to social decline for rural communities.¹³⁰

¹³⁰ See for example, Lionel Cliffe and Richard Moorson, "Rural Class Formation and Ecological Collapse in Botswana", *Review of African Political Economy*, no. 15/16, *The Roots of Famine* (1979), pp. 35-52; Leroy Vail, "Ecology and History: The Example of Eastern Zambia", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 3 (1977), pp. 129-155.

CHAPTER TWO

“The *Bakgomong* – People of the Cow”: Ngwato Pastoralist Expansion and the Rise of the Babirwa’s Bovine Worldview, 1850-1893

Introduction

“*Ee kgomo* (yes cow)”! goes the Babirwa’s acknowledgement of a greeting. The Babirwa praise each other as *kgomo*, referring to their totem, the buffalo, which to them is *kgomo ya naga*, “a wild cow.” This praise phrase has roots in the Babirwa’s adoption of cattle during the second half of the nineteenth century. The assimilation of cattle led to a symbolic shift in their previously wilderness based identity of the *Banareng* (people of the buffalo) to one of domesticity as the *Bakgomong* (people of the cow).¹³¹ In 1850, *Kgosi* Sekgoma of the Bangwato deployed a *mophato*, age-regiment, to conquer the Babirwa of Makhura who occupied the area between the Motloutse and Shashe watersheds (see map 1).¹³² The objective of this military campaign was to expand Ngwato pastoral lands into the Shashe-Motloutse confluence. However, this mission failed as Makhura’s people resisted and repelled the attacks.¹³³

Having failed to conquer and subjugate the Babirwa, the Bangwato later approached the Babirwa peacefully, asking for *mahudiso*, or grazing pasture, and promising to loan them cattle.¹³⁴ This strategy worked well because by 1863 the inner frontier of the Bangwato state was extended into Babirwa territory through the expansion

¹³¹ Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema and headmen of arbitration, Onketetse Serumola and Adam Masilo, Bobonong, February 9, 2011.

¹³² By this time, the Babirwa had populated the entire Shashe and Limpopo watersheds, including the Shashe-Motloutse confluence. E.C. Tabler, *The Far Interior* (Cape Town: A.A. Balkema, 1955), pp. 26-31.

¹³³ Isaac Schapera, *Praise Poems of the Tswana Chiefs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 26.

¹³⁴ Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema and headmen of arbitration, Onketetse Serumola and Adam Masilo, Bobonong, February 9, 2011.

of cattle posts, *meraka* (sin. *moraka*).¹³⁵ The expansion of Ngwato territory into the Shashe-Motloutse confluence produced a political frontier zone between the Bangwato and the Ndebele in present-day Zimbabwe as the two superpowers of the region laid claim to this coveted territory.¹³⁶ Subsequently the Bangwato and the Ndebele went to war at the end of 1863, which the Bangwato won.¹³⁷ The Bangwato's triumph probably induced the Babirwa of Makhura to accept Ngwato cattle especially since other weaker groups in the area, such as the Kalanga, had already sought Ngwato protection against the Ndebele.¹³⁸ Although the arrival of the Bangwato herds was to usher in a period of gradual incorporation of the Babirwa into the Bangwato state, these cattle became crucial in the production of an agro-pastoral identity in an area where crop production and sheep and goat herding had been the primary ways of life.

This chapter explores the rise of a bovine worldview among the Babirwa from the late 1850s until 1894 when the colonial landscape began to disrupt the Babirwa's pastoralist prosperity and exposed them to the vagaries of ecological stresses. A worldview is a set of lenses, which alter the way we perceive the world around us. Our worldview is formed by our education, our upbringing, external influences and the culture in which we live. Following cultural anthropologists' influential theories on Southern African bovine cultures, I define bovine worldview as a universe in which people use cattle to shape and their social worlds, including, but by no means limited to,

¹³⁵ Neil Parsons, "Settlement in East-central Botswana, circa 1800-1920", in R. Renee Hitchcock and Mary R. Smith (eds.), *Proceedings on the Symposium on Settlement in Botswana: The Historical Development of a Human Landscape, 4th-8th August 1980* (Gaborone: Botswana Society, 1982), p. 119.

¹³⁶ John Mackenzie, *Ten Years North of the Orange River* (Edinburgh: Edmonson and Douglas, 1871), pp. 360-361.

¹³⁷ John Mackenzie, *Ten Years*, pp. 360-361.

¹³⁸ John Mackenzie, *Ten Years*, p. 358.

culturescapes and socio-economic and political cartographies.¹³⁹ This ideology of cattle as the symbolic and material glue that produces social cohesion and reproduces socio-economic and political relationships constitutes the epicenter of life and power struggles in Southern African livestock herding communities.¹⁴⁰ It is within this cattle-shaped universe that the Babirwa transformed from being the *Banareng*, “people of the buffalo” to being the *Bakgomong*, “people of the cow.”

The Babirwa’s bovine worldview rested on the idea that ethnic identity is a cultural ideology that equates cattle with total wellbeing; cattle as the nurturers of both the spiritual, socio-cultural and the mundane worlds. Because of their dependence on cattle for their everyday livelihood, cattle imagery dominated their language in idioms, proverbs and speech. Cattle represent a concrete expression of the Babirwa wealth. They are central to such ceremonies and rituals as funerals, weddings, and ancestor worship. This dominant role of cattle also has a material background in that the Babirwa depend on them for almost everything from birth to death. Cattle, for instance, are used for bridewealth exchanges, meat, milk, draft power, propitiation of ancestral spirits and burials. The Sebirwa words for cow and cattle, *kgomo* and *dikgomo*, literally dominate Babirwa language and interaction in their life. The Babirwa praise each other as *kgomo*, a symbolic gesture that has remained central to language idioms and speech since the second half of the 19th century. Hence the praise phrase, *ee kgomo*, yes cow, continues to shape social relations to date. This explains the adoption of the symbolic identity, “Bakgomong” or people of the cow.

¹³⁹ See for example, John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, “Goodly Beasts, Bestly Goods: Cattle and Commodities in a South African Context”, *American Ethnologist*, vol. 17, no. 2 (1990), pp. 195-216; Ferguson, James, “The Bovine Mystique: Power, Property and Livestock in Rural Lesotho”, *Man*, New Series, vol. 20, no. 4 (1985), pp. 647-674.

¹⁴⁰ James Ferguson, “The Bovine Mystique”, pp. 647-674.

This chapter argues that the Babirwa acquired cattle for the first time from Bangwato in the second half of the nineteenth century and used them to build a pastoralist ethnic identity. My primary objective is to not reify the Bangwato influence on the construction of the Babirwa's pastoralist ethnicity. Rather, I show that the Babirwa organically shaped their identity by adapting Bangwato cattle herding cultures to create a sense of being Babirwa within Bangwato hegemony. Ethnic identity is a complex and dynamic set of symbolic meanings embedded in and patterned by history. The meanings of ethnicities change over time and differ according to historical circumstances.¹⁴¹ In this particular historical circumstance of the transformation in the Babirwa's ethnic identity, their incorporation of foreigners' cattle transformed livelihoods and produced new material and symbolic meanings as well as social identities. I challenge classic works, which visualized African concepts of cattle ownership almost exclusively in religious and cultural terms and therefore admonished Africans for purportedly personifying and mystifying their cattle.¹⁴² I also challenge materialist narratives for representing Southern African cattle exclusively as instruments of resisting western capitalist encroachment, thus obscuring the socio-cultural role the cattle played in these societies.¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ Allen F. Isaacman and Barbara S. Isaacman, *Slavery and Beyond: The Making of Men and Chikunda Ethnic Identities in the Unstable World of South-Central Africa, 1750-1920* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004).

¹⁴² With their ideas of the "cattle complex", the "bovine culture," and "wives for cattle" respectively, Herskovits, Schapera and Kuper argued that African cattle were raised primarily for the supplication of deities and for bridewealth transactions. Isaac Schapera, "Economic Change in South African Native Life", *Africa*, vol. 1 (1928), pp. 170-188; Isaac Schapera, *Married Life in an African Tribe* (London: Faber and Faber, 1940), pp. 116-126; Hoyt Alverson, *Mind in the Heart of Darkness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), p. 124; M. Herskovitz, "The Cattle Complex of East Africa", *American Anthropologist*, vol. xxviii (1926), pp. 230-72; Adam Kuper, *Wives for Cattle* (London & Boston: Routledge & Keagan Paul, 1982).

¹⁴³ James Ferguson's "bovine mystique," for instance, offers a linear model of the money-cattle exchange pattern in which Africans readily converted their wages into cattle but resisted any attempts to get them to sell their cattle for cash. James Ferguson, "The Bovine Mystique", pp. 647-674. See also Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, "How Beasts Lost Their Legs": Cattle in Tswana Economy and Society", in John G.

The two bodies of scholarship, however, converge on two fronts. First, that the economic value of cattle keeping should be placed above their cultural value. Secondly, that the use of cattle for cultural practices and Africans' perceived hostility to capitalist development were influenced by timeless traditions, which could easily be displaced by western notions of commercialized cattle production. Isaac Schapera and Jean and John Comaroff, in particular, proposed a modernist approach to the study of cattle in African society whereby the keeping of cattle should be interpreted as entirely market oriented. I challenge these narratives by arguing that cattle keeping among the Babirwa was a historical process driven by peoples' ability to use their landscapes to innovate new sources of power and as such adapt to changing socio-economic and environmental processes.

Tracing the history of the Babirwa beyond the mid-nineteenth century is difficult because of inherently limited oral and written sources. The available European documentary sources, such as travellers and missionary narratives do not specifically talk about the Babirwa and other smaller less centralized Southern African communities. Rather, they focus on the economic and political exploits of the larger states of the Bangwato and the Ndebele.¹⁴⁴ While oral sources would be the most accurate texts in reconstructing the pre-1850 pasts of the Babirwa, personal recollections are fragmented because of the length of time between the time such histories were made and that of my field research. The present inadequacies of the Babirwa's oral histories are also caused by

Galatay and Pierre Bonte (eds.), *Herders, Warriors and Traders: Pastoralism in Africa* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), pp. 33-61.

¹⁴⁴ See for example, Gordon Cumming, *Five Year's of a Hunter's Life in the Far Interior of South Africa* (London: John Murray, 1851); William Burchell, *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, 1822-1824); Frederick Elton, "Journal of an exploration of the Limpopo River", *Journal of the Royal Geographic Society*, vol. 42 (1873), pp. 1-48; David Livingstone, *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1858).

their predecessors' frequent migrations. This made it very difficult for people to remember exactly where certain changes about their pasts took place. Nonetheless, I start this chapter by giving a brief overview of the Babirwa before 1850. The object here is to show that prior to the advent of Ngwato herds into Bobirwa (land of the Babirwa), the Babirwa were less centralized politically autonomous groups whose identities were shaped by migrations, hunting, goat and sheep herding and agriculture.

From 1850, the Babirwa accepted gifts of cattle from the Bangwato and became clients of the Bangwato cattlemen. Although they remained scattered, this patron-client relationship helped the Babirwa to build herds of their own and produce a pastoralist ethnic identity. The discussion of this pastoralist ethnicity, spanning the second half of the nineteenth century, examines the manner in which cattle shaped the Babirwa's ways of life and produced social identities; gender, class and generation. Herding and cattle ownership were gendered processes, which produced masculinities. Men were made at those spaces beyond human settlements called the cattle posts. It is where young men were initiated into adulthood through their acquisition of herd management knowledge and skills. Class and gender also overlapped. Ownership of cattle was both a gendered and class phenomenon whereby men without cattle were relegated to the social position of boys whose duty was to herd the cattle of the wealthy cattlemen. Women's role as an autonomous productive force, tilling the land to feed their households, including herders, shaped an agro-pastoral identity.

Men, young men and boys gained power over nature as cattle herders, while women benefitted from the same environment through crop production and other creative strategies, embodying the spirits of lions, with which they threatened to divest men of

their cattle in order to have access to herd management and disposal. By hosting the hostile spirits of nature, these women were able to contribute to the taming of the wilderness, ensuring that the predation on cattle was controlled. It was from these gendered and class relationships that a bovine worldview was shaped.

“The *Banareng* – People of the Buffalo”: The Babirwa Before 1850

The ethnic label, “Babirwa”, historically connoted disparate groups of people who were scattered all over the Limpopo and Shashe watersheds during the nineteenth century.¹⁴⁵

These clusters of politically autonomous groups shared a language related to the Sotho-Tswana group of languages. Sebirwa, as the Babirwa language is called, gradually borrowed elements from other languages in the region, such as Shona, Kalanga and Ngwato languages, during the course of the nineteenth century.¹⁴⁶ These hitherto disintegrated groups became resettled into a centralized locality, today called Bobirwa, during the formative years of colonial rule when colonial administrators were trying to consolidate homogenous, identifiable and locatable, and therefore governable, ‘ethnic’ groups.¹⁴⁷

The history of the Babirwa of the Shashe-Limpopo basin in eastern Botswana before 1850 is, however, murky primarily because of lack of substantial evidence. Along with lack of documentary material, fragmented oral sources obfuscate the Babirwa’s pre-1850 history. Nonetheless, there are certain aspects of the Babirwa’s early nineteenth

¹⁴⁵ E.O.J. Westpal, “Notes on the Babirwa”, *Botswana Notes and Records*, vol. 7 (1975), pp. 191-192

¹⁴⁶ A. Chebanne, “The Sebirwa Language: a Synchronic and Diachronic Account”, *Pula: Botswana Journal of African Studies*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2000), pp. 186-195.

¹⁴⁷ Isaac Schapera, “The Political Organization of the Ngwato of the Bechuanaland Protectorate”, in M. Fortes and E.E. Evans-Pritchard (eds.), *African Political Systems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940), p. 61.

century histories, which are worth mentioning. Three are germane to my study. First, the hitherto politically autonomous Sebirwa-speaking groups kept flocks of sheep and goats, and no cattle; second, they were fragmented and politically distinctive communities without a hegemonic authority; and third, each polity had the *nare*, buffalo, as its totem, *sereto*.

The Babirwa's disinclination to keep herds of cattle had more of an ecological explanation. The forests on the riverbanks in the Shashe-Limpopo area provided a suitable habitat for the breeding of the tsetse fly and for much of the first half of the nineteenth century, the expansion and withdrawal of the fly belts was a recurrent phenomenon.¹⁴⁸ The low-lying areas of the Limpopo valley therefore provided inadequate grazing land for raising cattle because of tsetse infestation.¹⁴⁹ This fly belt extended from western Zimbabwe to the Bangwato territory, west of the Limpopo River, in central Botswana,¹⁵⁰ making *trypanosomiasis* endemic in the Shashe-Limpopo watershed.¹⁵¹ *Trypanosomiasis*, a disease the Babirwa called *kotselo*, or "dozing off", because of its tendency to curtail its victims' alertness, "is an infectious disease of humans and animals of similar aetiology and epidemiology...transmitted by the bite of tsetse fly."¹⁵² The vastness of the fly belt in the low-lying areas of the Limpopo and the Zambezi valley therefore made the region between western Zimbabwe and eastern Botswana unsuitable for cattle raising.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁸ John Ford, *The Role of Trypanosomiasis in the African Ecology: a Study of the Tsetse Fly Problem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 283-301.

¹⁴⁹ John Ford, *The Role of Trypanosomiasis*.

¹⁵⁰ John Mackenzie, *Ten Years*, p. 367.

¹⁵¹ John Ford, *The Role of Trypanosomiasis in the African Ecology*, pp. 283-301.

¹⁵² Dietmar Steverding, "The History of African Trypanosomiasis", *Parasites and Vectors*, vol. 1, no. 3 (2008), p. 1.

¹⁵³ John Ford, *The Role of Trypanosomiasis*

But the Babirwa survived these tsetse fly ecologies by interacting with them in complex and nuanced ways that minimized the threat of disease on their lives. Most importantly, they built a frontier relationship with this unstable environment, both harsh with disease and drought and plentifully endowed with wild animals. In this frontier relationship, interaction with the wild animal ecology made hunting an important activity to the Babirwa's lifeway.¹⁵⁴ Located in the proximity of human settlements, tsetse fly habitats were also an integral part of the human ecology because they constituted people's foraging and agro-pastoralist grounds, where crop cultivation was done and animals grazed.¹⁵⁵ Together with hunting, these productive activities established a measure of equilibrium between humans and this disease prone environment as the Babirwa and their flocks of sheep and goats were in regular but controlled contact with the tsetse flies. This minimal exposure enabled their bodies to "get used to disease", or develop a certain degree of immunity.¹⁵⁶

Writing about indigenous control of disease vectors in the East African Serengeti region, social historian Jan Shetler has demonstrated that regular but limited contact with the tsetse flies exposed the bodies of people and livestock to the pathogens thus developing their immunity.¹⁵⁷ The Babirwa's livestock comprised predominantly flocks of sheep and goats, all of which are browsers. As a result, these browsers, together with

¹⁵⁴ For indigenous knowledge about the tsetse fly in Botswana, see Maitseo M.M. Bolaane, "Tsetse and Trypanosomosis Control in the Okavango Delta, c. 1930-1970", *South African Historical Journal* vol. 58 (2007), pp. 91-116. As browsers, sheep and goats have the potential to develop immunity to *trypanosomiasis* better than cattle because they penetrate thickets of bush and thus maintain regular but limited contact with the flies. See Jan Bender Shetler, *Imagining Serengeti: A History of Landscape Memory In Tanzania from Earliest Times to the Present* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007), pp. 37-38.

¹⁵⁵ Interview with, *ngaka* Sekonopo, Mahalapye, August 22, 2011. A *ngaka* is a "traditional" medical specialist-cum-diviner.

¹⁵⁶ Interview with Ngaka Sekonopo, Mahalapye, August 22, 2013; Ngaka Sephetso, Tsetsebjwe, August 1, 2011.

¹⁵⁷ Jan Bender Shetler, *Imagining Serengeti*, p. 37-38.

their herdboys, exposed themselves to the vectors by penetrating thickets of bush, which also formed part of the tsetse fly habitats. Women acquired immunity to *kotselo* by cultivating lands connected to the tsetse fly habitats while the men's bodies became conditioned to the pathogens as they entered and retreated from the infested forests as hunters.¹⁵⁸ Browsing and cultivation also reduced the thickness of the bush thus pushing the tsetse fly habitats further away from human settlements. Thus, managed exposure to the bites of the flies rather than their eradication produced a frontier relationship between people and this harsh environment of disease. In a nutshell, the co-variation of pockets of tsetse fly habitats with human settlements produced a certain degree of equilibrium between the flies and the local peoples.¹⁵⁹

Other than this socio-ecological history, the Babirwa, despite being less centralized, did have political entities. From the late 1830s, they lived in small groups scattered all over the Shashe-Limpopo confluence.¹⁶⁰ Botswana historian, Neil Parsons, who has been criticized for arguing that the Babirwa may have originated in Zimbabwe,¹⁶¹ acknowledges that their origins are complicated and mystified by their multiplication into politically distinct groups and their constant movements as they crossed and re-crossed the Shashe-Limpopo watersheds until the latter half of the

¹⁵⁸ Interview with *ngaka* Sekonopo, Mahalapye, August 22, 2011.

¹⁵⁹ John Ford, *The Role of Trypanosomiasis*, p. 283.

¹⁶⁰ A 1985 Bachelor of Arts research essay, which focused on the Babirwa migrations and their early political encounter with the Bangwato, listed the various Babirwa groups as follows: Sekoba at Majweng Hills; Bolamba in present day Tuli Block at a place called Zembefonyi near the present day Lentswe-le-Moriti; Maunatlala in Lepokole Hills in the northern part of Bobonong; Serumola at Lephale Hills in the Tuli Block; Makala east of Mapungubwe; Kgwadalala and Mbalane settled on the hill called Lekhubu-la-Mbalane in the vicinity of the present day Semolale. G.B. Molelu, "The History of the Babirwa from Pre-colonial Times to Early Ngwato Rule, 1820-1926" (BA thesis, University of Botswana, 1985), pp. 5-6.

¹⁶¹ Rebutting suggestions that Babirwa may have originated in Zimbabwe, Chebanne points out that "[the] Shona lexical content in Sebirwa (Babirwa language) has a socio-linguistic explanation, that at a certain stage in history, falling within the Shona cultural and political influence, it borrowed these vocabulary items." A. Chebanne, "The Sebirwa Language: a Synchronic and Diachronic Account", *Pula: Botswana Journal of African Studies*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2000), p. 194.

nineteenth century.¹⁶² Parsons' also argues that the Babirwa's totem, the buffalo, was an important marker of their political identity. This idea raises an important question about the overlap between political organization and totemic affiliation in pre-colonial Southern Africa and how this relationship became reshaped in colonial and post-colonial times. Whereas in precolonial times the different Sebirwa speaking groups had only the buffalo as their totem, people who identify themselves as the Babirwa today have as their totems different objects, all of which are animals, such as buffalo, lion, duiker, elephant, wild pig and many others.¹⁶³ This totemic diversity is a result of the colonial project of centralizing formerly disparate groups of people under the rubric of tribes during the twentieth century.¹⁶⁴

Oral traditions about the origins of the Babirwa state that the Babirwa migrated from somewhere in the south before settling in a place called Nareng (lit. place of the buffalo) in the Phalaborwa (lit. better than the south) region of the Transvaal, South Africa.¹⁶⁵ The people who settled at Phalaborwa are said to have been migrants from the south. They settled in Phalaborwa because of its mineral wealth, relative peace and wildlife abundance.¹⁶⁶ Perhaps it is the economic prosperity and relative political stability of this area that made it "better than the south" and therefore earned it the name, Phalaborwa. Before settling in the Transvaal, no one knows what the Babirwa's totem(s)

¹⁶² Neil Parsons, "On the Origins of the bamaNgwato", *Botswana Notes and Records*, vol. 5 (1973), pp. 90-91.

¹⁶³ Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema and headmen of arbitration, Onketetse Serumola and Adam Masilo, Bobonong, February 9, 2013.

¹⁶⁴ Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema and headmen of arbitration, Onketetse Serumola and Adam Masilo, Bobonong, February 9, 2011. I discuss the incorporation of the Babirwa and other ethnicities into the Bangwato Tribal Reserve in the next chapter.

¹⁶⁵ E.J. Krige, *The Realm of the Rain-Queen* (London: Oxford University Press, 1943), p. 302.

¹⁶⁶ The Babirwa of present Bobirwa in Botswana claim that their ancestors were copper miners. Evidence for the copper mining economy of the Babirwa is found in the vernacular name for copper, which is called *tshipi e khibidu* or red metal. Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema and headmen of arbitration, Onketetse Serumola and Adam Masilo, Bobonong, February 9, 2011.

was. But according to a famous Babirwa praise poem of Nareng, this place was habitat to large populations of buffalo. The poem goes:

Nareng, small one of mother-buffalo-are- plentiful
Nareng is not big. It is encompassed by one hand
But it feeds its children
Nareng, country of hunters.

The large populations of buffaloes in the northern Transvaal and the entire Limpopo Valley were written about by several European hunters during the second half of the nineteenth century.¹⁶⁷ It appears likely therefore that the Babirwa adopted the totemic identity, “*Banareng*” or “people of the buffalo”, in Nareng, which is said to have derived its name from the abundance of the buffalo that roamed its plains at the time.¹⁶⁸

To the Babirwa, paying homage to the buffalo was the essence of creed. That is, the reverence of the Babirwa’s totem shaped their political and socio-cultural beliefs. As a result, even outsiders who entered the Babirwa groups through marriage, political subjugation or economic need, had to forgo their primary totems and adopt the buffalo, as their secondary totem, in order to be accepted as the Babirwa proper.¹⁶⁹ This process of discarding their original (primary) totems and replacing them with new ones (or secondary totems) for survival is a reflection of people’s ability to adapt to changing social and ecological landscapes and it is evidence of the contingency of the totem as a marker of ethnicity.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁷ Among others, see Gordon Cumming, *Five Year’s of a Hunter’s Life*; Frederick Selous, *African Nature Notes and Reminiscences* (London: Macmillan, 1908), pp. 46 and 151-152.

¹⁶⁸ Interview with Bathaloganyi Phuthago Molosiwa, Mogapi, December 26, 2010; Moagi Motsumi, Molaladau, February 5, 2011; Mooketsi Maunatala, Bobonong, February 6, 2011.

¹⁶⁹ Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema and headmen of arbitration, Onketetse Serumola and Adam Masilo, Bobonong, February 9, 2011.

¹⁷⁰ E.O. Erim, “Cultural Totemism”

An example from present day Bobirwa that demonstrates the historical process of one foreign group of people resigning its totem and adopting the Babirwa's totem was that of the Bahanwana who resettled among the Babirwa following their flight from Boer control in the Transvaal.¹⁷¹ Malebogo Kgakgathi from the village of Mabolwe, who claims to be heir to the Bahanwana throne, explained to me that when his people arrived in the Babirwa country they had as their totem the baboon. But they lost a sense of their totemic identity and adopted the *nare* as they gradually intermarried with the Babirwa.¹⁷² Thus, the process of cultural interaction that eventually produced a Babirwa ethnicity led to some of the Bahanwana adopting the *nare* as their secondary totem.

The foregoing example speaks to the multi-layered nature of ethnic identity production. As Joane Nagel eruditely notes, "ethnic identity is a dialectical process involving internal and external opinions and processes, as well as the individual's self-identification and outsiders' ethnic designations."¹⁷³ It is a negotiated and problematic process, which is mediated by changes in economic and political circumstances across time and space. A combination of the geopolitics of colonial rule, the Bahanwana's perilous minority location and the Babirwa's conceptualization of a totem as a symbol of ethnic identity therefore necessitated the Bahanwana's adoption of the buffalo as their secondary totem.

The adoption of new totems was part of the fundamental relationship between the Babirwa and their environments in Nareng. This relationship was at the level of production, which, as environmental historian Nancy Jacobs demonstrates of South

¹⁷¹ Neil Parsons, "Settlement in East-central Botswana", p. 122.

¹⁷² Interview with Malebogo Kgakgathi, Bobonong, February 10, 2011.

¹⁷³ Joane Nagel, "Constructing Ethnicity: Creating and Recreating Ethnic Identity and Culture", *Social Problems*, vol. 41, no. 1 (1994), p. 154 .

Africa, influenced the ways in which they adopted the new social identity of being the *Banareng*.¹⁷⁴ Production here refers to the multiple ways in which people exploit the biophysical environment to provide for their subsistence needs, such as farming, hunting and foraging. During their stay in Nareng, the Babirwa lived a life of hunting, foraging and crop production, and buffalo meat was a fundamental component of their diet. The multiple ways in which people interacted with their environments to accomplish each of these activities shaped the Babirwa's social identities of class, gender, age and generation. Young men were the primary hunters; the chiefs extracted tribute from hunters in the form of meat and skins; the *dingaka* (herbalists and diviners), who doctored the hunters for protection and success, accumulated wealth by demanding payment in trophies, such as animal skins and horns; while women provided subsistence to the hunters. But hunting seems to have profoundly transformed the Babirwa's totemic identity. Two Babirwa men interviewed by former South African ethnologist, Van Warmelo, in the Transvaal in 1939 told him that despite revering the buffalo as their totem, the Babirwa ate its meat because it was a bovine like cattle:

Despite this, we eat it, because the men of old perceived that they could not abstain from the flesh of the buffalo, as it was a bovine, and therefore thought it better to choose something to take its place. So they chose the pigeon to replace the buffalo.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ Nancy Jacobs, *Environment, Power, and Injustice: A South African History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

¹⁷⁵ Nakedi Mohwasa and Mokgethi Rakgati, "The Babirwa of Tauyatswala", in N.J. van Warmelo, *Die Tlokwa En Birwa*, pp. 44-46.

Oral accounts in present day Bobirwa also support the claim that despite having the buffalo as their totem, the Babirwa hunted buffalo and subsisted on its meat.¹⁷⁶ In fact, to date the Babirwa still consider buffaloes to be *dikgomo tsa naga* (wild cattle).¹⁷⁷ Hence, with the adoption of cattle herding, the material and symbolic representation of the buffalo in the ways of life of the Babirwa became domesticated. The fact that the Babirwa today praise themselves as the *Bakgomong* speaks to their continued reverence of the buffalo rather than renunciation and abandonment of their original totem.

The Babirwa's consumption of meat of an animal so held in such reverence is an indication of their unique understanding of the intersection between nature and cultural knowledge in Southern Africa. Their understanding of taboo as *moila*, or "that which must be avoided" and totem as *sereto*, or "that which is revered because it holds society together", reflects their adaptability to social and ecological change.¹⁷⁸ In other Southern African communities where totemic consciousness is imbedded in discourses of self-identity, the boundary between totem and taboo is so fluid that people avoid any form of contact with their totems.¹⁷⁹ With the buffalo doubling as a totem and a source of sustenance, the Babirwa constructed a taboo different from their totem, adopted the grey

¹⁷⁶ Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema, Bobonong, February 9, 2011; Gabatshabe Baipidi, Mogapi, December 25, 2010; Mbat Mashaba, Molaladau, July 15, 2011.

¹⁷⁷ Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema, Bobonong, February 9, 2011; Gabatshabe Baipidi, Mogapi, December 25, 2010; Mbat Mashaba, Molaladau, July 15, 2011. In an unrelated case, hunter Frederick Selous, made interesting observations about the way local peoples in the Zambezi-Limpopo Valley conceptualized the buffalo. While hunting between 1872 and 1886, Selous noted that "African buffaloes are, after all, nothing but wild cattle," and he relates how "my Matabele (sic.) boys used frequently to speak of [buffaloes] as *Izinkomo ka M'limo* (God's cattle) Frederick Selous, *African Nature Notes and Reminiscences* (London: Macmillan, 1908), pp. 46 and 151-152.

¹⁷⁸ Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema and headman of arbitration, Adam Masilo, Bobonong, February 9, 2011.

¹⁷⁹ John L. Comaroff, "Of Totemism and Ethnicity: Consciousness, Practice and the Signs of Inequality", in Roy R. Grinker and Christopher L. Steiner (eds.), *Perspectives on Africa: A Reader in Culture, History, and Representation* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 69-85.

pigeon or dove as a substitute *moila* or taboo.¹⁸⁰ The Babirwa's construction of the pigeon as taboo independent of their totem was also confirmed by a former colonial South African ethnologist's informants in the Transvaal in 1953:

If we [Babirwa] touch or eat a pigeon, we get boils or slough our skins....
If we marry a woman who may eat the pigeon, she henceforth avoids it also on account of our taboo. For we are afraid of begetting imbeciles in the tribe.”¹⁸¹

These informants also indicated that their forefathers had warned them that should they flout social custom and eat the pigeon, they “would die of epilepsy.”¹⁸²

Even today the Babirwa elders continue to teach their children that eating the pigeon is a taboo. My siblings and I grew up being taught by our grandmother that eating the pigeon would not only afflict us with the dreaded *dikoto*, seizures or epilepsy, but it would also turn us into *madhela* (sin. *ledhela*), imbeciles, and we would, in turn, beget *madhela*. We also learned that our children and their children would also beget *madhela*, thus “spoiling” our lineage and transforming the Babirwa into a community of *madhela*. My grandmother's warning imbedded a strong consciousness of our *leeba* taboo, the severe consequences of breaking the food taboo, and a direct link between the meaning of our family's practices and the rituals of our greater Babirwa community.

As historian/anthropologist, Steven Feierman, demonstrates of Tanzania, enlarging traditions to negotiate emerging social transformations does not necessarily

¹⁸⁰ Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema and headman of arbitration, Adam Masilo, Bobonong, February 9, 2011.

¹⁸¹ Nakedi Mohwasa and Mokgethi Rakgati, “The Babirwa of Tauyatswala”, in N.J. van Warmelo, *Die Tlokwa En Birwa Van Noord Transvaal*. Ethnological Publications, vol. 29 (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1953), p. 45.

¹⁸² Nakedi Mohwasa and Mokgethi Rakgati, “The Babirwa of Tauyatswala”, pp. 44-45.

reflect a society's romantic nostalgia for its pasts.¹⁸³ Rather, it is a society's way of bringing the past into the present. The Babirwa's continued observance of pre-colonial taboos is a way of maintaining their identity within the broader context of a homogenizing Tswana national culture in today's Botswana. As my grandmother's instructive telling of the *leeba* taboo also demonstrates, traditions connected local, familial contexts to our sense of belonging to a greater Babirwa community.

Oral traditions show that the strict adherence to the *nare* as a totem continued only until the Babirwa split into small groups. Such splits are blamed on one heir who relinquished his right to the throne because of cowardice. In my conversations with heirs to the thrones of some of the Babirwa groups that immigrated into eastern Botswana in the nineteenth century, I learned about the legend of one Motshabi.¹⁸⁴ Legend associated with this would-be chief tells us that he refused to be crowned with the insignia of chieftainship because he feared meeting with his *badimo*, spirits of his ancestors. According to rites customary in the installation of a new chief, the heir had to prove his bravery by meeting face to face with the departed chiefs, who manifested themselves in the shape of snakes. But this man got scared and ran away, and consequently being called Motshabi, or "Fearful", because he feared his birthright as a chief. This lack of courage by Motshabi is said to have caused the decline of the Babirwa nation as people despised him and refused to acknowledge his authority. The result was the disintegration of the Babirwa and the emergence of autonomous polities, which were to become part of a

¹⁸³ Steven Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).

¹⁸⁴ Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema; and headmen of arbitration, Onketetse Serumola and Adam Masilo, Bobonong, February 9, 2011. These men are currently embroiled in the ongoing Babirwa chieftanship conflict, which is proving difficult to resolve because the Babirwa came to Botswana as distinctive polities. Recently, government instituted a commission of inquiry to address this conflict and ascertain the rightful heir to the Babirwa throne. The commission is still to report back. But indications are that no solution will be found in the foreseeable future.

multi-ethnic frontier (explained below) on the Shashe-Limpopo confluence during the first half of the nineteenth century.¹⁸⁵

During the early years of the nineteenth century, the area on the confluence of the Shashe and Limpopo Rivers was experiencing an influx of diverse ethnic groups, most notably the Venda, Sotho and Ndebele groups from the northern Transvaal who were fleeing from the *mfecane* wars in the south, the causes of which have been the subject of various interpretations in Southern Africa's fierce historiographical debates.¹⁸⁶ This demographic shift added greater complexity to the already dynamic multi-ethnic population due to various encounters and forms of contact between the new arrivals and the already established groups in the region. The motley collection of ethnicities in turn necessitated economic, political and cultural interaction between the groups in a variety of ways, resulting in the production of autonomous¹⁸⁷ yet overlapping and malleable ethnic identities.¹⁸⁸

These overlapping ethnicities therefore produced a scattered, but flexible multi-ethnic frontier,¹⁸⁹ a frontier that has been confused for an ethnically homogenous space

¹⁸⁵ Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema; and headmen of arbitration, Onketetse Serumola and Adam Masilo, Bobonong, February 9, 2011; Gabatshabe Baipidi, Mogapi, December 25, 2010.

¹⁸⁶ The *mfecane* has been described as a period of disturbances, which occurred during the first half of the nineteenth century. Existing scholarship attributes this violence to multiple causes, among others, the rise of the Zulu military kingdom, ecological imbalance and European expansionism, and labor and slave-raiding activities from the Cape in the South and from Delagoa Bay in the North. See contributions in Carolyn Hamilton (ed.), *The Mfecane Aftermath: Reconstructive Debates in Southern African History* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1995); J.D. Omer-Cooper, *The Zulu Aftermath: a Nineteenth Century Revolution in Bantu Africa* (London: Longmans, 1966); Julian Cobbing, "The Mfecane as Alibi: Thoughts on Dithakong and Mbolompo", *Journal of African History*, vol. 29 (1988), pp. 487-519.

¹⁸⁷ Despite competition for natural resources, such as pastureland and hunting grounds, most of these communities were able to maintain relative autonomy for almost the entire nineteenth century. See Frederick J. Elton, 'Journal of an exploration of the Limpopo River', *Journal of the Royal Geographic Society*, vol. 42 (1872), pp. 1-48.

¹⁸⁸ Per Zachrisson, *Hunting for Development: People, Land and Wildlife in Southern Zimbabwe* (Goteborg University: Department of Social Anthropology, 2004), p. 32.

¹⁸⁹ Gordon Cumming, *Five Year's of a Hunter's Life in the Far Interior of South Africa* (London: John Murray, 1851); William Burchell, *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, 1822-1824); Frederick Elton, "Journal of an exploration of the Limpopo River", *Journal of the Royal*

by Zimbabwean historian, David Beach.¹⁹⁰ The theory of a homogenous pre-nineteenth century Bantu society in Southern Africa, as advanced by Beach, is flawed because it does not take into account the multiple arenas in which these people imagined and shaped their identities. Talking about the peoples of the northern Transvaal, which forms part of the Limpopo region, J.D. Krige observed in 1937 that the Sotho, for example, were very heterogeneous despite colonial efforts to map people into mutable political identities or tribes.¹⁹¹

Krige's idea of the continued fluidity of ethnic identities within a rigidified colonial landscape resonates with my argument that pre-colonial Africans were not ethnically homogenous, but were differentiated peoples tied to overlapping and fluid ethnic identities and geographic spaces; and that Africans imagined, articulated and reworked their ethnic identities across the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial temporal spaces.¹⁹² I show that pre-colonial Babirwa identities were continually being reworked because of interaction with other peoples.

The Babirwa of present day Botswana are believed to have arrived in the Shashe-Limpopo frontier space around the 1830s from present day Zimbabwe where they had

Geographic Society, vol. 42 (1873), pp. 1-48; David Livingstone, *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1858).

¹⁹⁰ David Beach, *Zimbabwe Before 1900* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1990), pp. 67-68.

¹⁹¹ J.D. Krige, "Traditional Origins and Tribal Relationships of the Sotho of the Northern Transvaal", *Bantu Studies* (1937), p. 27.

¹⁹² For Botswana, see Diana Wylie, *A Little God: The Twilight of Patriarchy in a Southern African Chiefdom* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), pp. 18-62); Pnina Motzafi-Haller, "Historical Narratives as Political Discourses of Identity", *Journal of Southern Africa Studies*, vol. 20, no. 3. Special Issue: Ethnicity and Identity in Southern Africa (1994), pp. 417-431. For other African areas, see David Lee Schoenbrun, *A Green Place, A Good Place: Agrarian Change, Gender, and Social Identity in the Great Lakes Region to the 15th Century* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann; Kampala: Fountain; Nairobi: EAEP; Oxford: James Currey, 1998); Allen F. Isaacman and Barbara S. Isaacman, *Slavery and Beyond: The Making of Men and Chikunda Ethnic Identities in the Unstable World of South-Central Africa, 1750-1920* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004).

been subject to the rule of Mambo kings in Khami.¹⁹³ Their entrance of present Botswana from Zimbabwe may have been the reason why Parsons thought that they originated in Zimbabwe.¹⁹⁴ The first group of the Babirwa to arrive in this region were the Babirwa of Kgosi Makhura who occupied the Shashe-Motloutse confluence.¹⁹⁵ On arrival, the group split into various autonomous polities, which interacted with the already established groups of the Basarwa, to whom colonial anthropologists and authorities were later to assign the pejorative and misleadingly homogenous pan-ethnic label, *Bushmen*.¹⁹⁶ They also intermarried with the Kalanga whom explorer, Frederick Elton, called the Makalaka in the 1870s.¹⁹⁷ Ethnographer, Westpal, has also cited the explicit Babirwa vernacular testimony of the Basarwa's pre-Babirwa occupation of the Shashe-Limpopo region, which goes thus: "*Re fithetse Masarwa (sic.) lefhatsheng la Vhovhirwa (we found the Basarwa in the land of Bobirwa).*"¹⁹⁸ These groups of the Basarwa neither reared animals nor grew crops, but traded and intermarried with the new arrivals.

This amalgamation of disparate peoples is what made the Shashe-Limpopo watershed a frontier. I define a frontier as a social and geographic space that brings together peoples of diverse life ways. According to Nancy Jacobs, frontiers become spaces of historical enquiry when they are "dynamic, when the line of contact encroaches onto one party's territory, and when people join through amalgamation or

¹⁹³ E.O.J. Westpal, "Notes on the Babirwa", *Botswana Notes and Records*, vol. 7 (1975), p. 191.

¹⁹⁴ Neil Parsons, "On the Origins", pp. 90-91.

¹⁹⁵ E.O.J. Westpal, "Notes on the Babirwa", p. 192.

¹⁹⁶ In this dissertation, I will use the Tswana nomenclature, Basarwa, which is the standard designation used in Botswana today although it also has its own linguistic history. For the colonial anthropological notion of the Bushman, see E.N. Wilmsen, *Land filled with flies: A political economy of the Kalahari* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

¹⁹⁷ Frederick Elton, "Journal of an exploration of the Limpopo River", *Journal of the Royal Geographic Society*, vol. 42 (1873), p. 5.

¹⁹⁸ E.O.J. Westpal, "Notes on the Babirwa", p. 193.

subjugation.”¹⁹⁹ The Shashe-Limpopo frontier was an area where diverse cultures, political systems, mutually (un)intelligible languages and production systems coalesced, resulting in overlapping ethnicities.

Even with the increase in population and competition for resources, the first half of the nineteenth century, however, saw no major reshuffling of people as these small polities remained autonomous of each other because they existed on the fringes of bigger and more powerful polities such as the Bangwato²⁰⁰ of present day central Botswana, the Ndebele,²⁰¹ and the emerging Boer republics in the neighboring Transvaal. But the Babirwa’s occupation of the Motloutse-Shashe confluence made them the target of the expansionist Ndebele and Bangwato who were always keen to exert their sovereign power over lands with greater potential for cattle farming. The threat of tsetsefly however, kept these two powerful groups away from the Babirwa lands.²⁰² As a result, the Babirwa maintained relative autonomy until the second half of the nineteenth century when they entered into a patron-client relationship with the Bangwato as cattle herders.

¹⁹⁹ Nancy Jacobs, *Environment, Power, and Injustice*, p. 29.

²⁰⁰ As a point of clarification on orthography, different scholars have used varying terminology to describe Bangwato. Terms such as bamaNgwato and Ngwato are predominant in missionary and colonial accounts. Most African historians have also adopted these descriptions in a number of cases. One such example is Neil Parsons, who employs the term, ‘bamaNgwato’. For purposes of clarity, I use here the term, ‘Bangwato’, which is the official terminology in present-day Botswana.

²⁰¹ The ethnic label, Ndebele, as used here refers to a group of people, whose ruling Khumalo lineage had seceded from Shaka’s all-conquering militarily powerful Zulu Kingdom and left present Natal at the height of the *Mfecane* wars. See Paul S. Landau, *The Realm of the Word: Language, Gender, and Christianity in a Southern African Kingdom* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995), p. 9.

²⁰² Neil Parsons, “On the Origins of the bamaNgwato”, p. 90.

“We Learn by Imitating Others”: Cattle Gifts, Herders and the Babirwa Pastoralist Identity

From the 1850s, the Bangwato began to expand their pastoral lands into the Shashe-Limpopo basin, particularly in the area on the confluence of the Shashe and Motloutse Rivers.²⁰³ This pastoral expansion was achieved through building patron-client relationships with the Babirwa. These relationships involved pastoral contracts whereby the Babirwa were loaned Ngwato cattle to take care of as *badisa*, herders. In return, the Babirwa herders were entitled to usufruct in the form of milk and were occasionally rewarded with a calf to build their own herd.²⁰⁴ But since the Bangwato cattlemen were absentee cattle farmers, visiting their cattle only occasionally, the Babirwa herders supplemented their irregular gifts of cattle by stealing calves from within the herds with which they were entrusted and re-farming them out to their distant relatives and friends.²⁰⁵

Other than receiving cattle gifts and stealing, the Babirwa's bovine worldview flourished because the Babirwa put into practice what is captured in their proverb: *dilo makwati di kwatobololwa mo go ba bangwe* (lit. things are barks, which are peeled from trees), or “we learn by imitating others.”²⁰⁶ Imitation is an important theme in cultural theory, particularly the significance of mimetic encounters as espoused by colonial

²⁰³ Isaac Schapera, *Praise Poems*, p. 26; Neil Parsons, “Settlement in East-central Botswana”, p. 119.

²⁰⁴ Neil Parsons, “On the Origins of the bamaNgwato”, p. 90.

²⁰⁵ By 1888, colonial authorities and missionaries were talking strongly against cattle thefts and the Bangwato's subjugation of communities in the Limpopo-Shashe confluence. BNA, HC24/2, J.S. Moffat to S.G.A. Shippard, July 26, 1888. However, due to the fact there were no colonial laws in place to deal with crime nor was there a set of laws to govern the new colony, these titular authorities had no coercive powers to take action against perpetrators. BNA, HC4/13, S.G.A. Shippard to H. Robinson, February 4, 1886.

²⁰⁶ Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema, Bobonong, February 9, 2011; Mbat Mashaba, Molaladau, July 15, 2011; Gabatshabe Baipidi, Mogapi, December 25, 2010.

encounter narratives.²⁰⁷ Since the proverb: *dilo makwati di kwatobololwa mo go ba bangwe*, falls within the realm of mimetic encounter, mimesis and alterity are worth mentioning. Mimesis and alterity are derived from anthropologist, Michael Taussig's polemic that colonial subjectivities conceptualized capitalism in terms of their cultural idioms, and thus incorporated it into their life ways. However, my discussion departs from this colonial encounter paradigm in that it places the discourse of mimesis within the realm of pre-colonial encounters. The ability to mime and mime very well is a process of differentiating oneself from other people.²⁰⁸ Far from being an inferior cognition mode, miming involves a lot of processing of copied information and innovation by the alter, or one who mimes. This innovation gives the alter power to produce new systems of knowledge about the original, subsequently assisting them (the alter) to create alternative sources of power to negotiate the institutionalized power of the original.

In the power relations between the Bangwato and the Babirwa, the Bangwato utilized the institutional power of cattle gifts in an attempt to subjugate the Babirwa. In response, the Babirwa innovated an alternative field of power by incorporating Bangwato pastoral repertoire into their way of life and stealing the loan cattle to build large herds. They drew on a proverb, *dilo makwati di kwatololwa mo go ba bangwe*, to develop intellectual capital with which to produce their own bovine worldview. In a sense, language became central to building this bovine worldview as the Babirwa intellectuals borrowed Bangwato concepts and assigned them new meanings. They also innovated

²⁰⁷ See for example, Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Paul Stoller, *Embodying Colonial Memories: Spirit Possession, Power, and the Hauka of West Africa* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), chapt. 3, pp. 37-48.

²⁰⁸ Paul Stoller, *Embodying Colonial Memories*, p. 38.

new concepts of their own and assigned new meanings to pre-existing ones to suit this emerging cattle ideology.

This innovative process of loaning concepts and assigning them new meanings or reconstituting pre-existing words by developing new meanings for them is a testament to the organic development of intellectual resources within the Babirwa communities. It resonates with social historian David Schoenbrun's utilization of comparative historical linguistics methodology to show that social change is reflected in a community's language as people loan, coin and retain words, and assign them new meanings.²⁰⁹ Such innovations produce intellectual capital and leads to the development of new forms of knowledge.²¹⁰

This section examines the beginnings and flourishing of a Babirwa pastoral identity from 1850 to 1894 when a more rigid colonial landscape disrupted such pastoral prosperity. In their encounters with the Bangwato, the Babirwa used language and the pastoral traditions of the Bangwato and those of the other African groups in the Shashe-Limpopo confluence to build a pastoralist identity which mirrored that of the Bangwato, but substantially different. The object was to contest any Ngwato attempts at cultural domination and assimilation of the Babirwa. The loaning and retention of concepts and cattle herding practices reflect the myriad ways in which "power was constituted, deployed and contested" between the Babirwa and the Bangwato.²¹¹ The idea of the divisions and the connections between "instrumental power" and "creative power"

²⁰⁹ David Lee Schoenbrun, *A Green Place, A Good Place*.

²¹⁰ On the idea of organic intellectuals in colonial African society, see for example, Steven Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals*; Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, "How Beasts Lost Their Legs", pp. 33-61; Elias Mandala, *Work and Control in a Peasant Economy: A History of the Lower Tchiri Valley in Malawi, 1859-1960* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), pp. 80-95.

²¹¹ Frederick Cooper, "Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History", *American Historical Review*, vol. 99, no. 5 (1994), p. 1545.

illuminates historical power relations between the Babirwa and the Bangwato.²¹² Power, I argue, is mercurial. It does not reside with the same authority or institutions forever. While those in authority can use the instruments of power at their disposal (instrumental or institutionalized power) the ordinary people often innovate alternative forms of power (creative power) to subvert institutionalized power.

Whereas gift giving can deprive the recipient of their autonomy, power is a problematic field that is always contested.²¹³ Despite the Bangwato using cattle gifts as instruments of power to exert hegemony by creating relations of dependency where the Babirwa became their protégés, the Babirwa in turn appropriated Ngwato cattle herding concepts, such as *mafisa* or cattle loans, and assigned them new meanings to innovate an alternative source of power. This innovation helped them to construct a bovine worldview different from but intersecting with Ngwato cattle herding practices at some points. This idea of power as a contested terrain reveals the creative ways in which those who face threats of exploitation and domination by powerful groups are able to deploy the intellectual power of their weakness to negotiate cultural attempts at assimilation, exploitation and oppression. The veracity of power differentials therefore depends on the ability of people to use language to negotiate interventions by the opposing group. For the Babirwa, the concept of *mafisa* denoted extra loaning whereby the Bangwato cattle with which they were entrusted were clandestinely farmed out to distant relatives in Zimbabwe and the Transvaal. They also innovated the concept of *mokôkô*, through which they confiscated the offspring of stray cattle that had entered their kraals.

²¹² David L. Schoenbrun, *A Green Place, A Good Place*, p. 12.

²¹³ David L. Schoenbrun, *A Green Place, A Good Place*.

My idea of the bovine worldview, as it applies to the Babirwa, therefore rests on the adaptability of their cultural practices, language and socio-economic systems to external influences. With the expansion of the Bangwato cattle herding institutions into the Babirwa territory from the 1850s, cattle became such a big part of the Babirwa lifeway that they invaded every aspect of society. They played significant economic, subsistence, spiritual, cultural and political roles in the life ways of the Babirwa communities. Consequently, much of the bovine worldview of the Babirwa became embedded in words and concepts, and other herding practices, which were loaned from the Bangwato, or were organically invented, retained and continually reconstituted to negotiate changing economic and political processes. The areal spread of cattle did not require geographic mobility of the Bangwato into the Babirwa territory nor direct physical control, conquest and coercion. . Rather, the flow of ideas on herding ensured linguistic contact and social change, but also resistance and innovation.

To understand how the process of Bangwato pastoralist expansion contributed to the production of a Babirwa's bovine ideology, we have to move back in time in order to place it within the broader context of political and institutional developments that occurred during the first half of the nineteenth century within the Bangwato state. During the first half of the nineteenth century, the Bangwato developed patron-client cattle owner-herder relations, which had the objective of buttressing the power of the *kgosi*.²¹⁴ It was within the broader context of these early nineteenth century institutions that the Babirwa-Bangwato relations were to be mapped in the latter half of the century. Until the late 1850s, Bangwato chiefs, who monopolized pastoral wealth, loaned cattle to their

²¹⁴ Neil Parsons, "The Economic History of Khama's Country in Botswana, 1844-1930", Robin Palmer and Neil Parsons (eds.), *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 114-117.

bathanka (sin. *mothanka*), or non-royal clients, in a patronage system called *kgamelo*, or milk pail, an institution that developed earlier in 1820.²¹⁵ The idea was to create relations of dependency whereby the *kgosi*'s clients would subsist on the milk of the royal cattle but would not accumulate enough cattle to be able to revolt or challenge the *kgosi*'s authority. *Kgamelo* was a political institution based on the subjection of less centralized communities by a powerful hegemonic authority of the Bangwato royals. It worked through the appointment of intermediate administrators called the *bathanka* who were non-royal men tasked to rule over the Bangwato subjects in outlying areas on behalf of the *Kgosi*. By receiving gifts of cattle from the royal kraal, the *bathanka* were pledging to give the *kgosi* unconditional political support to keep him in office against his political competitors, particularly his brothers.²¹⁶ The appointment of this intermediate administrator class was necessitated by the need to expand the Bangwato territory in order to control more water, as well as to secure the *kgosi* against political rivals, and to prevent the disintegration of the polity through succession disputes.²¹⁷

In a country largely in short of permanent sources of surface water and prone to high rainfall variability, water was a coveted resource, central to building sustainable herds. As Pauline Peters aptly notes:

The emphasis on rain and water in Tswana thought, symbol and ritual parallels that of cattle.... The need to find new water sources lies behind much of the mobility ... and many of the struggles between chiefdoms focused on water sources.²¹⁸

²¹⁵ Neil Parsons, "The Economic History", p. 113.

²¹⁶ Neil Parsons, "The Economic History", pp. 114-117.

²¹⁷ Pauline Peters, "Struggles over Water, Struggles over Meaning: Cattle, Water and the State in Botswana", *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, vol. 54, no. 3 (1984), p. 31.

²¹⁸ Pauline Peters, "Struggles over Water, Struggles over Meaning", p. 31.

The expansion of the Bangwato kingdom into outlying areas territory was thus defined by the presence of water. This expansionist policy in turn necessitated the appropriation and control of herding labor from the conquered groups.²¹⁹ To these conquered groups were appointed the *bathanka*, as governors and custodians of the royal *meraka*. As clients of the Ngwato chieftaincy, the *bathanka* were entitled to cattle gifts, an arrangement that helped them to build their own private herds.²²⁰ By introducing an intermediate administrator class, the institution of *kgamelo* thus replaced older, binary forms of patronage, which were premised on the royal/commoner social divide. *Kgamelo* therefore ushered in a period where the Bangwato state had a cattle-owning middle class.

This creation of a middle class was to become central to herd accumulation in the subject peoples as the *bathanka* clandestinely re-farmed out their *kgamelo* cattle to buttress their authority over the subject peoples and improve their economic status.²²¹ However, such extra-loaning of cattle was often punished by withdrawal of the cattle, thus impoverishing the *bathanka*.²²² In 1859, most *bathanka*, dissatisfied with the system of royal control of wealth, rebelled against Kgosi Macheng's authority and defiantly farmed out their *kgamelo* cattle to the subject peoples they were tasked to administer.²²³ This commoner subversion of royal appropriation of society's wealth seems to have had

²¹⁹ G. Mautle, "Bakgalagadi-Bakwena Relationship: A Case of Slavery, c. 1840-1930", *Botswana Notes and Records*, vol. 18 (1986), pp. 19-32; Thomas Tlou, *A History of Ngamiland, 1750-1906* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

²²⁰ Interview with Sedieng Kgamane, regent of the Bangwato throne, Serowe, August 6, 2011, February 9, 2011; Neil Parsons, "The Economic History", p. 113.

²²¹ Interview with Sedieng Kgamane, regent of the Bangwato throne, Serowe, August 6, 2011.

²²² The *kgamelo* cattle were given as a privilege on condition that the retainers pledge loyalty to the incumbent *kgosi*. Such loyalty was important for the *kgosi* to maintain his office and power because it was a bulwark against plots by the *kgosi*'s brothers who might aspire to overthrow him. As such, extra-loaning of the *kgamelo* cattle was tantamount to betrayal and therefore had to be punished through withdrawal of the cattle. Interview with Sedieng Kgamane, regent of the Bangwato throne, Serowe, August 6, 2011.

²²³ D. M'Intosh, *South Africa: Notes of Travel* (Glasgow: Bell & Bain, 1876), p. 102. Khama III later told the High Commissioner that the system of indiscriminate royal ownership of cattle had precipitated Kgosi Macheng's downfall at the hands of a small group of the *bathanka*. See BNA, J. 978 A, Khama to High Commissioner, March 28, 1916.

exposed cleavages within the ruling elite. Hardly two decades later, chiefly monopoly of cattle fractured the royal family itself as Khama III's ousted his father, Sekgoma, in 1875.²²⁴ Out of fear of the same fate befalling him, Khama III (hereafter Khama) renounced royal rights to ownership of all cattle on loan upon ascendance to the throne.²²⁵ But he maintained the system of royal appropriation of *matimela* cattle, or strays, through which the Bangwato *dikgosi* had for generations built their herds.²²⁶ Nonetheless Khama's privatization of cattle legitimized the loaning out of the *kgamelo* cattle by the *bathanka* middle class and therefore hastened the spread of cattle into the Babirwa territory, and elsewhere, through a new cattle loaning institution of *mahisa*.²²⁷

The institution of *mahisa* was an Ngwato construct in which wealthy cattle owners farmed out part of their herds to poor men for safekeeping. In this sense, the herd owner would have access to dispersed natural and human resources; water, grazing land, and labor. Loaning out cattle was also a way of circumventing ecological stresses, such as drought and disease, which could potentially reduce a once wealthy farmer to a poor man overnight. The client in turn benefitted from the milk of the cattle, but could not use the cattle for any other purpose not sanctioned by the herd owner. The client was also entitled to occasional gifts of cattle, depending on the terms of the contract, but usually a heifer per half a year. The idea that *mahisa*, and its predecessor, *kgamelo*, were reciprocal systems where both the wealthy farmer and his protégé benefitted, is a useful corrective to Botswana cattle literature's materialist presumptions of exploitative systems of

²²⁴ J.D. Hepburn, *Twenty Years in Khama's Country and Pioneering among the Batawana of Lake Ngami* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1895), pp. 26-29.

²²⁵ *BNA, J. 978 A, Khama to High Commissioner, March 28, 1916.*

²²⁶ Through the system of royal appropriation of *matimela*, Khama had by 1878 built a personal herd of between 7000 and 8000. E.C. Tabler, *The Far Interior*, p. 20.

²²⁷ Interview with Sediegeng Kgamane, regent of the Bangwato throne, Serowe, August 6, 2011, February 9, 2011.

patronage.²²⁸ While the Bangwato deployed the institutions of *mahisa* and *kgamelo* as tools to exploit both human and natural resources and therefore gradually bring the Babirwa within the orbit of their rule, the reciprocity imbedded in these systems should not be overlooked. Beneath this top-down history of exploitation existed a more complicated cultural matrix. In a society increasingly becoming dependent on cattle, cattle gifts brought extensive concealed and stark inequalities, and promoted the rise of a bovine worldview among the Babirwa.

Initially, the Bangwato were expanding their cattle into the Shashe-Limpopo region to exploit the herding labor of the Basarwa by extending only their *meraka* (sin. *moraka*), cattle posts.²²⁹ They avoided direct occupation of this territory to avoid upsetting the already fragile relationship with the Ndebele who were by now settled in Southern Zimbabwe.²³⁰ Occupying most of what Khama was later to claim as his territory, and fearing the predatory habits of the Ndebele,²³¹ however, the Babirwa were, like the Basarwa and the Kalanga, readily induced to enter into the employ of the Bangwato as cattle herders in exchange for protection against the Ndebele.²³² Oral sources also indicate that after failing to conquer the Babirwa through military force in

²²⁸ Jack Parson, "Cattle, Class and State in Botswana", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2 (1981), pp. 236-255; Philip Steenkamp, "Cinderella of the Empire?": Development Policy in Bechuanaland in the 1930s", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2 (1991), pp. 300-302.

²²⁹ By this time, groups of Basarwa to the north and northwestern parts of the country were already subjugated and exploited as *malata* or serfs, who provided free herding labor to Bangwato. See Edwin Wilmsen, *Land Filled with Flies*.

²³⁰ During this time, the Babirwa area between the Shashe and Motloutse Rivers was disputed territory as the two African superpowers of the region, the Bangwato and the Ndebele, were laying claims to it and simultaneously drawing tribute from the less militarily powerful groups. Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *The Ndebele Nation: Reflections on Hegemony, Memory and Historiography* (Amsterdam: Rozenberg Publishers, 2009), p. 71.

²³¹ Neil Parsons, "Settlement in East-Central Botswana, circa 1800-1920", in R. Renee Hitchcock and Mary R. Smith (eds.), *Proceedings on the Symposium on Settlement in Botswana: The Historical Development of a Human Landscape, August 4th to 8th, 1980* (Gaborone: The Botswana Society, 1982), p. 119

²³² John Mackenzie, *Ten Years*, p. 358.

1850, Sekgoma asked for *mahudiso*, or pasture.²³³ It was a request to which the Babirwa readily acceded because they did not have many cattle, but possessed grazing land.²³⁴

Socio-environmental interactions, in this case those entered into over resources such as herding and pastureland, are therefore important to understanding the history of pastoral relations between the Babirwa and the Bangwato. As Dikgang Montsosi, from Bobonong, the capital of Bobirwa, remarked, “Bobirwa was pastureland without cattle.”²³⁵ Montsosi’s statement has socio-environmental undertones. He brings our attention to the Babirwa’s reading and construction of new landscapes of cattle herding in the formerly tsetse-infested Limpopo-Shashe watershed. This socio-environmental concept links to my earlier idea of frontiers as open spaces upon which new relations between people and their environments were forged. The Babirwa’s reconceptualization of nature as spaces for raising cattle, rather than just for hunting, goat herding and cultivation, therefore played an important part in the introduction of Ngwato herds in their area. By 1875, the Bangwato *meraka* had expanded into much of eastern Botswana.²³⁶

The word *moraka* has a residential connotation and therefore can only be understood within the broader context of the Bangwato residential organization. *Moraka*, was a space for men (including herders and sons of cattle owners) and cattle only. It was located considerable distances away from both *motse*, village, and *masimo*, agricultural fields, in order to access dispersed grazing lands and water sources.²³⁷ As Parsons

²³³ E.C. Tabler, *The Far Interior*, pp. 26-31; Isaac Schapera, *Praise Poems*, p. 26.

²³⁴ Interview with James Sekoba and Goatweng Molosiwa, Bobonong, July 10, 2011.

²³⁵ Interview with Dikgang Montsosi, Bobonong, July 10, 2011. Montsosi’s reflections were also supported by James Sekoba and Goatweng Molosiwa, Bobonong, July 10, 2011.

²³⁶ E.C. Tabler, *The Far Interior*, p. 41.

²³⁷ The Bangwato organized their residence such that they had a tripartite abode. The premium residence was the *motse* (village) where the entire community resided and the administrative, political and judicial

observes, “the cattle-posts of the pastoral zone were within a few days walk.”²³⁸ The distant location of *moraka* also had a ritualized connotation. It was believed that women’s reproductive power was detrimental to cattle and hence their direct contact with cattle was tabooed.²³⁹ *Moraka* also connotes the cattle themselves and the term was only applied when one owned a considerable herd. As a result, men who owned no cattle could not have a *moraka* and therefore constituted the poor or underprivileged class.²⁴⁰ On the surface, the idea that *moraka* could only be built by large herds of cattle can be misconstrued to mean that *moraka* was a space of the wealthy cattle owners only.

Among the Babirwa, however, this socio-physical space was more complicated. With the arrival of the Bangwato cattle, residential patterns, characterized by the separation of residence, cultivation and pastoral lands, were also imported into the Babirwa territory.²⁴¹ The *moraka* system thus necessitated the geographic separation of domestic animals from the home. Previously, the Babirwa kept their animals, mostly flocks of goats and sheep, around the home and everybody, including women, contributed in the care of these animals.²⁴² Thus, there was no spatial separation of herding from the Babirwa domestic space. By moving cattle to distant places, the *moraka*

office of *bogosi*, chiefship, was located. Being the administrative and judicial center of the community, the *motse* therefore formed the center from which people accessed the other residences. The second abode was *masimo*, or lands, where crops were cultivated. Before the introduction of cattle to cultivation, in the 1880s, the *masimo* were primarily a women’s space as women were did all the agricultural work. Men did only the preparatory work of clearing the fields. *Masimo* were also transitory abodes, only occupied during the rainy season until after harvesting. Once all work on crops was finished, everything was transported to *motse*, and *masimo* were opened to cattle for grazing and fertilization of the soil. See Neil Parsons, “Settlement in East-central Botswana”, p. 120.

²³⁸ Neil Parsons, “The Economic History of Khama’s Country”, p. 115.

²³⁹ Interview with Bathaloganyi Phuthego, Mogapi, December 25, 2010.

²⁴⁰ Interview with Sediegeng Kgamane, regent of the Bangwato throne, Serowe, August 6, 2011, February 9, 2011.

²⁴¹ Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema, Bobonong, February 9, 2011.

²⁴² Interview with Gabatshabe Baipidi, Mogapi, December 25, 2010.

institution necessitated the separation of herders from the home, thus gendering cattle herding and introducing new concepts of gender and labor in the Babirwa cultures.

The Babirwa reconstituted the *moraka* into an idiom of wealth, work, ritual and social differentiation. For this reason, it was a social space, which produced social identities of gender, generation, and class. It was a space of those Babirwa men; young and old, who were tasked with the care of cattle as the Bangwato were primarily absentee farmers, visiting their cattle only occasionally.²⁴³ At the *moraka*, age did not connote straightforward generational binary between the young and the old. Instead, poor Babirwa men (*bakhumanegi*), who by conventions of wealth accumulation, were children of the wealthy (*bakhumi*) played the role of fathers and supervisors of young men, who in turn exercised power over young boys, *bashimana*.²⁴⁴ This multi-multi-layered trait therefore made the *moraka* more of an institution than a simple physical space as it introduced an element of hierarchical organization based on class and gender and status, all determined by some sense of wealth, authority and generation..

The location of *moraka* in remote and formerly “unoccupied” territory also brought fundamental changes in the ways in which the domestic and the untamed wilderness, *dinaga*, interacted. The word *dinaga* connotes boundless, unknown spaces beyond the boundaries of human settlement. In the Babirwa discourses of the unknown, young men and women in general were not allowed to enter forests because it was feared that the *dipoko* (sin. *sepoko*), unhappy spirits of the departed, which were believed to reside in these forests, would cause them to lose their way, or *timela*.²⁴⁵ Because of the

²⁴³ Interview with headmen of arbitration, Onketetse Serumola and Adam Masilo February 9, 2011.

²⁴⁴ Interview with headmen of arbitration, Onketetse Serumola and Adam Masilo February 9, 2011.

²⁴⁵ Interview with *ngaka ya dikgomo*, or ethno-veterinary medicine specialist, Moraka Mohwasa, Mabolwe, July 10, 2011; *ngaka* Sekonopo, Mahalapye, August 22, 2011.

dense *mophane* bush and numerous hill outcrops, losing the way was an everyday preoccupation of the Babirwa and my informants told me of how disorienting losing the way is.²⁴⁶ As a result, it was necessary to tell cautionary tales about the *dipoko*, unhappy spirits of the departed (or ghosts in western parlance), leading people astray so that children could not wander away from home and get lost. The *dipoko* were also thought to afflict boys and girls with the curse of impotence and infertility respectively. According to eminent figures in Bobonong, “only men who were married and had children could enter these spaces of the unknown during hunting expeditions.”²⁴⁷ Even then, these men had to be fortified with medicine because the *dipoko* were unpredictable spirits. “They had potential to inflict physical harm.”²⁴⁸ This fear of the wilderness may have roots in the Babirwa’s experiences with concern over predatory animals, anxiety over illness, particularly the deadly tsetse flies and threats from Ndebele raids during the former part of the nineteenth century.

From the second half of the nineteenth century, the *moraka* made this formerly hostile terrain called *dinaga* accessible to cattle herders who were predominantly young men. Prior to the 1850s, the Babirwa’s interaction with their tsetse-infested wilderness though frequent, was brief due to the threat of disease.²⁴⁹ With the decline of the tsetse-hosting large animals, due to commercialized hunting, and the beginning of extensive cattle herding, *meraka* were built in this formerly unstable territory of disease. This reinforced East African historian, Helge Kjekshus’ apt argument that pre-colonial Africans were not “always adapting to the environment” but they also shaped it in

²⁴⁶ Interview with Moloko Makgoba, Sefhophe, December 25, 2010; Dikgang Montsosi, James Sekoba and Goatweng Molosiwa, Bobonong, July 10, 2011.

²⁴⁷ Interview with headmen of arbitration, Onketetse Serumola and Adam Masilo February 9, 2011.

²⁴⁸ Interview with Moraka Mohwasa (herbalist and diviner), Mabolwe, July 10, 2011.

²⁴⁹ John Ford, *The Role of Trypanosomiasis*, pp. 283-301.

multiple and nuanced ways.²⁵⁰ The Babirwa, I argue, used cattle to tame their formerly wild and dangerous territory. As a former herder, my experience with cattle is that they always have a leading cow whenever they move to and from the grazing areas and watering points, thus forming a line. Such regular movements eventually produce *mabila* (sing. *mmila*), passages, through which human beings, particularly herders, can access the wilderness.

These paths provided access for young men into the untamed wilderness, a feat which previously was only achieved by hunters. As a result, cattle herding empowered herders, particularly boys, to confront their fear of the wilderness and make contact with unmediated nature. By traversing the previously untamed physical spaces, the Babirwa herders acquired knowledge of the landscape and its resources and therefore had access to new realms of power. Herding allowed human power to confront its limits. As cattle penetrated the wilderness, they opened paths to new realms of power and truths beyond what was culturally constructed as “evil spaces out of bounds for young people.”²⁵¹

The Babirwa’s acquisition of power over unmediated nature did not, however, simply reflect their subordination to the Bangwato. Rather, their ability to overcome the fear of the wilderness was a refraction of the Bangwato’s fear of the wilderness. Through Khama’s hunting experiences with “The Great White Hunter”, Gordon Cumming, the Bangwato had knowledge of the existence of vector borne diseases in the Shashe, Motloutse and Limpopo watersheds.²⁵² While they also understood that the decline of vector-hosting animals such as buffalo and elephant may have reduced the risk of disease,

²⁵⁰ Helge Kjekshus, *Ecology Control and Economic Development in East African History: The Case of Tanganyika, 1850-1950* (London: Heinemann, 1977), p. 27.

²⁵¹ Interview with *ngaka* Moraka Mohwasa, Mabolwe, July 10, 2011.

²⁵² Gordon Cumming, *The Lion Hunter of South Africa: Five Years of a Hunter’s Life in the Far Interior of South Africa*, 1st ed. (London: John Murray, 1850), pp. 254-256, 351, 404.

this land of flies and wild animals remained unknown to them. Due to this fear of the unknown, and of disease, the Bangwato would not risk the lives of their sons by sending them out to herd cattle there.

The Babirwa, who had lived in this area since the early nineteenth century had knowledge about the extent and movement of the tsetse fly belts. They also possessed knowledge that animals exposed minimally to disease would significantly develop immunity. Several of my informants confirmed that their great grandfathers kept goats in this tsetse-infested area before the arrival of cattle and would therefore have known the safest ways of introducing cattle to this hostile environment.²⁵³ These browsers (the goats and sheep) had regular contact with pathogens in areas infested with tsetse flies. Because of this feeding habit, they easily developed immunity to *trypanosomiasis*.²⁵⁴ The respective ability of the bodies of people and animals to become conditioned to the pathogens made *trypanosomiasis* endemic, never reaching epidemic levels.²⁵⁵ As a result of the Babirwa's adaptability to this unstable environment of disease and drought, the Bangwato became highly dependent on their Babirwa herders in order to build a successful herd.

The Babirwa herders were also very important to the sustainability of the Bangwato herds in this unstable environment of rain variability and drought. During the rainy season, the herd was watched more closely because good grass was found over a wider area, and individual animals tended to wander and become separated from the

²⁵³ Interview with Moloko Makgoba, Sefhophe, August 5, 2011; Thaloganyo Goromente, Baagi Masia, Moreki Montsosi, Bobonong, March 13, 2011

²⁵⁴ Jan Bender Shetler, *Imagining Serengeti: A History of Landscape Memory in Tanzania from Earliest Times to the Present* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007), p.p. 37-38.

²⁵⁵ African "herders learned that livestock could generate a limited tolerance to *trypanosomiasis* if some of their animals had regular but limited contact with the insects that carried the dangerous parasites." David L. Schoenbrun, *A Green Place, A Good Place: Agrarian Change, Gender and Social Identity in the Great Lakes Region to the 15th Century* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998), p. 75.

herd.²⁵⁶ In the dry season the herd tended to stay together because good pasturage occurred in relatively isolated and well-delineated areas. Keeping herds together and finding pastures and water for them was the work of herders and necessitated their permanent residence at the *moraka* where they practiced a herd management system called *go di tshwara ka megata* or (lit. holding onto cattle's tails) or following the cattle closely.²⁵⁷ This management system thus necessitated the residence of herders at the *moraka*. Consequently, the *moraka* became a space where men were made and masculinities produced.²⁵⁸

Among the Babirwa, young, uninitiated boys spent most of their boyhood years at the *meraka* under the tutelage of young men and older men. From an early age, these boys would gradually be initiated into the world of cattle herding and masculinities. There were two practices, which were not only crucial in initiating young boys into the world of herding but also contributed to the gendering of Birwa ethnic identity. The first one was the combination of work and leisure. This infusion of leisure pursuits into herding was done in the best interest of the development of a child.²⁵⁹ In the African context, games mirror a community's lived experiences within a socio-cultural and historical context.²⁶⁰ The Babirwa's pastimes were therefore crucial to the production of social identities across time and space. At the *moraka*, herd boys were taught a stick

²⁵⁶ Interview with cattle herder, Rashaso, Mogapi, December 26, 2010.

²⁵⁷ Interview with cattle herder, Rashaso, Mogapi, December 26, 2010.

²⁵⁸ In their work on the production of the Chikunda male identity, social historians of Southern Africa, Allen and Barbara Isaacman, bring our attention to the idea that entering the wilderness as a hunter not only exposed the Chikunda to the potential dangers of unmediated nature. Rather, this productive activity also initiated them into the masculine world of the Chikunda. Consequently, men who feared the wilderness could volitionally choose membership of non-masculine identities, particularly agricultural communities. Allen F. Isaacman and Barbara S. Isaacman, *Slavery and Beyond*, pp. 95-103

²⁵⁹ Interview with herders, Rashasho, Mogapi, December 26, 2010 and Basupi, Dau-e-meja-leebana, December 15, 2010.

²⁶⁰ C. Burnett and W.J. Hollander, "The South African Indigenous Games Research Project 2001/2002", *South African Journal of Research in Sport*, vol. 26, no. 1 (2004), pp. 9-23.

throwing game called *nnai*, a word that has no Sebirwa (Babirwa language) equivalent.²⁶¹ This game has similarities with the stick throwing games of the Kalanga of western Zimbabwe and the San of Namibia.²⁶² The Kalanga name for this game is *mnqgwai* while among the Basarwa it has many names (the common one being *xai*), all of which translate into “stick.”²⁶³

It is highly possible that both the Kalanga and the Babirwa adapted the stick throwing game from the Basarwa and went on to “vernacularize” its name respectively to suit their socio-cultural contexts.²⁶⁴ As one of the several ways of initiating boys into male adulthood, the Babirwa’s *nnai* was more than a pastime. It was also a herd management pursuit that built physical skill. Like football in colonial Zanzibar, it provided “the opportunity for individuals to display their virtuoso skills before a crowd of spectators” and was more than “simply a passing diversion for youth, but a passionate part of becoming an adult male in society.”²⁶⁵

Nnai involved competition among a group of boys, throwing aerodynamically designed sticks to determine the winner. The ability to throw the stick for the longest distance coupled with the accuracy with which the stick moved were the most important

²⁶¹ Interview with herders, Rashasho, Mogapi, December 26, 2010 and Basupi, Dau-e-meja-leebana, December 15, 2010.

²⁶² For the Kalanga game, see M.P.D. Gundani, D. Makaza, L.O. Amusa, S.C. Mungandani, M. Kanji, E.M. Taper, “Mnqgwai: A Stick Throwing Game of the Kalanga of People of Zimbabwe”, *African Journal for Physical, Health Education, Recreation and Dance*, vol. 14, no. 4 (2008), pp. 495-513. For the “Bushmen” game, see Floris Van de Merwe and Michael Slater, “Possible Changes in the Play Patterns of the Qgu Bushmen of Southwest Africa/Namibia”, *HSRC Project*, no. 15/1/3/3/912 (1990), pp. 46-49.

²⁶³ I personally played this game when I was a cattle herder. I also observed it in 1990 after completing high school being played by the Naro Basarwa of Ghanzi where I was doing a year’s national service.

²⁶⁴ A recent archaeological study has shown that hunter-gatherer-farmer contacts and interactions in the Shashe-Limpopo confluence have a very long history, dating to almost 6000 BP. Bronwen van Doornum, “Tshisiku Shelter and the Shashe-Limpopo Area Hunter-gatherer Sequence”, *Southern African Humanities*, vol. 19 (2007), pp. 17-67.

²⁶⁵ Laura Fair, *Pastimes and Politics: Culture, Community, and Identity in Post-Abolition Urban Zanzibar, 1890-1945* (Athens: Ohio University Press; Oxford: James Currey, 2001), p. 24.

components of the game.²⁶⁶ In the context of the Babirwa herding practices, accuracy was particularly instrumental in driving back any straying cattle into the main herd. Whereas the Basarwa men used the stick primarily to maim wild animals, the best Babirwa herders distinguished themselves by carrying sticks with which to manage the herd in the veld. Since herding produced men, as the being a good herder was synonymous with being a man, the stick throwing game, which was practiced exclusively by men/boys and separately from girls/women, was a gendered aspect of the Babirwa's production of masculinities.

Other than playing games, boys graduated to manhood through rituals that intricately linked them to cattle. During one of my visits to one *moraka* at Thune in February 2011, I witnessed an intriguing occurrence, which brought back memories of my time as a young herder. On that Saturday morning, at milking time, I witnessed two boys taking turns to swallow the urine of the only bull in the kraal. I then remembered that I used to partake in this ritual of urine swallowing.²⁶⁷ But, bearing in mind that history is as much about change as it is about continuities, the social historian in me told me not to rush into conclusions about the symbolism of that ritual in the ethnographic present. Pretending ignorance, I asked Basupi, the older man who was doing the milking, why the boys found the bull's urine so enticing to drink. To my surprise, the response I received from him indicated that the symbolism of the ritual has endured across many generations.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁶ Interview with herders, Rashasho, Mogapi, December 26, 2010 and Basupi, Dau-e-meja-leebana, December 15, 2010.

²⁶⁷ In the 1980s when I was still a young boy, I spent almost all my weekends and school holidays at the *moraka*. During that time, I learned several herding practices from my grandfather, who in turn was taught by his father many years ago. The ritual of swallowing a bull's urine to master the art of whistling and generally to become a man was one of the many practices that I learned.

²⁶⁸ Interview with cattle herder, Basupi, at Dau-e-meja-leebana cattle posts, December 15, 2010.

From my conversation with Basupi, I learned that when the Babirwa started engaging in extensive herding, they realized the importance of communication between herders and herds. As a result, they identified *molodi*, whistling, as an efficient mode of communication between animals and human beings. But communicative whistling was an art and therefore had to be learned and mastered. *Molodi* is a word that describes a distinctively beautiful sound, which makes people and animals alike to respond in particular ways. This word is derived from the expression: *molodi wa pina*, or “the beauty of a song.” It is the belief of the Babirwa that songs that have *molodi*, or beautiful sound, induce all people to dance.

The urine of a bull was, and still is, believed to enhance communicative whistling skills that would make the cattle understand what the herder expected of them. Failure to master the art of whistling made one a bad herder whose cattle would go astray because the cattle were most likely not to understand what the herder was trying to communicate. Such herders are called *mashodwe*, a verb that connotes uselessness or impotence. To be a man, one had to be able to build a herd, get married and have children. Lack of all these three attributes denoted impotence. Drinking the bull’s urine also had reproductive value as it was understood to transfer not only the masculinity of the bull to the boys, but also the bull’s fertility.

Since children and cattle were intimately linked, by being childless, men were also bereft of their premium form of social capital (or human resources), which is being parents and *bakhumi*. The labor of sons, and of course the marrying off of daughters, would transform children into *khumo*, cattle wealth. Above all, lack of sons would cause one to be heirless and therefore threaten the Babirwa’s patrilineal inheritance system, or

boswa.²⁶⁹ The noun, *boswa*, is derived from the verb, *swa*, which translates into “die.” *Boswa* was therefore the estate of a dead man. Such an estate could only be distributed amongst his sons, who were known as *baja boswa* (lit. eaters of the estate) or heirs, following the death of their father.

The institution of *boswa* worked through sons inheriting cattle from their father, which they had been caring for and protecting while their father was alive. This exclusively masculine gendered system of inheritance found expression in the naming of children. Throughout Bobirwa, there are many first-born sons with the name, *Mojaboswa*, or one who will inherit his father’s pastoral estate. Despite excluding daughters, however, the institution of *boswa* was designed to protect the *moswagadi* (widow of the departed man) as it kept the cattle within the family kraal. As Goitsewang Mankga points out:

My sisters had no entitlement to *boswa* because they would get married and move out. It was my responsibility to remain at home for the rest of my life. Even my brothers, those who had to move out of our parents home (because it is not customary for all of us to live here), have built their matrimonial homes adjacent to our parents’ home. They too have a responsibility to our mother. Anyone of them who dares run away with the cattle will incur the wrath of the spirit of our father. His inherited cattle will go astray, get stolen, die and get finished quickly, and he will become poor overnight.²⁷⁰

This point is further reinforced by his ninety-year old mother, who is now a *moswagadi*: “my husband would turn in his grave and take all the *boswa* had he (meaning her son,

²⁶⁹ In the Great Lakes Region, lack of children was dreaded because it condemned one to a lower social status. David L. Schoenbrun, *A Green Place, A Good Place*, p. 12. See also David L. Schoenbrun, “Cattle Herds and Banana Gardens: The Historical Geography of the Western Great Lakes Region, ca AD. 800-1500”, *The African Archaeological Review*, vol. 11 (1993), pp, 195-196.

²⁷⁰ Interview with Goitsewang Mankga, Molaladau, July 20, 2011.

Goitsewang) ran away and left me to suffer.”²⁷¹ By inheriting from their father, the sons were therefore expected to use the *boswa* to support not only their individual families but also take care of the wellbeing of their mother.

The spirit of a man who died leaving behind *boswa* for his sons never went into oblivion for his was not death but a transformation from an embodied form of life to a disembodied one. Such men’s corpses were shrouded in a black ox skin and buried in the kraal while their spirits moved into a parallel world to that of the living where they would continue to protect their cattle.²⁷² To keep these men active, their bodies were buried in a sitting position because it was believed that lying down was akin to laziness. The significance of burying wealthy men in a sitting position was expressed in the proverb, *ga gona kgomo ya boroko*, or sleep does not build herds of cattle.²⁷³ This proverb was a warning to men that to build herds and have their spirits live on after death, they needed to work hard day and night.

Death for men with cattle was therefore an honor as they became *badimo*, a word, which has been loosely translated into ancestral spirits by various ethnographies.²⁷⁴ The etymology of the word, *badimo*, derives from the concept of *godimo*, which directly translates into “above.” The concept, *godimo*, therefore has a spatial connotation. It implies that there is a place above the realm of the living where the spirits of departed men of a privileged social standing reside. These spirits were believed to take a “keen

²⁷¹ Interview with Kelebonye Mankga, Molaladau, July 20, 2011.

²⁷² Isaac Schapera, *The Tswana* (London: International African Institute, 1953), p. 59.

²⁷³ Interview with Moraka Mohwasa, Mabolwe, July 10, 2011; Bathaloganyi Phuthego and Gabatshabe Baipidi, Mogapi, December 25, 2010.

²⁷⁴ Among the Babirwa, the word, *badimo*, refers to those who reside in the upper realms of the human universe. For a detailed discussion of ancestral spirits among the Tswana, see among others, Paul Stuart Landau, *The Realm of the Word: Language, Gender and Christianity in a Southern African Kingdom* (London: James Currey, 1995), pp. 24-29; Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa* vol. I (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991), pp. 2016-213.

interest in the world of the living and could influence and determine events in the living world.”²⁷⁵ Thus, to the Babirwa, the death of a cattle-owning man was not the end of life, but a journey into the upper world where the undead resided. Anxiety about (in)fertility and heirlessness therefore gave the *badimo* centrality in social organization as men tried to avoid falling into the perilous social location of being *mashodwe* (useless herder or impotent man). The fear of becoming *mashodwe* and heirlessness, thus transcended the afterlife as no man would “enter the realm of the *badimo* if he died without leaving behind cattle and sons to keep his name living.”²⁷⁶ Thus, memories of such men would just disappear from the realm of the living and their spirits thrown into oblivion.

The Babirwa cattle had cultural, ritual, economic and political implications. One cultural aspect that defines Babirwa identity, and which underwent significant change, is the totem, *sereto*. Until the end of the first half of the nineteenth century, the Babirwa praised themselves as *Banareng*, “people of the buffalo.” But they had knowledge that the *nare*, buffalo, fell within the family of bovines, as did the *kgomo* (cow). This was the reason why, despite the *nare* being their *sereto*, they ate its meat.²⁷⁷ When the *nare* populations declined significantly during the second half of the nineteenth century, not only did the Babirwa lose a fundamental symbol of their identity, they also lost an important component of their food systems.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁵ Jan-Bart Gewald, “El Nigro, Al Nino, Witchcraft and the Absence of Rain in Botswana”, *African Affairs*, vol. 100, no. 1 (2001), p. 560.

²⁷⁶ Interview with *ngaka* Sekonopo, Mahalapye, August 22, 2011; *ngaka* Sephetso, Tsetsebjwe, August 1, 2011.

²⁷⁷ Nakedi Mohwasa and Mokgethi Rakgati, “The Babirwa of Tauyatswala”, pp. 44-45.

²⁷⁸ Before the 1850s, eastern Botswana was habitat to large populations of buffalo. After 1850, buffalo populations significantly declined and by the end of the century there remained no buffalo in this region. B.H. Raseroka, “Past and Present Distribution of Buffalo in Botswana”, *Botswana Notes and Records*, vol. 7 (1975), pp. 131-140.

With the arrival of the Bangwato cattle, and the rise of a pastoral economy, the Babirwa's symbol of identity moved from the wilderness to the domestic. First they identified *kgomo e thaba* (*thabana* if it was female), or a re/black colored cow, which bore the color of a buffalo, to replace the *nare* as the most revered animal. From this invention and from their knowledge that both cattle and buffaloes were bovines, the Babirwa began to praise themselves as the *Bakgomong*.²⁷⁹ This change also ushered in a shift in the food systems with regard to the consumption of meat. The meat of cattle became an integral part of their food systems because of the scarcity of buffalo meat. With this symbolic shift in totemic identity therefore came the praise, *kgomo*, for every Mmirwa. Hence the expression, *ee kgomo!* became the primary signifier of the symbolic representation of cattle in the Babirwa's ethnic identity. But, for men, being *kgomo* depended on the amount of social capital they built, making children very important to the building of sustainable large herds.

Marriage, Spirituality, and Agriculture: The Gendered Power Contests of a Pastoralist Ethnicity

Women shaped the social world by building ties between households through the institution of *dzeo*, (pronounced *jeo*) marriage.²⁸⁰ With cattle playing a central role in the accumulation of social capital, men, who feared the haunting image of being childless, therefore attempted to use cattle as masculine instruments to control the reproductive capacities of women. But women innovated creative ways of negotiating such displays of pastoralist masculine power, be it in the family, the community, and in spirituality. This

²⁷⁹ Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema, Bobonong, February 9, 2011; Moagi Serumola, Bobonong, March 28, 2011; Gabatshabe Baipidi, Mogapi, December 25, 2010.

²⁸⁰ David L. Schoenbrun, *A Green Place, A Good Place*, p. 232.

section challenges narratives of pastoralism in Southern Africa being an exclusively male domain where men used cattle to “reaffirm the masculine hierarchies of access to power.”²⁸¹ It argues that in the Babirwa’s pastoralist ethnic identity, cattle and women were never diametrically opposed; that women invented alternative forms of power to contest masculine dominance and gain access to the pastoralist domain. The mechanisms intended for male dominance also drew women into the broader pastoral identity and therefore empowered them to take an active part in this male-dominated sphere of social life.

There were several arenas in which gendered power struggles manifested themselves in pre-colonial pastoralist Babirwa societies. First and foremost was the institution of *dzeo*, marriage, which played a crucial part in the building of networks and the accumulation of social capital. The institution of *dzeo* existed long before the Babirwa started building large herds of cattle. Prior to the 1850s, a variety of articles could be used as bridewealth, such as agricultural implements and products, animal skins and other tools of production.²⁸² With cattle becoming more influential in social organization, during the second half of the nineteenth century, *dzeo* became reconstituted as it began to be consummated through *magadi* or *dikgomo*, (bridewealth cattle).²⁸³ The etymology of the word, *magadi*, derives from the word, *gadi*, which is a synonym of the English word, “female.” The word *gadi* itself is derived from the Bangwato noun, *mohumagadi*, which literally translates into “wealthy woman.” Among the Bangwato, only the chief’s wife

²⁸¹ John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, “Goodly Beasts, Beastly Goods: Cattle and Commodities in a Southern Context”, *American Ethnologist*, vol. 17, no. 2 (1990), pp. 195-216; Margaret Kinsman, “Beasts of Burden”: The Subordination of Southern Tswana Women, ca. 1800–1840’, *Journal of Southern African Studies* vol. 10, no. 1 (1983), pp. 39–54.

²⁸² Interview with Kelebonye Makgosa and Goitsewang Makgosa, Molaladau, July 20, 2011.

²⁸³ Interview with Kelebonye Makgosa and Goitsewang Makgosa, Molaladau, July 20, 2011; Kgosi Mmirwa Malema, Bobonong, February 9, 2011.

could be the *mohumagadi* because the chief was the only wealthy person in society. As Kgosi Sediegeng Kgamane, the current regent of the Bangwato, aptly notes, “the chief owned not only large herds of cattle, but also land and people.”²⁸⁴

Borrowing from the Bangwato’s orthography of the relationship between female cattle and women, the Babirwa gave bridewealth, *magadi*, in *namagadi*, or female, cattle.²⁸⁵ But not every female cow qualified as *magadi*. Only carefully selected heifers, *meroba* (sin. *moroba*), a word which also applied to women of marriageable age, could be given as *magadi*. These were female animals of value because they had not yet calved. Although there were exceptional cases where women who bore children before marriage got married, the expectation was that young women should not have children before marriage.²⁸⁶ While this in a way reinforces patriarchal dominance over women, it reflects the intricate connection between women and cattle; that, as much as these women were expected to give children to their matrimonial home, the cattle would also multiply in the wives’ natal homes.²⁸⁷

The very fact that the women would produce daughters to be married off for cattle and sons, whose labor would be converted into cattle, made women vulnerable to male dominance. According to the Babirwa conventions of marriage, women were *dzeiwa* (pronounced *jeiwa*), “taken” and *gorosiwa*, “brought home” (home being the natal home

²⁸⁴ Interview with Sediegeng Kgamane, regent of the Bangwato throne, Serowe, August 6, 2011. Traveller, William Burchell, also observed during his stay among the Bangwato in the 1820s, “the chief will always be the richest man ... he holds within his own hands the power of attaining property.” William Burchell, *Travels in the Interior of South Africa, 2 vols.* (London, 1822-1824, reprint, Cape Town: C. Strunk, 1974), vol. 2, pp. 347-348.

²⁸⁵ Interview with Kelebonye Makgosa and Goitsewang Makgosa, Molaladau, July 20, 2011; Kgosi Mmirwa Malema, Bobonong, February 9, 2011.

²⁸⁶ Most of the women who bore children became *mahetwa*, the passed by” or the never-got-married, because their bodies were spoilt by early child bearing. Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema, Bobonong, February 9, 2011; Moloko Makgoba, Sefophe, December 25, 2010; Mbat Mashba, Molaladau, July 15, 2011.

²⁸⁷ Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema, Bobonong, February 9, 2011; Moloko Makgoba, Sefophe, December 25, 2010; Sediegeng Kgamane, Serowe Village, August 6, 2011.

of the husband). On the contrary, men were expected to *dzeya basadi*, “take women” and *gorosa* “bring them home.”²⁸⁸ In pastoralist parlance, the word *gorosa* implied the act of bringing back the cattle and kraaling them after a day’s herding expedition, as well as bringing the *magadi* cattle to the natal home of the bride. As used in conjugal arrangements, the word *gorosa* was therefore used to connote a practice where women and the *magadi* cattle moved in opposite directions. Thus, women were equivalents of cattle because of their ability to build social networks.

The growing importance of cattle in conjugal arrangements, however, assumed an intricate relationship with the spiritual dominance of men. Men’s distinctive integration of cattle with spirituality caused women to innovate alternative strategies of gaining respect and access to cattle.²⁸⁹ The monopolization of intercession with *badimo* by patriarchs, *rrangolo*, (the “oldest father”, which in western parlance would translate into “grandfather”), in particular, caused women to innovate alternative powers of having a say in the wealth of the family. Most notably, the institution of *rrakgadi*, paternal aunt, became central to women’s access to cattle and power.

The *rrakgadi* possessed the power of the curse or *kgaba*, which manifested itself in numerous ways, such as sickness and bad luck. Through the *kgaba* curse, the *rrakgadi*, like the *rrangolo*, were able to invoke the power of the *badimo*. But the *rrakgadi*’s curse affected only the male children of their brothers²⁹⁰ This is not surprising because the

²⁸⁸ Interview with Kebonang Masilo, Barati Makgosa, Molaladau, July 16, 2011; Dikgang Montsosi, Bobonong, July 10, 2011.

²⁸⁹ Interview with Kebonang Masilo, Barati Makgosa, Molaladau, July 16, 2011; Moloko Makgoba, December 25, 2011.

²⁹⁰ Interview with Kebonang Masilo, Barati Makgosa, Maemo Mosedame, Molaladau village, July 16, 2011. All these women claimed to possess the *kgaba* curse. But they indicate that they do not deliberately unleash this curse on the children of their brothers. The curse, according to these women, is a latent trait that manifests itself when the *rrakgadi* is not happy and the *rrakgadi* has no control over it or whose of their brothers’ children it afflicts.

inheritance system of the Babirwa was strictly gendered, excluding daughters from the distribution of their father's pastoral estate. The *rrakgadi* therefore expressed their displeasure by targeting their brothers' sons with the *kgaba* curse. When that happened, the brother whose son had incurred the *kgaba* would pledge a cow, which would be given to the *rrakgadi* so that the curse could be lifted.²⁹¹ The *rrakgadi*'s ability to invoke the power of the *badimo*, by inflicting the *kgaba* curse, and use it to gain access to cattle has remained a key element of their social identity and a corrective to male power to date. They continue to retain their privileged position in society, particularly in marriage arrangements and the propitiation of female ancestors.

Women also appropriated the powers of nature to shape the spirituality of the community and therefore contribute to the taming of the wilderness. From the early nineteenth century, the Babirwa had intermarried with the Kalanga, leading to cross-fertilization of cultural practices between the two groups.²⁹² In this relationship the Babirwa proverb, *dilo makwati di kwatobololwa mo go ba bangwe* ("we learn by imitating others") once again came into play. The Babirwa women mimed the ritual of *magwasha* (hostile spirits), which is a rendition of the *mazenge* cult of the Kalanga.²⁹³ *Mazenge* was a glorified lion spirit, which possessed Kalanga women due to their fear of lions, which roamed their country in large numbers.²⁹⁴ The Babirwa territory also had large populations of lions as indicated by residential names, such as Molaladau (a place where lions spend their nights), Dau-e-meja-leebana (lion swallows pigeon) and

²⁹¹ Interview with Kebonang Masilo, Barati Makgosa, Maemo Mosedame, Molaladau village, July 17, 2011.

²⁹² Per Zachrisson, *Hunting for Development*, p. 32.

²⁹³ Interview with Kebonang Masilo, Barati Makgosa, Maemo Mosedame, Molaladau, July 17, 2011.

²⁹⁴ Richard P. Werbner, "Symbolic Dialogue and Personal Transactions among the Kalanga and Ndembu", *Ethnology*, vol. 10, no. 3 (1971), p. 213.

Bodumadau (a place where lions roar), all of which are famed for their lion concentrations.²⁹⁵

With men continuing to dominate the pastoral worlds of the departed and the living, some Babirwa women appropriated this lionized spirit, as *magwasha* (sin. *legwasha*), to assert their power in the spirituality of the community, contribute to the taming of the wilderness and therefore challenge masculine power.²⁹⁶ Whenever they were possessed, the Babirwa women would start speaking in *Ikalanga* (Kalanga language, which was incomprehensible to men) and roaring like lions.²⁹⁷ This behavior was akin to the *mazenge* cult, where every time “there is an appropriation of the exotic; the possessed... speak in the language of a neighbouring people.”²⁹⁸ Being the embodiments of the lion spirit, the *magwasha* women would speak to men through a designated female interpreter, demanding certain black cows from their menfolk, which cattle would then be killed and they would be served raw blood and meat.²⁹⁹

Among the Babirwa, the lion was an animal revered for its power, as *tshetha ya dikgwa* (king of the jungle), and feared for its predatory habits. As the population of wild animals dwindled due to commercialized hunting and the numbers of cattle increased from the 1870s, lions developed habits of preying on domestic animals, particularly

²⁹⁵ Malema’s Babirwa at Molaladau claim that Kgosi Khama III of the Bangwato settled them there in 1920 as punishment for their rebelliousness against his authority. They also claim that whereas *magwasha* no longer exist in other parts of Bobirwa, in Molaladau the practice is still being carried out although its importance has diminished considerably.

²⁹⁶ Richard P. Werbner, “Atonement Ritual and Guardian-Spirit Possession among Kalanga”, *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, vol. 34, no. 3 (1964), pp. 206.

²⁹⁷ A number of the Babirwa women I interviewed claimed to come from families where at least one woman had been possessed by the *magwasha* spirits. Interview with Kebonang Masilo, Barati Makgosa, Maemo Mosedame, Molaladau, July 17, 2011.

²⁹⁸ Richard P. Werbner, *Tears of the Dead: The Social Biography of an African Family* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), p. 192.

²⁹⁹ The *magwasha* women were themselves revered and addressed as *dau* and they are known to have roared like lions.

cattle.³⁰⁰ The possession of women by the lion spirit was therefore an embodiment of the lion as well as an act of domesticating the lion by the community. This challenges performance theories, which have suggested that spirit possession was a discursive practice whose sole purpose was to raise the consciousness of the disempowered African woman.³⁰¹

Spirit possession alone could not be a site of “consciousness-raising” for Babirwa women. It was an embodied practice whereby the mind and the body combined to deal with the power of nature. This idea of the mind and body working in tandem challenges western polarized notions of consciousness whereby the mind has power over the body in symbolic communication.³⁰² It resonates with Paul Stoller’s recent dialogical perspective of possession that “at one level [possession is] negotiation with spirits.... At another level it is the acquisition of [inner energy] by allowing one’s body to be completely possessed by the spirit, and in so doing, possessed becomes possessor.”³⁰³ The *magwasha*, was not just a discursive form of power. It also constituted women’s appropriation of the power of nature through bodily possession.

In the *magwasha* ritual, access to power therefore cannot be narrowly placed at the textual level. Possession was both an intellectual process of knowledge acquisition and the transformation of that knowledge into practical power; the power of women to

³⁰⁰ By the 1870s, the population of buffalo had significantly declined on any of the upper tributaries of the Limpopo. E. Mohr, *To the Victoria Falls of the Zambezi* (London: Samson, et al, 1876). The decline of buffalo in the southern and eastern Botswana after 1850 caused a lot of suffering for farmers as predators divested them of their animals. B.H. Raseroka, “Past and Present Distribution of Buffalo in Botswana”, *Botswana Notes and Records*, vol. 7 (1975), p. 133.

³⁰¹ Among others, see Jean Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People* (Chicago: University Press of Chicago, 1985); Janice Boddy, *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

³⁰² Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992).

³⁰³ Paul Stoller, *Embodying Colonial Memories: Spirit Possession, Power, and the Hauka in West Africa* (New York & London: Routledge, 1995), p. 25.

tame the wilderness, by containing the spirits of lions in their bodies, for communal benefit while contesting the pastoral dominance of men by threatening to destroy their cattle. The *legwasha* spirit was both sympathetic and hostile. It sought to strengthen and empower women while it posed a threat of destruction of cattle and divestiture of men of their wealth. As a result, this domesticated spirit of a lion had to be supplicated by feeding it with the blood and meat of cattle.³⁰⁴ This, it was believed, would keep the lions satiated for some time and therefore save the cattle.³⁰⁵

It was also believed that refusal to accede to the demands of the *magwasha* would anger such spirits so much that by the time they left the women to return to the jungle, lions would attack and kill cattle at a rate never experienced before.³⁰⁶ By embodying the lion[ized] spirit or *legwasha*, these women were therefore innovating alternative forms of community power over the formerly unmediated nature. They transformed the potentially dangerous power of nature into benign mystical energy, which could benefit the entire community. Whereas men officially exercised power over the wilderness by physically entering it as herders and hunters, women contributed to the taming of the wilderness by creatively hosting the hostile spirits of nature in their bodies.

The Babirwa women's power and nurturance of a pastoralist ethnicity extended beyond child bearing and spirituality. Through their social location as cultivators and household subsistence producers, Babirwa women bridged the boundary between cattle

³⁰⁴ Interview with Kebonang Masilo, Barati Makgosa, Maemo Mosedame, Molaladau village, July 17, 2011; Kgosi Mmirwa Malema and Onketetse Serumola, Bobonong, February 9, 2011.

³⁰⁵ Interview with Kebonang Masilo, Barati Makgosa, Maemo Mosedame, Molaladau village, July 17, 2011.

³⁰⁶ Although men and women alike would not divulge information on the ritual practices of *magwasha*, several of my male informants were convinced that the *magwasha* women did not only pose a threat to their cattle, but their power was equally important to the pastoral economy because when their demands were acceded to, predators were kept at bay. Interview with Moagi Serumola, Bobonong, April 15, 2011; Moreki Montsosi, Bobonong, April 15, 2011; Makgosa Makgosa, Molaladau, July 8, 2011. All these men claim that their families have had *magwasha* women at different times and spaces.

herding and arable farming and therefore shaped an agro-pastoral ethnic identity. Armed with only the *mogoma*, long-handled hoe, these women worked tirelessly, cultivating drought resistant varieties of grains such as sorghum and millet in an environment characterized by rainfall variability.³⁰⁷ The slowness of the hoe and the uncertainties of rainfall put a lot of strain on them as work had to start immediately with the onset of the first rains and continued at a fast pace to cultivate enough land within the short rainy season.³⁰⁸

The foregoing is not meant to portray the Babirwa women as slaves of men as works before this one have already done about Southern African women elsewhere, particularly studies of the 1980s.³⁰⁹ I draw insights from Ifi Amadiume, and Iris Berger and Frances White to argue that by cultivating the fields and producing subsistence for their households, the Babirwa women were displaying secular power over nature, the counterpart to spirituality's control over nature as I present it in spirit possession above.³¹⁰ Among the Babirwa, a woman is seen as the embodiment of the home and hence she is referred to as *mosadi*. The word, "*mosadi*," can be literally translated into "one who remains at home." This direct translation has lent itself to misinterpretation before, with Southern Tswana women described as people who are confined to the

³⁰⁷ Interview with Mbat Mashaba and Barati Makgosa, Molaladau, July 15, 2011; Ketholegile Phuthego, Mogapi, December 25, 2010.

³⁰⁸ Interview with Mbat Mashaba and Barati Makgosa, Molaladau, July 15, 2011; Ketholegile Phuthego, Mogapi, December 25, 2010.

³⁰⁹ These narratives represent women as a homogenous category of the oppressed and therefore ignore the historical existence of difference across classes and generations of women. See Margaret Kinsman, "Beasts of Burden"; Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, "Goodly Beasts, Beastly Goods", pp. 199-2002.

³¹⁰ Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in African Society* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1987); See for example, Iris Berger and E. Frances White, *Women in Sub-Saharan Africa: Restoring Women to History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999).

home.³¹¹ In the Babirwa parlance, *mosadi* is the custodian of the home who, in pre-colonial Babirwa society, wielded a measure of power over household subsistence.³¹² The word *mosadi* thus connotes the role that a woman or wife plays in the home and not her location as the subordinate of man.

A pre-colonial Babirwa adage, *mosha o thata ka mosadi* (“the home is strong because of a woman/wife” or “the strength of the home lies in that of a woman/wife”), captures the fundamental role of a Babirwa woman in both the private and public spaces.³¹³ It was the woman’s primary responsibility to create the home as a safe place by providing care and nurturance to those in her home. This constructed the home into a space where everyone was affirmed and restored in the midst of outside hardships and deprivations.³¹⁴ Indeed cattle herding in the unstable environment of Bobirwa was always emotionally and physically taxing for men.³¹⁵ As Fred Morton says of pre-colonial southeastern Botswana, “[cattle] were difficult to accumulate quickly; cultivating a herd was an undertaking of years – requiring husbandry skills, much personal inconvenience and considerable good luck in overcoming drought and disease.”³¹⁶

In my conversations with several Babirwa women, most of them reinforced the idea of a woman being the embodiment of the home. The following testimony resonated across the interviews: “It was the duty of a woman to love, feed, shelter and take care of

³¹¹ According to Jean and John Comaroff, the word *mosadi* means a person with restricted powers of movement and unable “to extend [her] personal influence in space and time.” See Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, “Goodly Beasts, Beastly Goods”, p. 200.

³¹² Interview with Mbatl Mashaba and Barati Makgosa, Molaladau, July 15, 2011; Ketholegile Phuthego, Mogapi, December 25, 2010.

³¹³ The word *mosha* can be applied either to the household or the community or both.

³¹⁴ Interview with Daniel Ngwako and Dikgang Masebe, Bobonong, March 1, 2011.

³¹⁵ Interview with cattle herder, Rashaso, Mogapi, December 25, 2010; Daniel Ngwako and Dikgang Masebe, Bobonong, March 1, 2011.

³¹⁶ Fred Morton, *When Rustling became an Art: Pilane’s Kgatla and the Transvaal Frontier, 1820-1902* (Claremont: David Philip, 2009), p. 35.

her husband. Men were like children, when they were tired after doing heavy work, they needed to be coddled.”³¹⁷ The Babirwa women and/or wives provided love, companionship and a home, for their pastoralist male counterparts. Thus as a woman’s domain, the home, acted as a place of healing and recovery from all kinds of bodily and mental distress.

Despite being an autonomous space of production, in this environment of drought, where grazing was seasonal, women’s agricultural work nurtured and complemented the pastoral economy in diverse ways.³¹⁸ The Babirwa moved their cattle seasonally depending on the availability of palatable grasses in a transhumant system called *khuduga* or “movement.” When I asked the Babirwa men and women casual questions about where cattle were grazed, how locations varied with the seasons and about the relation of grazing to the agricultural activities of the community, their responses presented an idealized grazing schedule. This pattern is roughly as follows:

Our *meraka* are not too far away from *masimo* (fields). During the cultivation season, until *lethahula* (time of abundance) cattle would be brought to graze around the fields area because water and grasses were plentiful and the job of the herders was to make sure they were driven back to the *meraka* at the end of the day to be kraaled. Bringing the cattle to the fields accorded the herders the opportunity to have a bite of the harvest. After the harvest, cattle were turned into the fields to eat the crop residue and fertilize the soil during the day and would be driven back to *meraka* in the evening. After winter the cattle would be restricted to the

³¹⁷ Interview with Mbat Mashaba and Barati Makgosa, Molaladau, July 15, 2011; Ketholegile Phuthogo, Mogapi, December 25, 2010. Historian Paul Zeleza has also reinforced these ideas of the pre-colonial African woman as an indispensable cogwheel in the movement of the pastoralist machine. In pre-colonial African herding communities, Zeleza argues, “livestock property, which was owned by men, was channeled through the institution of the house, controlled by women.” Tiyambe, Zeleza, *A Modern Economic History: Volume 1, The Nineteenth Century* (CODESRIA, 1993), p. 151.

³¹⁸ Rather than subjecting women to male dominance and exploitation, agricultural work has always been a space where African women exercised their autonomy as a producer class beyond the influence of men. Nancy Jacobs, *Environment, Power and Injustice*, p. 29.

meraka and boys would be required *go di sala morago* (to follow them) everyday.³¹⁹

The use of the plural *meraka* (sin. *moraka*) and *masimo* (sin. *tshimo*) reflects transhumance practiced by people in a communalized form of land use. This pattern of grazing involved the seasonal movement of cattle from one area to the other, in order to extend the grazing range. It was a form of land use which demonstrated the Babirwa's innovation of advanced indigenous environmental and technical knowledge. The drought-prone Shashe-Limpopo region therefore induced the Babirwa to develop range management systems that would ensure sustainable use of resources.³²⁰

The ideal management system of the *moraka* area and its relationship with the Babirwa social system was thus based on the temporality of land use. However, entering the grazing area was governed by rules of access designed to ensure a steady flow of rangeland resources. Rules of access to the *moraka* can be understood by digressing a little to note the roles played by women in agriculture and in home building. Women did most of the agricultural work. They were also responsible for thatching roofs. "When the crops are ready for harvesting it is the time when the thatching grass is ready for

³¹⁹ The word *lethahula* connotes a time of abundance. It literally translates into "time of grazing." *Letha-* translates into "time" and *-hula* can mean either grazing or picking vegetables, fruits and berries. This tells us that at a specific time of the year, people, like their animals, fed on the fruits of the land. This information was collected from *kgotla* (the seat of the community's administration) meetings I attended in Bobonong, Mathathane, Gobajango, Semolale and Molaladau between February 9, 11, 14, 15 and 16, 2011 respectively. These meetings were called by the Veterinary Department who were kind enough to give me lifts to these places. I managed to hold lengthy conversations with several men and women, among others, Kgosi Mmirwa malema, headmen of arbitration, Onketsetse Serumola and Adam Masilo, Bobonong; councilor Onkaribile Dikinya of Semolale; and farmers, Johane Kgakishi and Diratsagae Madiope of Mabolwe. All these men and women readily availed themselves to share insights on the Babirwa's herding traditions that have been passed down to them by their parents and grandparents.

³²⁰ John Reader argues that eastern Botswana lies at the center of a "drought trough", which extends from western Zimbabwe to cover much of western Botswana. John Reader, *Africa: A Biography of the Continent* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1997), p. 306.

collection too,”³²¹ said old Mbat Mashaba. Access to the *moraka* was initially prohibited in the early dry season, particularly at the beginning of winter when cattle would be feeding on crop residue in the fields, because women, who were mainly responsible for collecting the thatching grass, would still be busy harvesting crops in the fields.³²² This regulation was designed to give women ample time to harvest their crops from the fields before the cattle were allowed to feed on the crop residue.

Women were also given first access to the *moraka* area before the cattle destroyed the grass by grazing or movement. This access to thatching grass by the women was also regulated so that the thatching grass first matured and dried for seed dispersal before it was cut up in order to ensure another crop of thatching grass in the following season.³²³ These controls allowed for a fair distribution of the thatching grass to all the women and grazing for the cattle because after the harvests and the collection of thatching grass were done, cattle would then be allowed into the *moraka* area until the onset of the rains.

In the end, the Babirwa’s bovine worldview developed because of the work of men and women. It flourished because the boundary between cattle herding and crop production was fluid, leading to supplementation between the pastoral economy and household subsistence. As a result, the Babirwa women cannot be simply categorized as a class of subsistence producers. The type and amount of work done by men and women during the second half of the nineteenth century depended on unstable social divisions of gender, status and generation.

³²¹ Interview with Mbat Mashaba (popularly known as *bokuku*, or grandmother, for being the oldest woman in the village), Molaladu, July 26, 2011.

³²² Interview with Moraka Mohwasa, Mabolwe, July 10, 2011; Basupi, Dau-e-meja-leebana, December 15, 2010; Rashasho, Mogapi, December 26, 2010.

³²³ Interview with Mbat Mashaba, Molaladu, July 26, 2011.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the Babirwa's transition from herders of black sheep and goats, the "Bapirwa", to herders of cattle, and from the *Banareng*, people of the Buffalo, to the *Bakgomong*, people of the cow. It argues that the Babirwa built their bovine worldview, from which they shaped their pastoralist ethnic identity following their adaption of cattle from the Bangwato, in the second half of the nineteenth century. Between the 1850s and the early 1890s, cattle were pervading every aspect of the Babirwa's ways of life. They reshaped the Babirwa's socio-economic and cultural landscapes and brought a shift in the manner in which the Babirwa interacted with their environments. By the first-half of the 1890s, many groups of the Babirwa had amassed herds of sufficient size mainly through institutions of patronage. They also took advantage of the absenteeism of their "employers" to engage in extra loaning activities whereby they clandestinely re-farmed out *mafisa* cattle to their relatives in distant places. The considerable amounts of herds they built eventually allowed them to assert economic independence from their Ngwato employers and therefore establish pastoralism as an important part of their way of life.³²⁴ This prosperity was to be temporarily disrupted by a more rigidly ordered colonial landscape where colonial borders restricted the mobility of the Babirwa herders to marginal lands between 1895 and 1929, as the next chapter will show.

³²⁴ The Babirwa of Malema who only arrived in the Shashe-Limpopo confluence around the 1860s were by the 1890s owners of large herds of cattle, and during their 1920 forced relocation from the Tuli Block, their leader, Malema, promised to pay his lawyer with a herd of one thousand cattle. BNA, S20/4, Mr. Rice, Malema's Lawyer in Mafikeng to Assistant Commissioner, Francistown, January 7, 1922.

CHAPTER THREE

Colonial Landscapes: Land, Displacements and the Centralization of the Babirwa in the Bangwato Reserve, 1895-1929

Introduction

Landscapes are representations of more than the physical environment. They reflect the socio-economic and political significance of land to people. Colonial landscapes, in particular, were representations of topographies of power relations. They reflected the colonial power's use of land as an instrument of racial domination where coveted resources, such as fertile arable lands, water sources, and good pastures were disproportionately expropriated for settler farming.³²⁵ The struggle over these resources mirrored the multiple ways in which the colonials and the colonized read and constructed their landscapes.³²⁶

This chapter addresses the question of competing ideas about land and resources on the confluence of the Limpopo and Shashe rivers (see maps 2 & 3). It begins in 1895 when the colonial government displaced many groups of the Babirwa from their prime farming lands along the northern banks of the Limpopo River (see map 4). I examine the Babirwa's struggle and creative adaptability to ecological shocks and social change as they eked out a living in lands of marginal quality in the Bangwato Reserve to which they were relocated between 1895 and 1929. Their resettlement in the Bangwato Reserve produced a Babirwa ethnicity shaped not only by common ancestry, but also by ethnic

³²⁵ William Beinart, "African History and Environmental History", *African Affairs*, vol. 99, no. 1 (2000), pp. 269-32.

³²⁶ Toyin Falola and Emily Brownell (eds.), *Landscape, Environment and Technology in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012).

diversity as they interacted and intermarried with foreigners in what is today called Babirwa.

The “struggle and renegotiation of land,” a main theme in southern African environmental history, is therefore prominent in this colonial encounter history.³²⁷ Central to the displacement of the Babirwa from the northern banks of the Limpopo River, and their subsequent relocation to the Bangwato Reserve, was the common basic need of controlling coveted farmlands. In the struggle that ensued, different conceptions of the environment shaped distinctive and overlapping ideas about land between the Babirwa, the Bangwato chiefs and the British.

An argument that represents the Babirwa as competitors in the land struggles challenges Eurocentric presumptions of a colonial encounter that emphasizes European’s direct appropriation of African farmlands in Botswana.³²⁸ It moves beyond binary perspectives of direct resource competition between Europeans and Africans, and illuminates the differentiated, and sometimes ambiguous, ways in which both groups read and constructed their landscapes, and the opportunities that emerged out of representations of landscapes as simple physical spaces.³²⁹ Conflict and cooperation between the Babirwa, the Bangwato and the British was over locations with specific attributes: palatable grasses for pasture, water sources and fertile soils for crop

³²⁷ Emily Brownell and Toyin Falola, “Introduction: Landscapes, Environments and Technology”, in Toyin Falola and Emily Brownell (eds.), *Landscape, Environment and Technology*, p. 3.

³²⁸ See for example, Isaac N. Mazonde, *Ranching and Enterprise in Eastern Botswana: A Case Study of White and Black Farmers* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994); Michael Hubbard, *Agricultural Exports and economic growth; A study of the Botswana Beef Industry* (London, New York and Sidney: KPI Limited, 1986); R. Emery, *Development of livestock, agriculture and water supplies in Eastern Botswana before independence: A short history and policy analysis* (New York: Cornell University, 1980).

³²⁹ I underscore the important insights recently provided by Laura Mitchell, who argues, the relationship between Europeans and pastoral communities of Southern Africa went beyond a simple contest over the resources of the land to include the distinctive ways in which these groups conceptualized the landscape. Laura J. Mitchell, “Appraising Nature: Pastoralist Practice, Hunting Logics and Landscape Ideology in Southern Africa”, in Toyin Falola and Emily Brownell *Landscape, Environment and Technology*, pp. 42-61.

production, all of which were located along the Limpopo, Shashe and Motloutse river systems.

This chapter draws from oral sources and the little archival material available about the Babirwa to illuminate a complex relationship of collusion and contest between the Babirwa, the Bangwato and the British. This relationship was more nuanced than the binaries of colonizer/colonized and exploiter/exploited scenario so reified in existing Southern African environmental histories, particularly those that paint a picture of the direct appropriation of African lands and cattle by European settlers.³³⁰ I draw from socio-environmental histories that diverge from western intellectual traditions of reifying colonial intervention to argue that land struggles in the eastern Bechuanaland were not simple conflicts over the material utility of resources.³³¹ Rather, conflict reflected the differentiated meanings that the three groups assigned to land and its resources.

I challenge the dominant colonial discourse whereby Europeans constructed Africans as part of nature and therefore had no right to land, as they were purportedly unable to shape the environment.³³² This reification of the so-called unchanged, primordial land theory was a strategy to commoditize African lands. The British commoditized land through the introduction of the ranch system in what was to be called the Tuli Block farms. The ranch was also an instrument of dividing colonial society, separating European settlements from Africans and ossifying the ideological and social

³³⁰ Leonard Guelke and Robert Shell, "Landscapes of Conquest: Frontier Water Alienation and Khoikhoi Strategies of Survival, 1652-1780", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 18, no. 4 (1992), pp. 803-824.

³³¹ See among others, William Beinart, "Soil Erosion, Animals and Pasture over the Longer Term: Environmental Destruction in Southern Africa", in Melissa Leach and Robin Mearns (eds.), *The Lie of the Land: Challenging Received Wisdom on the African Environment* (Oxford: James Currey, 1996), pp. 54-72; Nancy Jacobs, *Environment, Power, and Injustice: A South African History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

³³² The colonial land policy in Bechuanaland was designed such that European settler farmers acquired the best possible farmlands for commercialized agriculture. See for example, Bechuanaland Protectorate (Lands) Order in Council, 1904.

distances between these contesting groups. It was no different from the colonial railway network, which “bifurcated the colonial landscape”, representing Africans as “seemingly lost in time and prehistoric, and Europeans as embodying technology, reason and progress.”³³³ The Tuli Block farms therefore mirrored Europeans’ representation of prime farming land as unoccupied wilderness, which could be transformed into alienable property. The Babirwa, who in European conception of nature, were part of this presumed pristine environment, had to move out as they would purportedly obstruct the development of modernized farming. By seeing and transforming land into private property and a commodity to be bought and sold, Europeans separated themselves from Africans. This idea of land being disposable private property produced colonial discourses of Africans as pests and their lands as empty.

European conceptions of the landscape are secondary to my discussion of the resettlement of the Babirwa. However, they do add texture to the relationship of patron and client that started in the 1850s between the Babirwa and the Bangwato (see chapter 2). This relationship of patronage and clientage was based on mutual reciprocity where the Bangwato farmed out part of their herds to some Babirwa groups, who in turn took care of these loan cattle but without being divested of their lands. For the Bangwato and the Babirwa, landscapes connoted *dinaga*, open spaces beyond human settlements accessible to all cattle farmers, crop producers and hunter-gatherers, and where social identities of class, gender and generation were produced. Whereas both of them imagined and constructed the Shashe, Motloutse and Limpopo watersheds as landscapes of

³³³ Emily Brownell and Toyin Falola, “Introduction: Landscapes, Environments and Technology”, in Toyin Falola and Emily Brownell (eds.), *Landscape, Environment and Technology*, p. 7.

abundant grazing and water, the Bangwato also constructed the Babirwa as an important source of herding labor very central to the building of herds.

The frontiers of such landscapes were not fixed and secured. They were flexible and could be expanded and contracted depending on the availability of pasture, fertile soils and water, and to circumvent ecological stresses, such as droughts and disease. These fluid frontiers were governed by local mechanisms of sharing the resources. The practices of *kopa mahudiso* (asking for grazing land) and *kopa metsi* (asking for water) ensured relative peace, punctuated by periods of contest, between the Babirwa and the Bangwato from the 1850s onwards, leading to coexistence rather than land alienation.³³⁴

This, however, does not mean that individuals never claimed rights to pieces of land. Whereas “natural open waters like rivers and pans” could not be claimed as private property by any individual or group of people, observes Schapera, “a man, by digging a [well] could acquire exclusive rights to water as the rewards of his industry.”³³⁵ Other cattle owners acquired access to such water by asking for permission to use the well, *sediba*, through the practice of *kopa metsi*.³³⁶ On the contrary, the permanent land claims, which had the object of sustaining settler farming, undermined possibilities for coexistence between the Babirwa and Europeans. As a result, the rigidified unalienable land tenure that came with the demarcation of settler farms and the alienation of land from the Babirwa became the basis for a settler property regime that necessitated the

³³⁴ Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema and headmen of arbitration, Onketetse Serumola and Adam Masilo, Bobonong, February 9, 2011; Bathaloganyi Phuthego, Mogapi, December 25, 2010.

³³⁵ Isaac Schapera, *Native Land Tenure in the Bechuanaland Protectorate* (Cape Town: Lovedale Press, 1943), p. 249.

³³⁶ Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema and headmen of arbitration, Onketetse Serumola and Adam Masilo, Bobonong, February 9, 2011; Bathaloganyi Phuthego, Mogapi, December 25, 2010.

relocation of the Babirwa, ideologically and physically, from their previously open lands into centralized spaces characterized by poor soils, and inadequate pastures and water.

The Cession of the Tuli Block: A Precursor to the Relocation and Centralization of the Babirwa in the Bangwato Reserve

In 1895, Khama III ceded a narrow strip of land along the western banks of the Limpopo River to the British Crown as part of an agreement the Tswana chiefs made with the British to stop the transfer of the Bechuanaland Protectorate (hereafter Bechuanaland) to the administration of the British South Africa Company (BSAC).³³⁷ This strip of land was later to be called the Tuli Block when the colonial administration handed it to the British South Africa Company in 1904.³³⁸ The Tuli Block, a strip of fertile land demarcating Botswana's eastern border with the northern Transvaal, lies along the northern banks of the Limpopo, stretching from the point where the Limpopo and Shashe Rivers meet in the east (see map 4). This area is suitable for both crop production and cattle farming because of its proximity to the waters of the Limpopo. It is also endowed with fertile alluvial soils deposited by Limpopo floods and palatable grasses suitable for pasture. Today it consists mainly of privately owned farms.

The Tuli Block has a fascinating frontier history because of its strategic position along the South African border. In 1890, the British mining magnate and imperialist, Cecil Rhodes, used his company, the British South Africa Company (BSAC), to spearhead the colonization of present-day Zimbabwe. Rhodes was driven by the idea of the “Second Rand” up north following the discovery of gold in the Witwatersrand in

³³⁷ Neil Parsons, *King Khama, Emperor Joe*, pp. 206-208.

³³⁸ Bechuanaland Protectorate (Lands) Order in Council, 1904.

South Africa earlier in 1886.³³⁹ The first group of Europeans sent there under the aegis of the BSAC established the first British settlement at the head of the Tuli River (the Shashe River in Botswana) in present-day Zimbabwe and named this settlement Fort Tuli.³⁴⁰

Fort Tuli was to become the launching pad of British privatized colonization of Zimbabwe, which had the prime objective of exploiting the imagined mineral wealth there. But gold mining proved to be unprofitable because, unlike the Witwatersrand's "continuous gold reef", the Zimbabwean gold deposits were small and scattered.³⁴¹ With their dream of an Eldorado (land of gold) in Zimbabwe vanished, the settlers transformed into farmers. From 1892, the British authorized the Company to set up an administration, thus empowering it to demarcate land for European settlement.³⁴² Consequently, Fort Tuli became a settler farmer area, out of bounds for Africans and their livestock.

At the time the BSAC consolidated power in Zimbabwe, the British formalized their colonization of Bechuanaland. In Bechuanaland the British did not interfere with the political organization of the local communities.³⁴³ Rather, they only concerned themselves with protecting an imaginary "road to the north" along which the Protectorate lay. This was previously a missionary and traders' road connecting the Cape and Central

³³⁹ Rhodes thought that the Gold deposits of the Witwatersrand extended up north into Zimbabwe. The privatized colonization of Zimbabwe by the BSAC was therefore motivated by the imaginary existence of huge deposits of Gold in Zimbabwe (the imagined Second Rand). Neil Parsons, *A New History of Southern Africa*, Second Edition (London: Macmillan, 1993), p. 181. For a nuanced narrative of South Africa's mineral revolution and Rhodes's manipulative imperial ambitions, see Martin Meredith, *Diamonds, Gold and War: The British, the Boers and the Making of South Africa* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007).

³⁴⁰ It was from Fort Tuli that the Tuli Block was to derive its name. William Brown, *On the South African Frontier* (Bulawayo: Books of Rhodesia, 1970 (1899)), pp. 83-84.

³⁴¹ Charles van Onselen, *Chibaro: African Mine Labour in Southern Rhodesia, 1900-1933* (London: Pluto Press, 1980), pp. 15-17.

³⁴² William Brown, *On the South African Frontier*, p. 84.

³⁴³ Henryk Zins, "The International Context of the Creation of the Bechuanaland Protectorate in 1885", *Pula: Journal of African Studies*, vol. 11, no. 1 (1997), pp. 54-62.

Africa.³⁴⁴ But with the discovery of gold in the Witwatersrand, this imaginary road became very important to the British, giving Bechuanaland strategic value. Although regarded as a desert, bereft of any mineral wealth, Bechuanaland thus became an important corridor for British imperialists because it was presumed to provide access to the legendary mineral wealth of Zimbabwe. Effective occupation of this coveted territory would also give the British monopoly over the interior of Southern Africa and secure African labor in the region for British capitalist interests.³⁴⁵

Effective occupation of Bechuanaland involved the imposition of the laws of the Cape Colony on the territory and defining the limits of its borders.³⁴⁶ The new borders cut off the Ndebele from much of the area inhabited by the Babirwa in eastern Botswana. As a result, the Bangwato seized this opportunity to lay claim to all lands lying in eastern Botswana. The consolidation of the Bangwato suzerainty was also buoyed by the defeat of the Ndebele at the hands of a combined Bangwato-BSAC military expedition in 1893.³⁴⁷ The fall of the Ndebele left the Bangwato as the only African military power in the Shashe-Limpopo confluence.

At first the delimitation exercise could not restrict cross-border movements of local border communities. This meant that the original Babirwa area of habitat was hardly affected in terms of size as they ignored the legality of such borders and continued to

³⁴⁴ Anthony J. Dachs, "Missionary Imperialism: The Case of Bechuanaland", *Journal of African Studies*, vol. 13, no. 4 (1972), pp. 649-658.

³⁴⁵ Christopher M. Paulin, *White Men's Dreams, Black Men's Blood: African Labor and British Expansionism in Southern Africa, 1877-1895* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2001). This idea of the British leaving the Transvaal to the Boers and pursuing privatized capitalist imperialism in the interior deconstructs the received strategist cliché that British imperialism at the time was neglectful of Africans but primarily focused on obstructing Boer expansionism. For strategist ideas concerning this issue, see D.L. Schreuder, *The Scramble for Southern Africa, 1877-1895: The Politics of Partition Reappraised* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

³⁴⁶ I.G. Brewer, 'Sources of the Criminal Laws of Botswana', *Journal of African Law*, vol. 18 (1974), p. 27.

³⁴⁷ Isaac Schapera, *Praise Poems*, p. 219.

cross and re-cross the Limpopo and Shashe rivers into the Transvaal and Zimbabwe respectively. The Babirwa communities on the Botswana side continued to interact physically with their kin in western Zimbabwe and the Transvaal to the extent of stealing Bangwato cattle and clandestinely farming them out to their kin across the new borders.³⁴⁸ The theft of the Bangwato cattle was to induce Khama to collude with the Company later in 1920 in the forceful eviction of Malema's Babirwa who had remained in the Tuli Block when other Babirwa groups relocated to the Bangwato Reserve in 1895.³⁴⁹ This theft and extra-loaning of the Bangwato cattle to kin across colonial borders represented the Babirwa's continued imagination and definition of their historical landscapes as fluid and expansive and not easily subjected to real or imagined colonial borders. Their open range herd release management systems, whereby animals would be released into the veld from morning until sunset, were based on freely accessible but regulated pastoral lands in which each community knew the boundaries of its grazing lands. Such boundaries, however, were collapsed during times of drought to give groups whose lands had been adversely affected access to available grazing elsewhere through the practice of *kopa mahudiso*.

This system of making land accessible to all people regardless of ethnic affiliation was disrupted at the beginning of colonial rule. In 1895, the British, encouraged by the "success" of their privatized colonization of Zimbabwe, decided to transfer Bechuanaland to the administration of the Company for strategic and economic purposes.³⁵⁰ The British had always seen control over Bechuanaland as a temporary expedient, expecting it to be

³⁴⁸ Neil Parsons, "Settlement in East-central Botswana circa 1800-1920", in R. Renee and Mary R. Smith (eds.), *Proceedings of the Symposium on Settlement in Botswana: The Historical Development of a Human Landscape* (Gaborone: Botswana Society, 1982), pp. 121-122.

³⁴⁹ See BNA, S. 40/7, Khama to R.C., August 7, 1920.

³⁵⁰ Neil Parsons, *King Khama, Emperor Joe*, pp. 206.

transferred to Company rule and later to South Africa.³⁵¹ Since the British Government was intent on pursuing a minimalist policy of spending very little on the administration of Bechuanaland, it was therefore beneficial that the Company effectively occupy Bechuanaland.³⁵² Company administration of Bechuanaland would therefore lift the financial burden of running the colony from the British Crown and continue the policy of keeping imperialist competitors at bay.

But, with prior knowledge of the ruinous “smash-and-grab tactics” employed by the Company against the Ndebele, Tswana chiefs, particularly Khama, protested the handing over of their lands to the Company. At their meeting over the issue of transfer of Bechuanaland to Company rule in England in early 1895, Khama, a lifetime teetotaler, impressed upon the British public that the BSAC would introduce European liquor into his territory, which would morally corrupt his people, impoverish them and turn them into wage laborers.³⁵³ The temperance campaign found favor with the British public who believed in Christian missionary ideals of pacifying the ‘savage’ African. The popularity of Khama’s temperance message put pressure on the British Government and in November 1895, an agreement between the chiefs and the British colonial secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, prevented the lands of these chiefs from being taken by the Company.³⁵⁴

³⁵¹ Christopher M. Paulin, *White Men’s Dreams, Black Men’s Blood*, p. 212; Neil Parsons, *King Khama, Emperor Joe*, p. 34.

³⁵² Louis Picard, *The Politics of Development in Botswana: A Model for Success?* (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc., 1987), p. 31. Imperial aid to Bechuanaland Protectorate was meager from the onset of British rule. For the first three years of colonial rule British aid amounted to roughly £200 000 and this figure declined in succeeding years. See BNA, HC 26/24, Notes on Bechuanaland, March 21, 1889.

³⁵³ Christopher M. Paulin, *White Men’s Dreams, Black Men’s Blood*, p. 212.

³⁵⁴ Neil Parsons, *King Khama, Emperor Joe and the Great White Queen: Victorian Britain through African Eyes* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 206-208.

The projected transfer was, however, only rescinded after the chiefs made concessions to the British Government in which each Tswana chief was to cede a small portion of his community's land to the British Crown and agree to the imposition of an annual tax on their peoples.³⁵⁵ Such lands (the blocks as they were to be called) were, however, chosen by the British themselves bearing in mind their productive capacities as farmlands.³⁵⁶ In Khama's country, Chamberlain demanded a ten-mile strip of land along the Limpopo River. But Khama was not prepared to let go of this prime land in which were located the Bangwato *meraka* (cattle posts) and in which resided the people he considered "his subjects", the Babirwa. The following conversation reveals the power imbalance between the British as a colonizing authority and the Tswana chiefs as colonial subjects:

CHAMBERLAIN (realizing that Khama would not budge): We will take the land we want for the railway, and no more, and if we take any of [your] garden ground (we shall not take much) we will give [you] compensation elsewhere

KHAMA: If Mr. Chamberlain will take the land himself, I will be content

CHAMBERLAIN: I will make the railway myself by the eyes of one whom I will send and I will take only as much as I require, and will give compensation if what I take is value

KHAMA: I trust that you will do this work as for myself, and treat me fairly in this matter.³⁵⁷

³⁵⁵ BNA, S. 466/3, Secretary of state. Interview with 3 Bechuanaland chiefs (Khama, Bathoen and Sebele), November 6, 1895.

³⁵⁶ The land ceded to the British Crown, or Crown Lands, also known as the Blocks, were primarily reserved for European settlement. To the West was the Ghanzi Block, to the southeast were the Gaborone and Lobatse Blocks, to the north was the Tati Block and to the east, the Tuli Block.

³⁵⁷ BNA, S. 466/3, Secretary of state. Interview with 3 Bechuanaland chiefs (Khama, Bathoen and Sebele), November 6, 1895.

On the surface, this conversation reflects the colonial authority's unmitigated influence over the land talks. In fact, one Botswana historian has argued that Khama was tricked into giving away land to the British.³⁵⁸ Such Eurocentric presumptions of the colonial encounter not only reify European interventions in the struggles for land. They also diminish the intellectual capabilities of Africans.

Digging deeper, one finds more nuances about Khama's personal agenda, which he placed above the interests of the very people he claimed to represent, the Babirwa. Khama certainly did not want the Limpopo strip and the whole area between the Motloutse and Shashe Rivers taken by the British.³⁵⁹ Endowed with open lands suitable for raising cattle, this area had remained a space of contest between the Bangwato and the Ndebele until the Ndebele were ousted by a combined British-Ngwato force.³⁶⁰ Once the Ndebele threat was removed, the British wanted to take control of the whole Shashe-Limpopo confluence, which included the Motloutse watershed, and apportion it for settler farming.³⁶¹ With many of the Bangwato's cattle posts located at the confluence of the Shashe and Motloutse rivers Khama refused to give this territory to the British, ultimately retaining it by offering them the Tuli Block.³⁶²

But the Chamberlain Settlement was temporarily expedient for by the time of the meeting with the Tswana chiefs, the British had already made a decision to grant the BSAC the right to administer Bechuanaland. Despite Chamberlain's claims that the land was being ceded to the British Crown for the purpose of building a railway only, his

³⁵⁸ Neil Parsons, *King Khama, Emperor Joe*, pp. 206-208.

³⁵⁹ Interview with Bangwato Regent, Sedieng Kgamane, Serowe, April 6, 2011.

³⁶⁰ Isaac Schapera, *Praise Poems*, p. 219.

³⁶¹ Neil Parsons, *King Khama, Emperor Joe*, p. 50.

³⁶² BNA, S. 466/3, Secretary of state. Interview with 3 Bechuanaland chiefs (Khama, Bathoen and Sebele), November 6, 1895.

response, “I will make the railway myself by the eyes of one whom I will send,” is a testimony of the colonial office’s predetermined decision to transfer Bechuanaland to Company administration. When Kgosi Bathoen of the Bangwaketsi asked: “Who will be the ruler of this country?”, Chamberlain replied laconically, “the Company.” When he sensed uneasiness among the chiefs, he added, as if it was an afterthought, “under the Queen.”³⁶³

The power relation between the *dikgosi* and Chamberlain that plays itself out in this conversation reflects their differentiated readings and constructions of Bechuanaland, particularly the Tuli Block. Chamberlain conceptualized Khama’s country in strategic and economic terms. His main concern was to have Bechuanaland administered privately to relieve the British treasury while using it to consolidate British imperial interests in Southern Africa. On the other hand, Khama’s understanding of the lands of the Babirwa was shaped by concerns over the wellbeing of “his subjects”, upon whose labor he envisaged relying to build sustainable cattle herds and therefore impose his hegemonic power over them. It was from this seemingly Chamberlain-dictated settlement that Khama decided to cede a strip of land along the northeastern banks of the Limpopo River to the British Crown who later handed it to the Company.³⁶⁴

In addition, by the time the three Tswana chiefs met with Chamberlain, the fate of the Tuli Block was already predetermined because of events across the border in the Transvaal. The broader object was to make the thin strip of rocky terrain a buffer against incursions by South African Boer expansionists whose rogue expansionist policies were

³⁶³ BNA, S. 466/3, Secretary of state. Interview with 3 Bechuanaland chiefs (Khama, Bathoen and Sebele), November 6, 1895.

³⁶⁴ *Bechuanaland Protectorate Blue Books, 1904-05.*

seen to be interfering with British imperialism.³⁶⁵ When in mid-1895 the *uitlanders* or outsiders (foreign whites, mostly of British origin) threatened to revolt against the Afrikaner-led Transvaal Government for its refusal to grant them mining franchises and citizenship in the mineral rich Witwatersrand, the immediate purpose of the Limpopo strip shifted to that of a springboard from which to launch the botched Jameson Raid whose objective was to overthrow the Transvaal Republic.³⁶⁶

The Raid failed as the *uitlander* uprising never materialized. The failure of the Raid effectively diminished the BSAC's political power in Bechuanaland and therefore forced the British government to recognize Khama as the subordinate sovereign of the British Crown in the entire eastern Botswana, including the Shashe-Limpopo confluence. Consequently, when Bechuanaland was demarcated into Native Reserves in 1899, this territory became the Bangwato Reserve.³⁶⁷ This allowed Khama to lay claim to all lands in eastern Botswana, including the Tuli Block as falling within the sovereignty of the Bangwato.

While Khama reaped the rewards of ceding land to the British Crown by being compensated with more of the Babirwa lands, the Babirwa became collateral damage. That is, in a struggle over lands in which the rightful owners were not represented, the expansionist Khama and his British competitors shared Babirwa lands among themselves

³⁶⁵ The Tuli Block area was the first to have a police garrison. This post, or the Motloutse Fort as it was called, was built for the protection of the area "from the threat of inroads of the Boers from the Transvaal and as a check-up on Lobengula." See BNA, HC. 46/38, P. Gillmore to Sir R.H. Loch, April 22, 1885.

³⁶⁶ D. Schreuder and J. Butler (eds.), *Sir Graham Bower's Secret History of the Jameson Raid and the South African Crisis, 1895-1902* (Cape Town: van Riebeeck Society, 2002).

³⁶⁷ Originally, the country was divided into five native reserves being the Bamangwato, Batawana, Bakwena, Bakgatla and Bangwaketse reserves. See Proclamation no. 9 of 1899, the Tribal Territories Proclamation, March 29, 1899. Subsequent amendments of this Proclamation added the Bamalete in 1909 and the Batlokwa and the Barolong Farms in 1933. Tribal Territories Act of 1933 changed the names of these reserves from native reserves to tribal reserves. This application of the tribal model effectively rigidified the bio-political boundaries between the former native reserves.

while the Babirwa were dispossessed. The cession of the Tuli Block to the British and Khama's subsequent acquisition of the Motloutse-Shashe confluence therefore meant the expropriation of pastureland, fields and villages of the Babirwa, who were scattered in much of eastern Botswana, and their eventual removal from their lands.³⁶⁸

Prominent figures and elderly people in Bobirwa indicate that from the time the British took over most of the land along the Limpopo River, there was an influx of *makgoa*, "white people," whose encroachment gradually forced the Babirwa to move away from the immediate precincts of the River.³⁶⁹ "The River was a source of life to the Babirwa", laments Moagi Motsumi. "It flowed all year long. Our grandparents watered their cattle in its waters. Women harvested roofing grasses from its banks", adds old Mbat Mashaba. For Bathaloganyi Phuthego, displacing the Babirwa from the banks of the river exposed their cattle to hunger and thirst and "killed" people because *mothoka kgomo ke mokang a sule* (he who does not have cattle is as good as dead).³⁷⁰

The expression, *mothoka kgomo ke mokang a sule*, connotes "social death", a process of sparing human bodies while insidiously destroying their social fabric.³⁷¹ The Babirwa's loss of prime farmlands on the banks of the Limpopo River destroyed their pre-existing herd management systems of shifting domicile. By pushing the Babirwa into lands of marginal quality where herd movement was restricted, this process of

³⁶⁸ During this time, there were over 600 Babirwa families living in the land ceded to the British government and beyond it. Isaac Schapera, *The Ethnic Composition of the Tswana Tribes*. Monographs on Social Anthropology, no. 11 (London: London School of Economics and Political Science, 1952), p. 75.

³⁶⁹ Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema, Chapiro Molosiwa, Bobonong, February 9, 2011; Kenewang Mashaba, Joseph Makgosa, Molaladau Village, June 26, 2011.

³⁷⁰ Interview with Moagi Motsumi, Molaladau, February 5, 2011; Mbat Mashaba, Molaladau, July 15, 2011; Bathaloganyi Phuthego, Mogapi, December 26, 2010.

³⁷¹ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); Veena Das, "Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain," in Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock (ed.), *Social Suffering*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 78.

dispossession increased the vulnerability of cattle to ecological shocks and undermined some aspects of the Babirwa's pastoralist ethnicity. That is, while the bodies of the Babirwa survived the loss of cattle, the disappearance of some of the social networks and identities that were built through the exchange of cattle, such as patronage, killed part of their social fabric. Whereas social theorists have associated social death with powerlessness and victimhood³⁷², for the Babirwa this process of dying socially did not constitute the road to perdition. Instead, it inspired them to be resilient and adaptable to social and ecological change.

A Fractured Landscape: Drought, Rinderpest and Famine

From the end of 1895, the entire Protectorate was hit by a severe and prolonged drought, which caused low crop yields and depleted stores of food.³⁷³ The Babirwa lived in one of the driest places in Botswana primarily because it is located at a low altitude in a major river valley. The mean annual rainfall is only about 350mm and drought is a dominant feature of the climate.³⁷⁴ However, the fluid frontier between pastoral production and crop production ensured that people survived on the products of their cattle. Despite the increasing role of cattle in offering cultural capital, household subsistence and economic strength, both herding and crop production provided buffers against ecological stresses in a territory prone to rain-induced drought.³⁷⁵

³⁷² Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*.

³⁷³ BNA, RC. 3/2/1, Moffat account on failure of crops due to drought and locusts, 1895.

³⁷⁴ Rainfall records for Bobirwa for the years 1959 to 1991 reveal erratic rainfall with long hot dry spells. See Department of Meteorological Services, rainfall statistics, 1959-91 (Gaborone: Government Printer).

³⁷⁵ Edward I. Steinhart, "Herders and Farmers: The Tributary Mode of Production in Western Uganda", in Donald Crummey and Charles C. Stewart (eds.), *Modes of Production in Africa* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1981), pp. 115-156.

However, not much rain fell in 1896, making it ever more difficult for people to secure food. The scorching sun baked all the grasses and dried the Limpopo River (the only perennial river in the area), leaving only scattered pools. “*Gatwe letsatsi le ne le lela, go sena le ha e le lerothodi* (They say it was very hot, without a drop of rain)”, remembers ninety-two year old Ketholegile Phuthego, “women had no grass for roofing and men watched helplessly as cattle died.”³⁷⁶ These dry conditions were primarily a result of climate change.³⁷⁷ “Assisted by a severe drought,” observed an Assistant Commissioner who was stationed among the Bangwato, “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.”³⁷⁸ With little to eat and drink, the cattle produced very little milk. As the drought worsened, they began dying of hunger, thirst and general debilitation, or *mopalo* in Babirwa parlance.³⁷⁹

This prolonged drought coincided with the rinderpest pandemic, a disease that attacked and killed all bovine species, domestic and wild, at an alarming rate in Southern Africa between 1896 and 1897.³⁸⁰ Reference to the decimation of cattle by rinderpest in Botswana’s historical accounts, though brief, is pervasive. Sources that mention the

³⁷⁶ Interview with Ketholegile Phuthego, Mogapi, December 25, 2010. Also interview with Moloko Makgoba, Sefhophe, December 25, 2010.

³⁷⁷ By the turn of the twentieth century, the Limpopo River was becoming a weak perennial river where flows frequently ceased. In times of low rainfall, its flows became only episodic, and when drought became too prolonged, no surface water would be present over large stretches of the middle and lower reaches of the River.

³⁷⁸ BNA, RC. 3/2/1, Moffat account on failure of crops due to drought and locusts, 1895.

³⁷⁹ Interview with Moagi Motsumi, Molaladau, February 5, 2011; Bathaloganyi Phuthego, Mogapi, December 26, 2010.

³⁸⁰ Pule Phoofolo, “Face to Face With Famine: the Basotho and the Rinderpest, 1897-1899”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 29, no. 2 (June 2003), pp. 503-527; Charles van Onselen, “Reactions to Rinderpest in Southern Africa, 1896-7”, *Journal of African History*, 13, no. 3 (1972), p. 473-488; Pule Phoofolo, “Epidemics and Revolutions: The Rinderpest Epidemic in the Late Nineteenth-century Southern Africa”, *Past & Present*, vol. 138 (1993), pp. 12-43. For Botswana, see Gary Marquardt, “Water, Wood and Wild Animal Populations: Seeing the Spread of Rinderpest through the Physical Environment in Bechuanaland, 1896”, *South African Historical Journal*, 53 (2005): 73-98.

devastations of the disease “guesstimate” bovine mortality rates to around ninety-seven per cent of Bechuanaland’s cattle population.³⁸¹ Despite lack of definitive numerical evidence, however, these sources show that the casualties were unprecedented. Having entered Bechuanaland from western Zimbabwe, the Babirwa area, which borders western Zimbabwe, is likely to have felt the strongest effects of the contagion. The loss of cattle thus strained subsistence production, disintegrated the social fabric, and caused famines. Remembering what their grandparents told them about the famine or *tala*, some Babirwa women told me: “*go ne go bohiwa mala ka tukwi* (people tied their stomachs with head scarfs), *motsetse a j aka lebogo* (nursing mothers eating with their bare hands).”³⁸²

The metaphors, “tying stomach with head scarf” and “the nursing mother eats with bare hands”, continue to galvanize talk about years of hunger among the Babirwa today. They are often aptly used to emphasize the magnitude of the food crisis. *Go bofa mala ka tukwi* implies enduring hunger while *motsetse o ja ka lebogo* connotes a serious decline in the food supply. In the Babirwa’s natal traditions, the *batsetse* (sin. *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, when the famine intensified and threatened the nutrition of nursing babies and their mothers, such restrictions were relaxed as *batsetse* had to fend for themselves.³⁸³ Thus the late 1890s famine undermined even the most adhered to public health practices.

³⁸¹ Jeff Ramsay, “The Establishment and Consolidation of the Bechuanaland Protectorate, 1870-1910”, in W.A. Edge and M.H. Lekorwe, *Botswana: Politics and Society* (Pretoria: J.L. van Schaik Publishers, 1998), p. 77; Gary Marquardt, “Water, Wood and Wild Animal Populations”, p. 74.

³⁸² Interview with Ketholegile Phuthego, Mogapi, December 25, 2010; Mbat Mashaba, Kebonang Masilo, Barati Makgosa, Maemo Mosedame, Molaladau, July 15, 2011.

³⁸³ Interview with Ketholegile Phuthego, Mogapi, December 25, 2010; Mbat Mashaba, Kebonang Masilo, Barati Makgosa, Maemo Mosedame, Molaladau, July 15, 2011.

The relaxation of rules governing certain cultural practices and values, such as health care and the *botsetse* (confinement of mothers who have newly given birth), illuminates the Babirwa'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. Khama's cession of the Tuli Block to the colonial government had reduced the amount of land previously used by the Babirwa to raise their cattle, pushing them into marginal lands and increasing their vulnerability to drought and disease. Despite being exposed to the vagaries of ecological shocks, however, the Babirwa devised adaptive social mechanisms through which they negotiated the subsistence crisis caused by the loss of cattle to rinderpest. Constructing new ideas about their landscape as one of hunger, disease and famine, they re-appropriated and reconstituted certain pillars of their cultural, social and economic life, such as practices of courtesy, and hunting and foraging, to negotiate the hardships and, when these failed, they invented new strategies, such as wage employment, appropriate to specific situations.³⁸⁴ The droughts and famines therefore teased out patterns of living and survival in the Babirwa's landscape. Such patterns of living and survival offer insights into our understanding of their "situatedness", vulnerability and survival strategies.

For these reasons, this section focuses on famine and the Babirwa's creative adaptations to break the on-going academic silence about famine in Bechuanaland during the rinderpest era. This historiographical lacuna is surprising considering the cattle wealth

³⁸⁴ Interview with Moagi Motsumi, Molaladau, February 5, 2011; Bathaloganyi Phuthego, Mogapi, December 26, 2010; Barati Makgosa, Maemo Mosedame, Molaladau, July 15, 2011.

that communities held at the time.³⁸⁵ It also obscures the extent to which local communities depended on their cattle for survival. Despite being agro-pastoralists, the Babirwa, by the end of the nineteenth century, depended on their cattle for livelihoods more than they did on crops due to successive droughts that made rain-fed crop production a risky undertaking. By exterminating cattle, rinderpest disrupted livelihoods, destabilized subsistence practices, and triggered famines.³⁸⁶

Famines, socio-environmental histories in Southern Africa have demonstrated, are ecologically and socially modulated processes that gradually impoverish the population and do not necessarily imply the death of people.³⁸⁷ They are processes, which slowly render ineffective pre-existing alternative coping strategies that people have developed to adapt to ecological shocks. As creative adaptation strategies get eroded, the community becomes more and more dangerously impoverished. In Bobirwa, high cattle mortality rates, together with a declining arable farming sector, commercialized food in an area where buying and selling food was a relatively unknown exchange pattern and therefore further impoverished the Babirwa and made them vulnerable to famine.³⁸⁸ The commercialization of food resulted in dispossessions, deprivation and poverty on the part of the Babirwa as European traders took advantage of food shortages to raise prices. The sufferings inflicted by the rinderpest plague can therefore be understood well within the

³⁸⁵ 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 L.M.S Letters, Willoughby to Cousins, June 9, 1897; *Bechuanaland Protectorate Annual Reports*, 1898.

³⁸⁶ According to “guesstimates” approximately ninety-eight per cent of the cattle population died of disease or were culled. Ramsay, “The Establishment and Consolidation”, p. 79.

³⁸⁷ Diana Wylie, *Starving on a Full Stomach: Hunger and the Triumph of Cultural Racism in Modern South Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001); Diana Wylie, “The Changing Face of Hunger in Southern Africa”, *Past and Present* 122 (1989), pp. 159-199; Megan Vaughan, *The Story of an African Famine: Gender and Famine in Twentieth Century Malawi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

³⁸⁸ By the beginning of the twentieth-century, foodstuffs had been entirely commercialized and the prices were prohibitive for many people. See BNA, S. 602/1, territory of the B. P. statistics. *Blue Book*, 1904-05.

context of the dynamics of a combination of several ecological and socio-economic processes.

The subsistence crises that accompanied rinderpest were so cataclysmic for the Babirwa and other communities located along trade routes in Bechuanaland 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 people as much as it did animals. Writing to a newspaper in Lesotho, Lefantiri claimed:

[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.³⁸⁹

Contrary to Lefantiri's claims, there is no evidence anywhere in the region that people contracted rinderpest. In Bechuanaland, 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. Infections were particularly caused by shortage of milk as well as dependence on a diet bereft of vegetables and based primarily on meat as crop production was undermined by lack of rain.³⁹⁰ As the famine intensified and people became desperate, the Babirwa reconstituted pre-existing traditions and practices, and invented new coping mechanism to offset the crisis. Indigenous knowledge about hunger and enlarged traditions of dealing with food crises shaped many people's decisions about what coping mechanisms to adopt. Europeans, however, saw such strategies as curious and bound to fail. A white farmer, for

³⁸⁹ "Letter from Andreas Lefantiri", *Leselinyana [Moriya]*, 15 June 1897. Cited in Phoofolo, "Epidemics and Revolutions", p. 127.

³⁹⁰ Even as late as the 1930s, colonial officials were concerned at the severity of malnutrition, which medical officers ascribed to food deficiency. See B.N.A. S. 176/4, PMO to Shepherd, 4 May 1931.

instance, talked of “Africans postponing death by eating caterpillars, bark, roots and long-decayed corpses [of cattle].”³⁹¹ Such condescending remarks about indigenous famine coping strategies are revealing of Europeans’ little knowledge of Africans’ food systems and how they shifted with ecological shocks. On the contrary, recourse had always been taken to such coping strategies before as the Babirwa were not just agro-pastoralists. They were also hunters and foragers, though for the wealthy, hunting and foraging were part-time activities.³⁹²

In times of normal food supply, hunting, an exclusively male activity, was a pastime for men at the cattle posts and the meat was seldom shared with the women and children in the villages.³⁹³ Thus, hunting occupied a marginal position in household subsistence in times of normal food supply, and was therefore a supplementary measure as the Babirwa lived on a diet of cereal, milk, vegetables, and occasionally, meat from domesticates.³⁹⁴ Conversely, during famines it was carried out extensively. Since the colonial administration legally regulated hunting only in the 1940s (through the Game Proclamation no. 19 of 1940), the Babirwa survived by hunting small animals such as antelope.³⁹⁵

On the other hand, foraging, a female domain, was an important component of the traditional diet as it added to the nutritional value of the diet, particularly for poor families. During the rinderpest induced famine there was a phenomenal rise in gathering,

³⁹¹ “Rotting Carcasses and Ruined Men”, *Farmers’ Weekly* (26 Dec. 2003), p. 32.

³⁹² Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema; and headmen of arbitration, Onketetse Serumola and Adam Masilo, Bobonong, February 9, 2011.

³⁹³ Interview with cattle herders, Basupi, Dau-e-meja-leebana cattle posts, December 15, 2010; Rashasho, Mogapi, December 26, 2010.

³⁹⁴ Interview with Mbat Mashaba, Molaladau, July 15, 2011; Thaloganyo Goromente and Moreki Montsosi, Bobonong, March 13, 2011.

³⁹⁵ Interview with headmen of arbitration, Onketetse Serumola and Adam Masilo, Bobonong, February 9, 2011.

with some men becoming gatherers and whole families relying on wild food plants, worms and insects, such as locusts.³⁹⁶ One most relied upon food of the wilderness were the *mophane* worms, which though seasonal, added nutritional value to the diet.³⁹⁷ These are caterpillars that seasonally occur and feed on the leaves of the *mophane* tree, which dominates the vegetation in Bobirwa. Highly nutritious, *phane*, as the Babirwa call these caterpillars, remains a popular delicacy in Bobirwa today. The Babirwa women harvested and preserved it by cooking or smoking, drying and storing in a cool place, particularly the grass-roofed mud hut. In that way, people could consume their stores until the next harvest.³⁹⁸

The Babirwa also subsisted on meat of animals killed by rinderpest, some of which would be semi-decomposed. Being the primary source of food, because of its abundance and the corresponding shortage of other foodstuffs, the meat of rinderpest cattle had to be preserved, specifically through sun drying. Despite the art of drying meat already imbedded in the Babirwa's food preservation techniques, the extended days of unusually high temperatures for most of the year often resulted in the semi-decomposition of the meat. But this semi-decomposed meat, or *nama ee dikologileng seolo* was deemed to be in an edible state.³⁹⁹ The reference to semi-decomposed meat as *nama ee dikologileng seolo*, rather than *nama ee bodileng*, or rotten meat, was an inventive strategy to survive

³⁹⁶ Interview with Moloko Makgoba, Sefhophe, December 25, 2010; Kgosi Mmirwa Malema, Bobonong, February 9, 2011.

³⁹⁷ *Phane* is still a valuable component of the diet in central, eastern, northern and northwestern Botswana today.

³⁹⁸ Interview with Mbat Mashaba, Molaladau, July 15, 2011; Diakanyo Molebatsi, Tsetsebjwe, August 10, 2011.

³⁹⁹ Interview with Oteng Juta, Mogapi, December 25, 2010; Kgosi Mmirwa Malema; and headmen of arbitration, Onketetse Serumola and Adam Masilo, Bobonong, February 9, 2011. This semi-decomposed meat continues to be part of the Babirwa's dietary habits today. However, I am not suggesting that the Babirwa deliberately decompose meat prior to consuming it. Whenever meat decomposes during the process of drying, it is cooked and dried so as to kill bacteria and preserve it for later use.

under conditions of serious food insecurity. With knowledge that rotten meat could cause a sickness called *mala* (lit. intestines), or diarrhoea, and therefore be seen as inedible, the Babirwa drew on the proverb: *sebodu se lekwa ka legano, sa nko le latsa le tala* (lit. eat even whatever smells bad or you will sleep on an empty stomach), or “people who are too selective in what they eat will starve”, to give semi-decomposed meat an image of edibility.⁴⁰⁰ With this expression in mind, the Babirwa incorporated *nama e e dikologileng seolo* from rinderpest cattle into their daily diets.

The eating of this semi-decomposed meat was also part of a longstanding practice based on the notion that *kgomo ga e lathwe* (lit. a cow cannot be thrown away), or “it is wasteful to throw away meat of cattle when raising them is such an arduous task.” Also, based on the expression: *lebita la kgomo ke legano* (lit. the grave of a cow is the mouth), the Babirwa could not fathom their cattle dying and being thrown away. As Kgosi Mmirwa Malema reminded me, “for us, the idea of *poloko* (lit. Safekeeping), or burial, connotes wholeness. As you are aware”, he continued, “a human corpse has to be buried whole. 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.”⁴⁰¹ Perhaps this belief that cattle should be “buried in the mouths of people” informed Herskovits’s idea of the “cattle complex.”⁴⁰²

The consumption of *nama e e dikologileng seolo* may have caused food poisoning and opportunistic infections. In the border communities of the Transvaal, for instance, reports were abounding about pervasive food poisoning among Africans, which the

⁴⁰⁰ Interview with Oteng Juta, Mogapi, December 25, 2010; Kgosi Mmirwa Malema, Bobonong, February 9, 2011.

⁴⁰¹ Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema, Bobonong, February 9, 2011. Also interview with Bathaloganyi Phuthego, Mogapi, December 25, 2010.

⁴⁰² In 1926, anthropologist, Melville Herskovitz, 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*, vol. xxviii (1926), 230-272.

Secretary of Native Affairs attributed to eating meat from animals killed by disease.⁴⁰³

The Transvaal borders eastern Botswana and as a frontier community, the Babirwa who had kin in the Transvaal, frequently moved back and forth across the border. With people having the same experiences of famine, coupled with kinship relations, the eating of decomposed meat of rinderpest cattle may have easily permeated the porous boundaries.

There is therefore likelihood that the Babirwa in Bechuanaland were affected in a similar manner as their kin in the Transvaal.

Other than subsisting on the meat of rinderpest cattle, the Babirwa re-appropriated, reconstituted and sometimes discarded certain pillars of their cultural life to negotiate the ensuing subsistence crises. Sharing food has historical precedence. It falls within the broader historical context of the Babirwa teaching children the values of giving and instilling in them a sense of community. From an early age, a group of children would eat from one container to cultivate in them a sense of sharing. In old woman, Moloko Makgoba's words, "*bana bane ba ja bothe*, children ate together, and whoever refused to share food (children and adults alike) were labelled *magodu* (sin. *legodu*) or thieves."⁴⁰⁴ As much as land for producing food, particularly for crop and animal farming and for foraging and hunting, was shared, the understanding was that even the food produced from the land had to be shared.

Under circumstances of normal food security, people who would otherwise have failed to command food often benefited from proverbs 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*

⁴⁰³ Charles Ballard, "The Repercussions of Rinderpest: Cattle Plague and Peasant Decline in Colonial Natal", *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, vol. 19, no. 3 (1986) p. 444.

⁴⁰⁴ Interview with Moloko Makgoba, Sefhophe, December 25, 2010. This idea of food sharing was confirmed by other women such as Mbat Mashaba, Molaladau, July 15, 2011; Diakanyo Molebatsi, Tsetsebjwe, August 10, 2011.

kgaona tlhogwana ya ntsi (lit. siblings share the head of a fly).⁴⁰⁵ The former implies that no matter how little the food, it is always enough for everybody. 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 if they had visited outside meal times because, as Thaloganyo Goromente and Mbat Mashaba note, “*Babirwa ba a sikana*,” or the Babirwa are all kin.⁴⁰⁶ The term *baeng* connotes both invited and uninvited guests. Most of the visitors came uninvited, but, in times of plenty, they could still be offered food depending on availability.⁴⁰⁷

Prior to the famine, such uninvited guests were known as the *bahiti*, or the passers-by. The *bahiti* were known for their notoriety to *apaya ka lenao* (lit. cook with one’s foot), or visiting solely for food. 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 *heta*, or pass-by, during meal times. Visitors of any kind, upon reaching the entrance of every household they wanted to enter, would shout: “*ke a heta!*” (“I am passing by!”). Courtesy required the owner of the household they were supposedly passing-by to shout back: “*heta!*” (“pass on!”) to invite them in, as keeping quiet would be interpreted as antisocial.⁴⁰⁸ Contrary to its English equivalent of “pass on”, the call,

⁴⁰⁵ Interview with, Mbat Mashaba, Molaladau, July 15, 2011; Diakanyo Molebatsi, Tsetsebjwe, August 10, 2011.

⁴⁰⁶ Interview with, Thaloganyo Goromente, Bobonong, March 13, 2011; Mbat Mashaba, Molaladau, July 15, 2011.

⁴⁰⁷ Interview with, Mbat Mashaba, Molaladau, July 15, 2011; Diakanyo Molebatsi, Tsetsebjwe, August 10, 2011; Thaloganyo Goromente, Bobonong, March 13, 2011; Mbat Mashaba, Molaladau, July 15, 2011.

⁴⁰⁸ This information is based on the conversations I had with several Babirwa old women who shared with me their grandparents and relatives’ lived experiences of the devastations of rinderpest and how they coped with the subsistence crises that ensued thereof. Interview with Moloko Makgoba, Sefophe, December 25,

“*heta*”, connoted an invitation to enter the compound. Before the subsistence crises of the rinderpest era, however, such visits from the *bahiti* were few and far apart.

As household subsistence became dangerously compromised, the numbers of the *bahiti* 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 of food supply, would accord visitors access to the meals of other households.⁴⁰⁹ Subsequently, the tradition of sharing was undermined as people tried to protect household subsistence. The *bahiti* became reconstituted into the *di eta di ema*, or “things that always stop by”, for their notoriety in entering other households for the sole purposes of getting food.⁴¹⁰

One social theorist has termed this process of giving people the image of things as “thingfication.”⁴¹¹ The reconstruction of the *bahiti* into these invasive things called the *di eta di ema* dehumanized all classes of hungry people, representing them as scavengers. By “thingfying” the *bahiti*, the Babirwa were therefore redefining what would be socially acceptable during times of normal food supply, the hungry people’s attempts to secure food, as invasive. To effectively subvert the power of these scavenging “things” called the *di eta di ema*, households discarded one of their pillars of food sharing and courtesy. They stopped offering uninvited guests food, thus ignoring the proverb: *sejo se nnye ga*

2010; Ketholegile Phuthego, Mogapi, December 25, 2010; Mbat Mashaba, Molaladau, July 15, 2011; Diakanyo Molebatsi, Tsetsebjwe, July 1, 2011.

⁴⁰⁹ Interview with Mbat Mashaba, Molaladau, July 15, 2011; Diakanyo Molebatsi, Tsetsebjwe, August 10, 2011; Thaloganyo Goromente, Bobonong, March 13, 2011.

⁴¹⁰ Interview with Moloko Makgoba, Sefophe, December 25, 2010; Diakanyo Molebatsi, Tsetsebjwe, July 1, 2011.

⁴¹¹ Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, translated by Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review, 2000 [1955]), p. 42.

se hete molomo.⁴¹² In times when the majority of households had enough food, this proverb expressed food sharing, a pillar of social cohesion which provided food 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 became highly guarded secrets. Divulging information about a family's eating habits would most likely attract unwanted visitors and children who dared divulge such information to outsiders were certain to forfeit a meal as they would be told: "your meal has been offered to your visitors."⁴¹³ Missionary impressions also indicate that food was so scarce that preparation and eating of meals was done with maximum silence.⁴¹⁴ This idea of meals being prepared and consumed in silence resonates with the Babirwa's apt cautionary phrase: *didimala! o ta re biletsa di eta di ema*, or "hush! You will attract the things that stop by." This phrase developed during the famine to silence children who, after going for the whole day without a meal, got excited in the evenings in anticipation of something to eat.⁴¹⁵ The dread of the *di eta di ema* thus shifted meal times and reconstituted having a meal into an activity of stealth and silence, and thus "transformed all the Babirwa into the *magodu*, thieves, because nobody wanted to share food."⁴¹⁶

The subsistence crises also produced new forms of gendered masculine power as men uncharacteristically invaded women's domains, particularly the *sebeso*, (lit. a place

⁴¹² Interview with Bonang Sekonopo, Tsetsebjwe, July 1, 2011; Mbata Mashaba, Molaladau, July 15, 2011; Motsamai Keoreng, Gobojango, June 4, 2011.

⁴¹³ Interview with Bonang Sekonopo, Tsetsebjwe, July 1, 2011; Moloko Makgoba, Sefophe, December 25, 2010; Ketholegile Phuthego, Mogapi, December 25, 2010.

⁴¹⁴ Marcel Dreier, "Years of Terrible Drought: Surviving the 1895-1897 Supply-Crisis in the Limpopo Area", *Limpopo Histories* (2005). <http://www.unibas.ch/afrika/limpopo>. Accessed June 2, 2012.

⁴¹⁵ Interview with Moloko Makgoba, Sefophe, December 25, 2010; Ketholegile Phuthego, Mogapi, December 25, 2010.

⁴¹⁶ Interview with Moloko Makgoba, Sefophe, December 25, 2010; Ketholegile Phuthego, Mogapi, December 25, 2010.

for setting fire) or cooking space. Under normal circumstances, the *sebeso* was the preserve of women, particularly when it did not involve the preparation of large amounts of meat.⁴¹⁷ But some men started sticking around such women's spaces, especially during meal preparation times. There are tales of men sitting next to their wives during dishing time 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, Mbat Mashaba's narrative:

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.⁴¹⁸

These gender struggles seem to have produced new forms of naming, with some women giving their sons names that had resonance with food preparation, such as *Rradijo*, he who loves food, *Sebeso*, fireplace, and *Pitsana*, small pot.⁴¹⁹ 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 domains where women could exercise power beyond the purview of male dominance.

Historical practices of courtesy were, however, not only compromised because of shortage of food. The subsistence crises that occurred between the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries coincided with the incorporation of Bechuanaland into the world market economy. The Babirwa were already becoming used to selling their cattle

⁴¹⁷ Interview with Gabatshabe Baipidi and Bathaloganyi Phuthego, Mogapi, December 26, 2010.

⁴¹⁸ Interview with Mbat Mashaba, Molaladau, July 15, 2011. Mashaba's story was supported by Moloko Makgoba, Sefophe, December 25, 2010; Ketholegile Phuthego, Mogapi, December 25, 2010.

⁴¹⁹ Interview with Bonang Sekonopo, Tsetsebjwe, July 1, 2011; Moloko Makgoba, Sefophe, December 25, 2010; Ketholegile Phuthego, Mogapi, December 25, 2010.

and grain for cash to European traders.⁴²⁰ Additionally, cash was beginning to dominate local exchange patterns as some men from across Bechuanaland had started taking wage employment as early as the 1880s.⁴²¹ In eastern Botswana, there existed European trading stores, which were known as the “bush stores.”⁴²² As the Babirwa men and other communities’ men entered the wage labor markets, and cash began to dominate local exchange patterns, these stores bought grain from Africans during years of bumper harvests and sold it back during times of low yields.⁴²³

As food became scarcer, these retailers raised prices, leading to the *dikgosi* appealing to colonial authorities that “we have got no money but we want food.”⁴²⁴ Thus Food was available in the “bush stores” but the Babirwa were unable to secure it because of a prohibitive pricing regime. High prices of food, accompanied by the poverty caused by the loss of cattle and low crop yields therefore put food sources beyond the reach of many Babirwa households, leading to widespread famine.⁴²⁵ Consequently, the Babirwa discarded most of their traditional practices of courtesy whereby food entitlements were extended to non-family members, particularly the *baeng*. As individuals and households began to protect household subsistence against the *baeng*, social integration weakened and society became ever more individualistic.⁴²⁶

⁴²⁰ Neil Parsons, “The Economic History of Khama’s Country”, p. 127.

⁴²¹ Lord Hailey, *Native Administration in the British African Territories Part V*, p. 160.

⁴²² Chiponde Mushinge, “The Impact of Colonial Policies on Ecological Control and African Cattle Production in Botswana, 1885-1954”, *Eastern Africa Social Science Research Review*, vol. 6, no. 2 (1990), p. 7.

⁴²³ Chiponde Mushinge, “The Impact of Colonial Policies”, p. 7.

⁴²⁴ BNA, RC. 3/2/2, Chief Bathoen I Gaseitsiwe to Ellenberger, 17 June 1897; Surmon to Resident commissioner, 26 June 1897.

⁴²⁵ B.N.A., R.C. 3/2/1, Moffat eye witness report on loss by rinderpest, 1896; BNA, RC. 3/2/2, Moffat report, 1897.

⁴²⁶ Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema; headman of arbitration, Onketsetse Serumola, Bobonong, February 9, 2011.

By 1904, the tradition of sharing food with non-relatives had almost disappeared as households protected their stressed food stores against “marauding hordes” of hungry people.⁴²⁷ Access to food within families had also become unequal as men used their power as household heads to get a disproportionately higher share of the little food available. The disintegration of the social fabric as it pertained to food was compounded by the advent of the cash nexus. Unlike cattle, which were seen as communal because many people could benefit from them, cash introduced the notion of private property.⁴²⁸ The need to raise cash to pay taxes necessitated the sale of surplus grain instead of sharing it with needy relatives and neighbours. All these undermined social cohesion and exposed many people to famine.⁴²⁹ But the loss of cattle did not spell cultural genocide among the Babirwa. This was evident in the endurance of the institution of *dzeo*, marriage. As cattle died, and *magadi* or *dikgomo* (lit. cattle), bridewealth, temporarily lost significance as a channel through which cattle as coveted resources were redistributed, marriage nevertheless retained its central position in the reproduction of social relations. For these reasons, Bridewealth among the Babirwa was not a timeless tradition but a transformative practice with historical salience.⁴³⁰

The practice of giving bridewealth took on a variety of forms and meanings depending on particular socio-environmental changes over time and space. As a result of the changes in its interpretations and functions, and the differentiated ways of practicing

⁴²⁷ BNA, S. 602/1, Territory of the Bechuanaland Protectorate. Statistics. *Blue Book*, 1904-1905.

⁴²⁸ Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema; headman of arbitration, Onketetse Serumola, Bobonong, February 9, 2011.

⁴²⁹ Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema and headman of arbitration, Onketetse Serumola, Bobonong, February 9, 2011.

⁴³⁰ For insights on the changing nature of bridewealth, see for example, N. Ansell, “Because it’s our Culture!” (Re)negotiating the Meaning of Lobola in Southern African Secondary Schools”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 27, no. 4 (2001), pp. 697-716; D. Jeater, *Marriage, Perversion and Power: The Construction of Moral Discourse in Southern Rhodesia* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

and understanding it, bridewealth became central to marriage in particular spaces and times and peripheral in others. Before the Babirwa became cattle keepers, marriage was still essential in building social relations. During the first half of the nineteenth century, for instance, people could still get married without giving bridewealth through the tradition of *mogombo*, or taking for free.⁴³¹ Through this practice, a poor suitor would, following *pato* (formal talks preceding the giving of bridewealth), stealthily take the bride and spend the night with her at his parents' place. In the morning the parents of the suitor would send a go-between, *sebang*, to go and inform the parents of the woman that their daughter spent the night with their son.⁴³² This presented the in-laws of the suitor with a *fait accompli* as bridal abduction was used in lieu of bridewealth, thus declaring the couple married.

Mogombo was therefore culturally acceptable to empower the *bakhumanegi*, poor men, to get married. But even then, bridewealth was still given in various forms by those who could afford it and depending on social location. According to eminent figures in Bobirwa, during the early nineteenth century, when hunting and arable agriculture were the primary productive tasks, animal skins were prestigious items in bridewealth exchanges between families of hunters and those of the royal houses; craftsmen gave bridewealth in the form of axes and hoes; and ordinary men could still provide bride-service whereby they worked in the fields of their in-laws for a stipulated period of

⁴³¹ Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema, and headman of arbitration, Onketetse Serumola, Bobonong, February 9, 2011.

⁴³² The word, *pato*, derives its utility from the verb, *go bata*, used in reference to searching for cattle. It is also used as a metaphor to represent a process whereby the parents of the groom-to-be ask the parents of the bride-to-be to allow their daughter to be married by their son. Such a process is known as *go bata mosadi* (lit. to search for a wife). Interview with Moloko Makgoba, Sefhophe, December 25, 2010; Kgosi Mmirwa Malema, February 9, 2011.

time.⁴³³ With the rise of a Babirwa pastoralist identity, marriage became increasingly consummated through *dikgomo* or *magadi* cattle.⁴³⁴ As cattle became more central to marriage and their acquisition became a route to gaining wealth and high social status, cases of *mogombo* became a rarity. With the loss of cattle to rinderpest, however, the Babirwa again tapped into this pre-colonial tradition of *mogombo* to sustain the institution of *dzeo* and many marriages were consummated in this manner.⁴³⁵

The devastations of the rinderpest also marked the rise of wage labor migration for the entire Bechuanaland as men took up mining contracts in South Africa or found employment in the nearby settler farms.⁴³⁶ Even women abandoned their homes and migrated in search of employment.⁴³⁷ Intent on building a self-financing colony, the colonial administration took advantage of the inflowing mine labour remittances to introduce taxes, culminating in the imposition of the Hut Tax in 1899.⁴³⁸ But the Tax was followed by widespread defaults and evasions as people resisted or did not have the means to pay.⁴³⁹

Initially, Khama protested against colonial taxation mainly due to the ravages of drought, famine and the loss of cattle. He also feared that colonial taxation would eclipse his own efforts at taxing the Bangwato subject groups. But once he, and other *dikgosi*,

⁴³³ Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema, headmen of arbitration, Onketetse Serumola and Adam Masilo, Bobonong, February 9, 2011; Headman, Kethalehile Gabanamotse, Tsetsebjwe, July 2, 2011.

⁴³⁴ Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema, headmen of arbitration, Onketetse Serumola and Adam Masilo, Bobonong, February 9, 2011; Moloko Makgoba, Sefhophe, December 25, 2010;

⁴³⁵ Interview with Moloko Makgoba, Sefhophe, December 25, 2010; Kgosi Mmirwa Malema, February 9, 2011.

⁴³⁶ Isaac Schapera, *Migrant Labour and Tribal Life: a Study of Conditions in the Bechuanaland Protectorate* (London: Oxford University Press, 1947); W.G. Morapedi, "Migrant Labour and the Peasantry in the Bechuanaland Protectorate, 1930-1965", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 25, no. 2 (1999), pp. 197-214.

⁴³⁷ *Blue Book on Native Affairs*, 1899, 65; Isaac Schapera, *Migrant Labour and Tribal Life*.

⁴³⁸ Christian J. Makgala, "Taxation in the Tribal Areas", p. 281.

⁴³⁹ Julie Livingston, "Physical Fitness and Economic Opportunity in the Bechuanaland Protectorate in the 1930s and the 1940s", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 27, no. 4 (2001), p. 798.

were appointed as tax collectors and offered ten per cent of the total taxes they collected from their people, he relented and colluded with colonial officials to “persuade” men to migrate to the mines.⁴⁴⁰ The tax revenue itself did not benefit the Babirwa, and the rest of Bechuanaland’s colonial subjects. For instance, no medical services were provided despite a rise in disease incidence.⁴⁴¹ Eventually, lack of medical services had reverberating demographic effects as human mortality escalated and population growth was considerably arrested.⁴⁴² Human mortality during this period was estimated at about twenty per cent of the country’s total population.⁴⁴³ 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.⁴⁴⁴

In addition, there were very few men from Bechuanaland in wage employment at this time. Even with the construction of the north/south rail line that passed through eastern Bechuanaland, contractors hired very few locals. 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”,⁴⁴⁵ said missionary John Moffat. Contrary to European stereotypes of indolent Bechuanaland’s men, however, evidence suggests that the Babirwa men abhorred wage employment only when it coincided with the cultivation season during a time when droughts were recurring at short intervals. Earlier in 1891, the Babirwa men employed in the construction of the Mafikeng-Bulawayo Telegraph line had gone on

⁴⁴⁰ Christian J. Makgala, “Taxation in the Tribal Areas”, p. 286.

⁴⁴¹ R.K.K. Molefi, *A Medical History of Botswana*, 1885-1966 (Gaborone: the Botswana Society, 1996), 9.

⁴⁴² B.N.A. S. 43/4, ‘HC to Hon. Lewis Harcourt, MP’, 6 Nov 1911.

⁴⁴³ Jeff Ramsay, “The Establishment and Consolidation”, 72.

⁴⁴⁴ Monageng Mogalakwe, “How Britain Underdeveloped Bechuanaland Protectorate: a Brief Critique of the Political Economy of Colonial Botswana”, *African Development*, vol. 31 (2006), pp. 66-88.

⁴⁴⁵ B.N.A., R.C. 3/2/1, “Moffat account on relief”, 1896.

strike at the beginning of the cultivation season.⁴⁴⁶ These men accused Khama and “white men” for tying them to wage employment at the expense of their households’ subsistence needs: “It is all very well for Khama and you white men,” charged the telegraph employees. “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,”⁴⁴⁷ they complained.

Responding to my questions regarding their purported laziness, one old man informed me: “The white man’s work isolated men from their families. The home breaks down when a man stays away for a long period of time”, to which his friend added: “My father told me of the disappearance of his brother who went to work in the Transvaal farms.”⁴⁴⁸ These testimonies illuminate the Babirwa’s understanding of the difference between *tiro*, or doing, and *mmereko*, or work. While *tiro* kept families together because it was a household activity, *mmereko* was an individuating process that siphoned away the necessary social capital, leading to the breakdown of families. The experience of “natives” openly challenging chiefly and colonial authority, rather than their purported indolence, may have influenced the decision of Europeans to avoid hiring Babirwa men.

The Europeans’ imaginations of the ‘indolent’ Babirwa men shaped the land struggles that gained momentum from 1904 when the colonial administration transferred the Tuli Block to the British South Africa Company (BSAC). By 1904, only Malema’s

⁴⁴⁶ A.G. Leonard, *How We Made Rhodesia* (London, 1896), p. 34. Cited in Parsons, Neil, “The Economic History of Khama’s Country in Botswana, 1844-1930”, Robin Palmer and Neil Parsons (eds.), *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), p. 124.

⁴⁴⁷ A.G. Leonard, *How We Made Rhodesia*, p. 34. Cited in Parsons, “The Economic History of Khama’s Country”, p. 124. Oral sources, however, show that there were very few Babirwa men who cultivated the fields alongside women at by the end of the nineteenth century.

⁴⁴⁸ Interview with Motsami Keoreng and Kagiso Modibedi, Gobojango, June 4, 2011.

Babirwa remained in the Tuli Block.⁴⁴⁹ The Company saw them as a nuisance and potential obstruction to modernized agricultural developments in the area. Appropriating racial stereotypes of indolent “natives”, the BSAC warned Malema’s people that they could only continue to live in the Tuli Block as laborers.⁴⁵⁰ The objective was to scare the Babirwa away with threats of working for the white man and expand the Tuli Block beyond its initial borders.⁴⁵¹ But Malema’s people refused to move. Nor did they accede to settler demands that they become farm laborers. This standoff eventually led to the forceful eviction of Malema’s people from the Tuli Block and their relocation to the Bangwato Reserve, an experience that a South African human rights lawyer has called “the tragedy of the Babirwas.”⁴⁵²

“The Tragedy of the *Ababirwas*”: Malema, Forced Removals and the Babirwa in Ordered Colonial Space, 1904-1929

Between 1904 and 1905, the colonial administration transferred the Tuli Block, together with the other settler farming enclaves, otherwise called the Blocks, (Tati, Lobatse, Gaborone, Ghanzi), to the British South Africa Company (BSAC).⁴⁵³ The transfer of the Blocks to Company administration marked the beginning of the privatization of all lands

⁴⁴⁹ The Babirwa of Pitse, Mmadema, Serumola and Kgwalalala had willingly left the Tuli Block area after its cession to the British Government in 1895. G.B. Molelu, “The history of the Babirwa from pre-colonial times to early Ngwato rule, 1820-1926” (BA Dissertation, University of Botswana, 1985), p. 17.

⁴⁵⁰ T. Maruatona, “A Historical Analysis of the Conditions of Farm Labourers in Freehold Farms: A Case of the Tuli Block, 1930-1975 (B.A. Dissertation, University of Botswana, 1988), p. 6.

⁴⁵¹ T. Maruatona, “A Historical Analysis”, p. 6.

⁴⁵² Emanuel Gluckmann, *The Tragedy of the Ababirwas and some reflections of Sir Herbert Sloley’s Report* (Johannesburg: Central News Agency, June 1922). Reprinted from the Rand Daily Mail, May 1922.

⁴⁵³ Proclamation no. 13 of 1904 created the Tuli Block in favor of the British South Africa Company. See Bechuanaland Protectorate (Lands) Order in Council, 1904. See also Bechuanaland Protectorate (Lands) Order in Council, 1910, which created the Crown Lands or areas reserved for the British Crown in which Europeans were settled. Europeans, like Africans, were also settled in reserves but for economic and strategic reasons rather than simply administrative motives. Reserving land for European settlers, who were predominantly farmers, meant the generation of revenue for the administration as these farmers produced commercial products for trade in the region. They also provided local employment therefore increasing taxation revenue. At a more political level, reserving land for the Crown secured its claims to land within the Protectorate and by extension the Protectorate itself.

initially designated European settler areas thus giving credence to Chamberlain's 1895 remark that in the future Bechuanaland would be administered by the BSAC.⁴⁵⁴ The BSAC immediately parceled out plots of land in the Tuli Block to more English settler farmers, in the process displacing the Babirwa from all prime lands in this area.

At this time, Khama was also beginning a hegemonic process in the Babirwa territory, physically expanding Ngwato territory to include all the Babirwa lands. Earlier in 1894, Khama had given refuge to groups of the BaGanawa, BaSileka and BaDalaunde (today called Batalaote) who were fleeing from Boer conquest in the Transvaal.⁴⁵⁵ At the time the Tuli Block was transferred to the BSAC, Khama was settling these groups on the former disputed territory – the Motloutse-Limpopo confluence – at a place today called Bobonong, to which he later sent his son-in-law, Modisaotsile Mokomane, as a *kgosana* (chief's representative).⁴⁵⁶ This resettlement of foreigners in the Babirwa territory produced a frontier that shaped the fluidity of the Babirwa's ethnic identity. The intermarriage that took place between the Babirwa and these foreigners reshaped the Babirwa's ethnicity into an identity not only defined by common ancestry but by ethnic diversity. The process of close socio-cultural interaction between the groups also led to linguistic change as the Sebirwa language loaned foreign words thus producing a hybridized form of Sebirwa, which is spoken today. The emerging ethnic diversity in the Babirwa territory defeated colonial efforts at rigidifying identities.

⁴⁵⁴ BNA, S. 466/3, Secretary of state. Interview with 3 Bechuanaland chiefs (Khama, Bathoen and Sebele), November 6, 1895.

⁴⁵⁵ Neil Parsons, "Settlement in East-central Botswana", p. 122.

⁴⁵⁶ Isaac Schapera calls such administrators, "district governors" for their role as rulers of subject groups who occupied outlying lands falling under Ngwato suzerainty. Isaac Schapera, "The Political Organization of the Ngwato of the Bechuanaland Protectorate", in M. Fortes and E.E. Evans-Pritchard (eds.), *African Political Systems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940), p. 61.

Khama's resettling of foreigners in the Babirwa territory was also an economically motivated strategy of transforming the Shashe and Motloutse watersheds into landscapes of subordinated people whose existence would rest on providing herding labor for Ngwato cattle, and who would increase his colonial tax commission.⁴⁵⁷ The BSAC's encroachment on the Tuli Block and Khama's settlement of foreigners in the Babirwa territory therefore combined to constitute the plank upon which the Babirwa and other communities were consequently brought together and consolidated under one umbrella social unit and a single geographic entity called Bobirwa, land of the Babirwa, inside the Bangwato Reserve.⁴⁵⁸ This geographic entity was therefore a result of Khama and the colonial government's resettlements of disparate groups of people for administrative purposes, for tax collection and to secure labor.⁴⁵⁹

The resettlement of the Babirwa coincided with the appointment of the *dikgosi* of the Tswana-speaking groups, Bangwato, Bangwaketse, Bakgatla and Bakwena and Batawana as tax collectors, earning a ten percent commission on total taxes collected.⁴⁶⁰ More tax collected meant therefore more commission for *dikgosi*. In order to increase his tax earnings, Khama sought to expand the Bangwato population by incorporating the Babirwa and other groups in eastern Botswana. The economic prospects of tax collection, coupled with the harassment meted on *dikgosi* whose tax returns fell below colonial expectations, led to overzealous enforcement of the tax law and subsequently abuse of the

⁴⁵⁷ Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema, headmen of arbitration, Onketetse Serumola and Adam Masilo, Bobonong, February 9, 2011; Headman, Kethalehile Gabanamotse, Tsetsebjwe, July 2, 2011.

⁴⁵⁸ Neil Parsons, "Settlement in East-central Botswana", p. 122.

⁴⁵⁹ Christian John Makgala, "Taxation in the Tribal Areas", p. 281.

⁴⁶⁰ Christian John Makgala, "Taxation in the Tribal Areas", p. 281.

office of *bogosi* (chiefship), which had been transformed into a revenue collecting office.⁴⁶¹

For the Bangwato Reserve, Khama forced people to pay their taxes in cash and subject peoples who defaulted were rounded up and closed into kraals like cattle and later sent out to work.⁴⁶² In fact, the Bangwato's representations of subject peoples had always been patronizing, dehumanizing and paternalistic. They saw these groups as "lesser breeds" and as such called them *meratshwana*, which implied that the subject groups were miniature communities when compared to the *morafe* or state (as the Bangwato referred to themselves).⁴⁶³ Khama himself treated men, women and children in these subject communities as a homogenous category of *bana*, children, as evidenced by his paternalistic gestures: "He is always on horseback, visiting the outlying kraals", said one observer of Khama in 1892. "He has a word for everyone; he calls every woman "my daughter", and every man "my son."⁴⁶⁴

It would seem that the Bangwato's infantilizing and patronizing treatment of the subject people's had the support of colonial officials as long as the prime object was to induce men to pay their taxes. As one resident magistrate in the Bangwato Reserve was later to make a revelation in 1934: "When tax defaulters were brought before me I gave them suspended sentences to enable them to obtain work."⁴⁶⁵ While the resident magistrate's description of the process of inducement to pay sounds less violent, the fact that he took it upon himself to arrange for a labor recruiter to seek out defaulters

⁴⁶¹ Monageng Mogalakwe, "How Britain Underdeveloped Bechuanaland", p. 78; C.J. Makgala, "Taxation in the Tribal Areas", pp. 279-303.

⁴⁶² Interview with Baagi Ngwako (tax collector in 1940), Bobonong, June 12, 2011. Diana Wylie's informants also recounted the kraaling punishment to her in 1986. Diana Wylie, *A Little God*, p. 240, footnote 30.

⁴⁶³ Diana Wylie, "Lesser Breeds without a law", in *A Little God*, pp. 149-155.

⁴⁶⁴ James Theodore Bent, *The Ruined Cities of Mashonaland* (London: Longman, Green, 1892), p. 27.

⁴⁶⁵ BNA, S. 391/7, Resident Magistrate, Francistown, to General Secretary, May 17, 1934.

wherever they were being held is tantamount to coercion.⁴⁶⁶ Taking into account the devastations of the rinderpest pandemic, such overzealous enforcement of the tax law and the demands that tax should be strictly paid in cash forced the Babirwa to seek wage work.

Other than forcing people to seek wage work, colonial taxation expropriated the Babirwa as they were forced by tax demands to sell their cattle to raise the necessary cash. A small diversion suffices here to put into perspective the idea of tax divesting the Babirwa of their cattle. While the Babirwa lost all their cattle to rinderpest between 1896 and 1897, rebuilding herds was achieved relatively quickly. Rinderpest followed trade routes in the south and east Bechuanaland. The north and west Bechuanaland where such routes were not yet developed had incurred minimal to no losses.⁴⁶⁷ The Bangwato, particularly Khama, who had large herds in these areas, loaned them out to the Babirwa chiefs, such as Sekoba, Mbalane, Serumola and Mmadema.⁴⁶⁸ These chiefs in turn re-loaned some of the cattle to their subjects as per the 1875 Khama's decree that allowed retainers of Ngwato royal cattle to farm out part of those herds to subjects under them in the outlying provinces of the Bangwato state.⁴⁶⁹ For Malema's Babirwa, who were still living in the Tuli Block and therefore autonomous of Khama's authority, rebuilding was achieved by stealing cattle from settler farms (see below), smuggling cattle from their kin in the Transvaal and purchasing from Europeans.⁴⁷⁰

⁴⁶⁶ BNA, S. 391/7, Resident Magistrate, Francistown, to General Secretary, May 17, 1934.

⁴⁶⁷ Jeff Ramsay, "The Establishment and Consolidation", pp. 74-75.

⁴⁶⁸ In 1916, Khama explained the High Commissioner in the Cape that he rescinded royal monopoly of cattle in 1875, and individuals owned cattle as private property in his state. BNA, J. 978 A, Khama to High Commissioner, March 28, 1916.

⁴⁶⁹ Neil Parsons, "Settlement in East-central Botswana", p. 122.

⁴⁷⁰ Cattle smuggling was rife across the Transvaal-Bechuanaland border as farmers from both sides tried to restock following losses to Rinderpest and later to East Coast Fever. Shaun Nicholas Milton, "To Make the Crooked Straight: Settler Colonialism, Imperial Decline, and the South African Beef Industry" (University

This successful rebuilding of herds provided the basis upon which colonial taxation was introduced, although not all the Babirwa were able to acquire cattle again. The intricate link between tax and cattle had roots in the establishment of the colonial project when the British co-opted the chiefs as the subordinate sovereigns of the Monarchy because of their control of large herds.⁴⁷¹ The expropriations of Khama's tax collectors who targeted Ngwato subjects therefore produced the image of colonial taxation as state-sanctioned banditry, which the Babirwa expressed with the metaphor, *mphahela*. The word *mphahela* literally translates into "give me in return for nothing."⁴⁷² The Babirwa saw taxation as a form of state-sanctioned banditry as all they knew was "pay, pay and pay, but not a single day did people receive the goods for which they were paying."⁴⁷³ Thus, with the introduction of colonial taxation, being ruled became a very expensive experience for the Babirwa. The levying of taxes was to lead to conflicts between the Babirwa and the Bangwato *dikgosi*. As historian John C. Makgala points out, "relations between the Tswana and their subject tribes were mostly hostile and tax collection was one of the arenas for intertribal animosity."⁴⁷⁴ Diana Wylie's informants also told her in 1986 that the forceful relocation of the Babirwa of Malema was induced more by Malema's refusal to pay tax to Khama than to the BSAC's decision to evict the Babirwa from the Tuli Block.⁴⁷⁵

of London, 1996), pp. 35-37; Personal communication, Kgosi Mmirwa Malema, Bobonong, February 9, 2011.

⁴⁷¹ Neil Parsons, *King Khama, Emperor Joe*, p. 34.

⁴⁷² Interview with Gaobotse Mooketsi, Mogapi, December 26, 2010.

⁴⁷³ Interview with Batsile Makgosa, Semolale, April 25, 2011. It appears reference to colonial taxation as *mphahela* was a nation-wide phenomenon. See C.J. Makgala, "Taxation in the Tribal Areas", p. 281.

⁴⁷⁴ C.J. Makgala, "Taxation in the Tribal Areas", p. 281.

⁴⁷⁵ Diana Wylie's informants, Kgosi Mmirwa Malema, Member of Parliament for Bobirwa, Mr. Mosweu and Bobonong Secondary School Headmaster, K. Morake argued that Malema defied Khama's instruction to pay taxes to Khama and refused to collect taxes from his people. Diana Wylie, "Lesser Breeds without a Law", in *A Little God*, p. 241, footnote no. 42.

Whereas previous attempts to bring the Babirwa within the orbit of Ngwato rule had the primary object of gaining access to pastureland and water in the Bobirwa area, the twentieth century aggressive efforts to centralize the Babirwa were more likely defined by Khama's financial greed. While he had lost all his cattle in eastern Botswana during the rinderpest pandemic, Khama had many other herds scattered in the Kalahari Desert, which survived the pandemic because of the remoteness of the desert from areas with developed ox-wagon transport.⁴⁷⁶ Based on the Bangwato's conceptualization of the landscape as a space with abundant pastureland, water and herding labor, the scheming Khama moved some of his remaining cattle into the Babirwa territory where he sent his son-in-law, Modisaotsile Mokomane as his *mothanka* in 1905.⁴⁷⁷

As a retainer, Modisaotsile had the immediate task of looking after Khama's cattle. But he had a broader mandate of consolidating all the scattered groups under Ngwato rule, including the two thousand Ngwato subjects whom Khama relocated into the Shashe-Motloutse confluence in in early 1904.⁴⁷⁸ For this hegemonic process to succeed, Khama established mechanisms that would strip these groups of their political autonomy. First, he instructed Modisaotsile to centralize all willing groups of the Babirwa at Bobonong.⁴⁷⁹ Second, drawing from his experiences of the rinderpest devastations in eastern Botswana, Khama knew very well that the Babirwa, who, a decade ago, had become so prosperous that they were beginning to assert economic autonomy from their Ngwato patrons, had been impoverished by rinderpest. A politically astute *kgosi*, Khama took advantage of the Babirwa's desperation to rebuild their herds

⁴⁷⁶ E.C. Tabler, *The Far Interior* (Cape Town: A.A. Balkema, 1955), p. 20.

⁴⁷⁷ Isaac Schapera, "The Political Organization of the Ngwato", p. 61.

⁴⁷⁸ Isaac Schapera, "The Political Organization of the Ngwato", p. 61.

⁴⁷⁹ Nicholas John Mahoney, "Birwa Traders and Neighbours: An Anthropological Study of Social Relations in Rural Botswana (PhD dissertation, Manchester University, 1977), p. 44.

by reviving the *kgamelo* institution.⁴⁸⁰ The aim was to employ the instrumental power of gift giving as a tool of conquest.

Gift giving is a process of domination as it leads to loss of autonomy by the recipient.⁴⁸¹ The farming out of Ngwato royal cattle through the *kgamelo* system to some Babirwa groups effectively subordinated these groups to Ngwato domination. By virtue of their acquired status as retainers of Ngwato cattle, the chiefs of these groups were obliged to give tacit political support to Khama and to do his bidding at all times.⁴⁸² As a result, their people were to be tied to the Ngwato chieftaincy, as they depended on the economic and political protection of the Ngwato chiefs. Thus, patronage subordinated these Babirwa groups to Ngwato hegemony.

While Khama was busy incorporating many groups of the Babirwa into the Ngwato state, the BSAC was beginning the process of expelling Malema's Babirwa from the Tuli Block. From 1910, the Company set aside land on the confluence of the Motloutse and Limpopo Rivers, to the far east of the Tuli Block, to which the Babirwa of Malema were relocated.⁴⁸³ Since this new land was in the Tuli Block and therefore technically belonged to the Company, the Babirwa were officially designated squatters and were therefore required to either pay rentals or provide cheap labor to settler

⁴⁸⁰ Isaac Schapera, *Tribal Innovators: Tswana Chiefs and Social Change, 1795-1940* (London: Athlone Press and Berg Publishers, 1970), pp. 79-81.

⁴⁸¹ “[Gifts] of cattle among the Great Lakes peoples embodied the relationship between a leader and a follower, they were public expressions of inequality and they marked a relation where the person who received the cow was subordinate to the person who gave the cow.” David Lee Schoenbrun, *A Green Place, A Good Place*, p. 224.

⁴⁸² Neil Parsons, “Khama III, the Bangwato, and the British with special reference to 1895-1923” (PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1973), p. 385.

⁴⁸³ BNA, S.21/1/1, Letter from Acting Resident Commissioner to High Commissioner, 20/6/1922.

farmers.⁴⁸⁴ But Malema and his people refused to accede to these demands on the basis that they could not pay any form of rentals in their own land.⁴⁸⁵ In response, the Company demanded that they leave the Tuli Block, to which the Babirwa responded with defiance.

Having failed in its attempts to force Malema and his people to pay rentals or provide cheap labor to the settler farmers, the Company imposed a ten-shilling tax on each of the Babirwa families living in the Tuli Block, in addition to the existing colonial government taxes.⁴⁸⁶ These growing tax demands were meant to put pressure on Malema's people with the hope that many of them would succumb and volitionally leave the Tuli Block and weaken Malema's position.⁴⁸⁷ Despite feeling exploited by this double taxation, however, Malema's Babirwa persevered, resisting exploitation by flatly refusing to pay Company taxes. With regard to colonial taxation, Malema refused to pay directly to Khama. Instead, he preferred to collect and send his people's taxes directly to the Resident Magistrate's office despite the fact the colonial government did not recognize him as a subordinate sovereign of the British Monarchy with powers to collect taxes.⁴⁸⁸ Malema's refusal to acknowledge Khama as the tax collector in his territory was an expression of the ethnic identity of his people and their claim to political autonomy from the Bangwato.⁴⁸⁹

⁴⁸⁴ N.S. Mudzinganyama, "The Articulation of the Modes of Production and the Development of a Labour Reservoir in Southern Africa, 1885-1994: the Case of Bechuanaland", *Botswana Notes and Records*, vol. 15 (1983), p. 53.

⁴⁸⁵ N.S. Mudzinganyama, "The Articulation of the Modes of Production", p. 53.

⁴⁸⁶ In 1907, the Hut Tax became a poll tax of 20 shillings per year and in 1919 a Native Tax of 3 shillings was imposed on all adult Africans regardless of their economic status C. John Makgala, "Taxation in the Tribal Areas", p. 282.

⁴⁸⁷ N.S. Mudzinganyama, "The Articulation of the Modes of Production", p. 53.

⁴⁸⁸ Diana Wylie, "Lesser Breeds without a Law", in *A Little God*, p. 241.

⁴⁸⁹ under Ngwato rule Kgosi Mmirwa Malema and headmen of arbitration, Onketetse Serumola and Adam Masilo, Bobonong, February 9, 2011.

This contest reflects the meanings and imaginations imputed by the Company, Khama and the Babirwa on the physical spaces within the ecologically differentiated Shashe-Limpopo region. Because of its ecologically contrasted bands, this area could provide opportunities for survival as much as it could threaten people's livelihoods. The area around Bobonong where most of the Babirwa were living was a mainly hilly and rocky fastness with very little pastureland and no sources of surface water. As such, it presented risks to the agro-pastoral livelihoods of the Babirwa. However, for Khama it offered opportunities for prosperity as an increasing subject population in his Reserve would raise his tax commission and provide a local pool of labor.⁴⁹⁰

The confluence of the Shashe and Motloutse Rivers, now straddled by the Bangwato *meraka*, boasted of lush vegetation and sand riverbeds where *didiba* (sin. *sediba*), wells, could be sunk during times of low rainfall.⁴⁹¹ The word *sediba* derives its utility from the word *bodiba*, which means "pool of water." Environments adjacent to riverbeds were very important for building sustainable herds of cattle in an area characterized by low and erratic rainfall and only one perennial river, the Limpopo. The banks of the Limpopo River (the Tuli Block) were renowned for lush vegetation, fertile alluvial soils and the perennial Limpopo waters. To the Babirwa, leaving the Tuli Block spelled loss of livelihoods, which depended much on the waters, vegetation and soils of the Limpopo River. The decision to expel the Babirwa therefore represents the Tuli Block as a shifting frontier of power relations and contest between the BSAC and the Babirwa.

⁴⁹⁰ Interview with Gabatshabe Baipidi, Mogapi, December 25, 2010; Kgosi Mmirwa Malema, Bobonong, February 9, 2011.

⁴⁹¹ Interview with Gabatshabe Baipidi, Mogapi, December 25, 2010; Kgosi Mmirwa Malema, Bobonong, February 9, 2011.

Most importantly, it reflected the Babirwa's threat to colonial ideas of bringing modernity and progress to a pristine environment.

The eviction of the Babirwa from their lands falls within the broader historical context of colonial governments' conceptions of Africans as things or pests that obstructed modernity and progress.⁴⁹² As Zimbabwean historian, Clapperton Mavhunga, notes, "the reduction of humans to pests justifies the elimination of pests [and] sanctions policies of elimination."⁴⁹³ Colonial authorities and settler farmers visualized the Babirwa as a nuisance to the colonial project as they would purportedly hinder the development of "modernized farming." But pests are also invasive species, such as weeds, which often grow where they are not wanted. The European's visualization of Malema's people as pests was a refraction of their own intrusive pestiferous identity.

As a result, Malema's people in turn imagined settler farmers and their enclosed farms as destructive vermin that had invaded their lands. They responded to this invasiveness in profound and nuanced ways, cutting ranch fences to harvest roofing grass and graze their cattle inside, and drive out European cattle.⁴⁹⁴ The deliberate destruction of farm fences was an act of subversion of colonial rule as it had the intention to undermine commercialized cattle farming, which was the mainstay of the colonial economy.⁴⁹⁵ Indeed eminent figures in Bobonong agree that their fathers cut ranch fences to access the alienated resources such as pastures and grass for roofing. They also

⁴⁹² Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review, 2000 [1955]), 42.

⁴⁹³ Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga, "Vermin Beings: On Pestiferous Animals and Human Game", *Social Text 106* Vol. 29, No. 1 Spring 2011, p. 152.

⁴⁹⁴ BNA, S.21/1/1, Philip's letter to McNeill, 17/9/20. Unfortunately, there are no police reports nor court records regarding cases of cattle thefts from settler farms in the colonial archive. What is available is only The British South Africa Company's secretary's report to the colonial government.

⁴⁹⁵ Isaac N. Mazonde, *Ranching and Enterprise in Eastern Botswana: A Case Study of White and Black Farmers* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994)

informed me that whenever opportunities arose they would drive out as many settler cattle as they could.⁴⁹⁶

Consequently, from 1919 the BSAC, through its secretary in the Bechuanaland, F.B. Philip, demanded that the colonial government remove Malema's people from the Tuli Block immediately, and suggested that Malema be placed under strict Ngwato control to curb his people's wayward behavior.⁴⁹⁷ At the end of 1920, Government Secretary, McNeill, authorized the relocation of Malema and his people to Bobonong in the Bangwato Reserve where the rest of the Babirwa groups were already settled.⁴⁹⁸ The date of November 30, 1921 was set as the deadline for Malema and his people to move, failing which the Resident Commissioner would authorize Khama to use force to drive them to Bobonong.⁴⁹⁹

The decision to relocate Malema and his people to Bobonong resonated with Khama's political interests as he viewed Malema's refusal to pay colonial taxes through him as an act of insubordination.⁵⁰⁰ The eagerness of Khama to subordinate Malema to his authority was expressed in his reinforcement of European conceptions of Malema and his people as juveniles and criminals. In Khama's words, "they had nobody to check on them, [and] if left to themselves at Tuli Block, they would probably steal, [including] from the Transvaal or Rhodesia, and cause trouble."⁵⁰¹ This image of the Babirwa as irresponsible and destructive resonates with ideas of "pestiferous" beings so imbedded in

⁴⁹⁶ Interview with headmen of arbitration, Onketetse Serumola and Adam Masilo, Bobonong, February 9, 2011.

⁴⁹⁷ BNA, S.21/1/1, Philip's letter to McNeill, 17/9/20.

⁴⁹⁸ Q.N. Parsons, "Khama III, the Bangwato, and the British", p. 384.

⁴⁹⁹ BNA, S.21/1/1, Philip's letter to McNeill, 17/9/20.

⁵⁰⁰ Diana Wylie, "Lesser Breeds without a Law", in *A Little God*, p. 241.

⁵⁰¹ BNA, S. 40/7, Khama to R.C., August 7, 1920.

colonial discourses of African resistance to different forms of colonial divestiture.⁵⁰² Khama's visualization of other ethnic groups as lesser humans was, however, central to the Bangwato's expansionist policies long before colonial rule.⁵⁰³ It was therefore not surprising that Khama disregarded Malema's protestation that "they were not cattle that could be removed at a few days notice to stand in the rain"⁵⁰⁴ and went ahead with the eviction order. To Khama, the Babirwa had the image of cattle because their labor and tax payments (from which he gained a ten per cent commission) would be transformed into herds once they were brought under his direct authority.

This dehumanizing conception of the Babirwa defined the atrocities meted on them by Khama's regiments during their forced expulsion from the Tuli Block. 1920/21 was a good season with rain in abundance. Many had ploughed and cattle were in good condition.⁵⁰⁵ Removed at short notice, the Babirwa left their crops behind. In desperation, some of them sold their cattle at unenumerative prices to settler farmers as they fled to the Transvaal resisting their subjugation by the Bangwato.⁵⁰⁶ They also left other possessions such as guns behind due to the prohibitive gun laws in the Transvaal.⁵⁰⁷ The homes of the over six hundred families who were under Malema were set on fire destroying most of their property.⁵⁰⁸ For six days, they were marched to Bobonong with nothing to eat and subjected to unspeakable outrages of torture. They even had to buy

⁵⁰² Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga, "Vermin Beings", pp. 151-176.

⁵⁰³ See for example, Isaac Schapera, *The Ethnic Composition of the Tswana Tribes* (London: London School of Economics, 1952), p. 78; Pnina Motzafi-Haller, "Historical Narratives as Political Discourses of Identity", *Journal of Southern Africa Studies*, vol. 20, no. 3. Special Issue: Ethnicity and Identity in Southern Africa (1994), pp. 417-431; Diana Wylie, "Lesser Breeds without a Law", in *A Little God*.

⁵⁰⁴ BNA, S.21/1/1, McNeill to BSAC, November 12, 1920.

⁵⁰⁵ Emanuel Gluckmann, *The Tragedy of the Ababirwas*.

⁵⁰⁶ Emanuel Gluckmann, *The Tragedy of the Ababirwas*

⁵⁰⁷ BNA, S.21/1/1, Modisaotsile's statement during Sir Herbert Sloley's Commission of enquiry on the removal of Babirwa, January 20, 1922.

⁵⁰⁸ Emanuel Gluckmann, *The Tragedy of the Ababirwas*.

drinking water from their captors at two shillings and six pence per tin.⁵⁰⁹ Above all, they were subjected to physical violence and personal indignity. The confirmation by Captain Nettleton of six cases of rape by Captain Nettleton of the Bechuanaland Protectorate Police, who was appointed by the administration to investigate allegations of human rights violations, is an important piece of evidence about the atrocities meted on Malema's Babirwa.⁵¹⁰

Images of sexual transgressions against women remain inscribed in the experiential memories of survivors today. Old woman Keamogetse Mashaba's (who did not know her age) recollection of the evictions reveals a tale of untold atrocities involving psychological and physical abuse:

I was young then, a little girl of about ten (sighs). But I still remember that fateful day when my mother was dragged into a nearby bush. They raped her, many of them. I was so shocked that I could not even cry. My uncle was brutally beaten up when he tried to help my mother. My mother never recovered from that ordeal. She died with a heavy heart, shamed, because she was raped in front of children. Many people were abused; we were called thieves, all kinds of names.⁵¹¹

Captain Nettleton also reported the death of twenty-five people out of the more than one thousand Babirwa captives between December 1920 and January 1922.⁵¹² Meanwhile Kgosi Malema and a small group of his followers escaped into the Transvaal, but returned within a few weeks to harvest their crops and look for lost cattle.⁵¹³ Their return, however, sparked the second coming of the Bangwato *mephato*, leading to the capture and physical abuse of the fugitives. Malema was brutally caned and driven to Bobonong

⁵⁰⁹ Q.N. Parsons, "Khama III, the Bangwato, and the British", p. 385.

⁵¹⁰ BNA, S.21/1/1, Nettleton's Report, 15/5/1922.

⁵¹¹ Personal communication, Keamogetse Mashaba, Molaladau, July 15, 2011.

⁵¹² BNA, S.21/1/1, Nettleton's Report, 15/5/1922.

⁵¹³ BNA, S. 21/1/1. Extract from the Sloley report, 1921.

with his hands tied behind his back and subjected to verbal abuse.⁵¹⁴ Again Malema managed to escape across the border into South Africa where he enlisted the services of attorney Emanuel Gluckmann to represent him in his claim for losses and damages.⁵¹⁵

But Malema was recaptured and an inquiry into the Babirwa complaints, chaired by a Basutoland administrative official, Sir Herbert Sloley, was held in early 1922 in Serowe, Bangwato capital.⁵¹⁶ At this inquiry, the colonial administration hid behind the cloak of “custom and native law” to assert that subjects had no customary right to litigate against their chiefs, and to exclude Malema’s attorney from the proceedings.⁵¹⁷ Gluckman was also disqualified on the grounds that he had no license to practice in the Bechuanaland Protectorate.⁵¹⁸ When Malema protested that he would not attend in the absence of his lawyer, he was threatened with imprisonment.⁵¹⁹ During the proceedings, Malema was refused a seat, made to stand for the entire duration of the proceedings and was consistently abused.⁵²⁰

To further punish Malema for his purported acts of subversion, the claims of loss of crops, gold and cattle numbering one thousand head, which he leveled against Khama, were summarily dismissed during the case.⁵²¹ Criticizing the outcome of Sloley’s judgement as a travesty of justice, Gluckmann launched a press campaign to influence public opinion in South Africa against Bechuanaland’s violation of human rights. His

⁵¹⁴ BNA, S. 21/1/1. Extract from the Sloley report, 1921.

⁵¹⁵ J. Ramsay, “Resistance from Subordinate Groups: BaBirwa, BaKgatla Mmanaana and BaKalanga Nswazwi”, in Fred Morton and Jeff Ramsay (eds.), *The Birth of Botswana: A History of the Bechuanaland Protectorate from 1910 to 1966* (Gaborone: Longman Botswana, 1987), pp. 65-67.

⁵¹⁶ Diana Wylie, “Lesser Breeds without a law”, in *A Little God*, pp. 149-155.

⁵¹⁷ J. Ramsay, “Resistance from Subordinate Groups”, p. 67.

⁵¹⁸ Q.N. Parsons, “Khama III, the Bagwato and the British”, p. 395.

⁵¹⁹ J. Ramsay, “Resistance from Subordinate Groups”, p. 67.

⁵²⁰ BNA, S. 20/4, Mr. Rice to Asst. Comm, Francistown, January 7, 1922; Diana Wylie, *A Little God*, pp. 149-155.

⁵²¹ J. Ramsay, “Resistance from Subordinate Groups”, p. 67; Emanuel Gluckmann, *The Tragedy of the Ababirwas*.

newspaper article: “The tragedy of the Ababirwas and Some Reflections on Sir Herbert Sloley’s Report”, amassed public support and sympathy for Malema and his people.⁵²² But all this public sympathy only encouraged Khama and the colonial government to resettle Malema and his people in Molaladau, a small village located northeast of Bobonong in 1925.⁵²³ The resettlement of Malema’s Babirwa in Molaladau completed the colonial project of confining subjects into a rigid colonial space in eastern Botswana.

As Malema’s lawyer Gluckman indicated in his article, this centralization of all the Babirwa into ordered colonial space constituted a tragedy.⁵²⁴ On arrival in the Bangwato Reserve, the Babirwa were forced into servility and servitude, their labor appropriated to build Ngwato huts, plough *masota* (public fields), erect kraals and dig wells for the Bangwato chiefs appointed to rule over them.⁵²⁵ Mobilizing the labor of subject peoples through chiefly fiat was a feature of Ngwato tradition. In pre-colonial times, men from subject groups could be formed into age groups and deployed to undertake hunting expeditions and build royal cattle kraals.⁵²⁶

Above all, the Babirwa were settled in marginal lands with very few sources of water and poor soils unsuitable for crop production. Bobonong and the surrounding areas were characterized by rocky landscape with undulating surfaces. The landscape was so rocky that Bobonong became known metaphorically as *Lekgarapeng*, or a place of rock fragments.⁵²⁷ Combined with occasional downpours characteristic of the nature of rainfall in the area, which causes dramatic runoff, Bobonong’s landscape experienced high levels

⁵²² Emanuel Gluckmann, *The Tragedy of the Ababirwas*.

⁵²³ Diana Wylie, “Lesser Breeds without a Law”, in *A Little God*, p.155.

⁵²⁴ E. Gluckman, *The Tragedy of the Ababirwas*.

⁵²⁵ E. Gluckman, *The Tragedy of the Ababirwas*, p. 5.

⁵²⁶ Interview with Bangwato Regent, Sedieng Kgamane, Serowe Village, August 6, 2011.

⁵²⁷ Today Bobonong continues to be called *Lekgarapeng* and its residents hardly use the original official name.

of erosion every rainy season. Other areas were primarily made of sandy soils, which made them prone to leaching and erosion due to runoff. The residential name Mothabaneng (land of sandy soils), for instance, is testimony to the sandy nature of the soils in the area. Though suitable for the production of melons, the soils in Mothabaneng and other sandy areas could hardly support the growth of other crops, particularly varieties of sorghum, the Babirwa's staple, which could easily be washed away by runoff whenever the rain fell in downpours.⁵²⁸ This landscape of sandy unproductive soils is also eulogized in a folk song:

Keedidi, where is my mother?
She has gone to the fields
Where are the fields?
At Mothabaneng (land of sandy soils)

This song is a lullaby sang to kids to try to get them to sleep while their mothers were out cultivating the fields. The singer, a sister or grandmother, draws our attention to the tragedy of the poor sandy soils from which the Babirwa were forced to struggle to survive. The high potentiality of crops to be washed away by running water forced women to spend long days trying to build mounds around their crops to protect them from run-off. The struggle to eke out a life in these sandy soil areas thus forced many women, including those with very young children to leave their babies in the care of their sisters and/or older women for much of the day. This new experience of leaving very young children behind to work in the fields significantly reduced the *botsetse* (the confinement of new mothers to inside a house) period to about two months, leading to early weaning of babies. As Moloko Makgoba notes, "milk dries when a mother goes for long periods without breastfeeding. *Mme kana monna o pelo khutshwane* (lit. but a man's

⁵²⁸ Personal communication, Adam Sepache, Mothabaneng, May 3, 2011.

heart is short), a man does not have long sexual patience. This led to the birth of *dirathana*.⁵²⁹ *Dirathana* are babies born in quick succession. This lack of adequate spacing of children is known as *go rathela* or to bear many children in a short space of time. The *dirathana*, says Ketholegile Phuthego, “are also identified by stunted growth because they were denied adequate breast milk nutrition at an early age.”⁵³⁰ Thus the absence of women, as they struggled to control erosion broke down the pre-existing conjugal traditions of regulating sexual contact between men and women and, because this disrupted longer birth spacing, impacted negatively on family health and natal practices.

It may sound surprising that I talk of women struggling alone to raise crops in a time when the ox-drawn plow had incorporated the labor of men into cultivation. Despite the entrance of men in tilling the land, gender polarity remained a feature of agricultural division of labor. Men contributed their labor only during cultivation. Once cultivation was done, they retreated to the cattle posts, leaving the women to tend for the crops. With ploughing done during the rainy season, management systems changed from the drought coping strategy of herd release to close monitoring with the view to making sure the cattle would not get attracted by widespread pools of water and therefore go astray.⁵³¹

Other than the need to monitor the movement of animals closely, the Babirwa men also had to do intensive herding to make sure they did not get divested of their animals by predators, particularly lions. The place, Molaladau (place where lions sleep), says Kgosi Mmirwa Malema, derived its name from the high population of lions, which

⁵²⁹ Personal communication, Moloko Makgoba, Sefhophe, December 25, 2010.

⁵³⁰ Interview with Ketholegile Phuthego, Mogapi, December 25, 2010.

⁵³¹ Interview with cattle herders, Rashasho, Mogapi, December 26, 2010 and Basupi, Dau-e-meja-leebana cattle post, December 15, 2010; Moreki Montsosi, Bobonong, March 13, 2011.

Malema's people found when they were resettled there.⁵³² Despite having lost most of their herds during the forced removals from the Tuli Block, Malema's Babirwa still retained some of their cattle. The claim of one thousand head, which Malema made against Khama during Sloley's inquest earlier in 1922, is also suggestive of a community that had considerably rebuilt their herds before their resettlement in the Bangwato Reserve.⁵³³

Malema's claim that Khama dispossessed him of one thousand cattle, however, is not the only piece of evidence suggesting that the Babirwa had rebuilt their herds by the first quarter of the twentieth century. Colonial officials' reports are also suggestive. For instance, in 1924 various Babirwa groups in Bobonong told Captain Hannay of the Bechuanaland Protectorate Police who was investigating cases of cattle thefts that Ngwato headman, Mompe, was in the habit of confiscating their cattle, which he claimed were strays, *matimela*.⁵³⁴ According to Ngwato property law, the chief, "as owner of land and people", was entitled to *matimela* cattle because they were presumed to be feral animals.⁵³⁵ The primary objective for the *matimela* institution was not only to enrich the chief, but also to make sure the subjects did not get wealthier, build their own networks of clients and use their social capital to challenge the hegemonic authority of the Bangwato royals. These dispossessions have resonance with the idea of using institutionalized power to give subject peoples the image of "pestiferous" beings and therefore mark them for elimination.⁵³⁶ Such institutionalized expropriations of the

⁵³² Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema, Bobonong, February 9, 2011; Moreki Montsosi, Bobonong, March 13, 2011.

⁵³³ J. Ramsay, "Resistance from Subordinate Groups", p. 67; Emanuel Gluckmann, *The Tragedy of the Ababirwas*.

⁵³⁴ BNA S. 22/2/2, Captain Hannay to Resident Commissioner, November 11, 1924.

⁵³⁵ Interview with Kgosi Sediegeng Kgamane, regent of the Bangwato throne, Serowe, August 6, 2011.

⁵³⁶ Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga, "Vermin Beings", pp. 151-176.

Babirwa reduced the numbers of herds they owned so they would have to depend on the Bangwato for sustenance, especially with regard to ploughing their fields.

As a consequence of the *matimela* confiscations and the lands of marginal quality to which they were pushed, by 1929 one third of the Babirwa households had no cattle and therefore occupied the perilous social location of being *bakhumanegi*, the poor, while ten per cent of Babirwa households owned fifty per cent of the region's total cattle.⁵³⁷ Minimum household herd size was five; the average ranged from thirteen to twenty; while the chiefs could own up to a maximum of one thousand.⁵³⁸ While the Babirwa's cattle population growth was being negatively impacted upon by environmental and social factors, the use of the ox-drawn plow, which required up to twenty oxen to pull, was tangentially becoming widespread. Combined with increasing climate variability, which required that cultivation be done quickly before the soil moisture disappeared, the lack of enough and suitable cattle to form a team of draft oxen therefore threatened to exclude and further marginalize many households, particularly women headed households.⁵³⁹

Nonetheless, the shift in agricultural technology led to extensive cultivation, which required a lot of labor. Households with few cattle to make a span of draft oxen therefore depended on those that possessed enough cattle to cultivate their fields. In some cases, these poor households often failed to take advantage of early rains as they waited for relatives to cultivate their fields first.⁵⁴⁰ My intention, however, is not to advance a

⁵³⁷ N.J. Mahoney, "Birwa Traders and Neighbours", p. 99.

⁵³⁸ N.J. Mahoney, "Birwa Traders and Neighbours", p. 99.

⁵³⁹ Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa malema, headmen of arbitration, Onketetse Serumola and Adam Masilo, Bobonong, February 9, 2011.

⁵⁴⁰ Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa malema, headmen of arbitration, Onketetse Serumola and Adam Masilo, Bobonong, February 9, 2011.

defeatist formulation of this relationship and the growing differentiation between the wealthy and the poor. Anthropologist, Nicholas Mahoney, had argued that the majority of the poor failed to produce enough grain to meet their subsistence needs whereas a few wealthy households had high output.⁵⁴¹ Perhaps this is true, but the Babirwa had just emerged from a tragic experience of being divested of land and cattle and forced into collective subordination under the Bangwato rule. Tragedy instills a collective sense of belonging. It brings people who share a common traumatic experience together and builds a sense of communality in them.

Plow users drew on the labor of the poor for cultivation, weeding, bird scaring, winnowing, thrashing and harvesting. In most cases women and children within households performed such activities, but men who owned no cattle and were therefore seen as less masculine could be called upon to help and would be entitled to part of the harvest as reward for their labor. Such contracts, whereby labor was paid for in kind, were based on a new social exchange pattern called *tshwara mogoma*, holding the plow. The reference to the plow as *mogoma*, or hoe, is derived from the functionality and social location of the hoe and the plow in arable agriculture. Like the hoe, the plow also became *mogoma* and was therefore visualized as feminized technology for both performed the duty of cultivation.

This feminization of technology, which was powered by animals, which remained largely under male control, challenges European conceptualizations of the power of science and technology to shape the landscape as an exclusively masculine domain.⁵⁴²

⁵⁴¹ N.J. Mahoney, "Contact and Neighbourly Exchange among the Birwa of Botswana", p. 41.

⁵⁴² "Part II – Colonized Environments: Domestication, Medicine and Technology", in Falola and Brownell (eds.), *Landscape, Environment and Technology*. See particularly Bridget A. Teboh, "Science, Technology

Despite the preponderance of women in cultivation, Europeans considered their technology as unscientific and therefore unable to transform the landscape. Contrary to these assumptions about the primordial quality of African technology, the Babirwa's *mogoma* was a tool of production reserved for use by women as they worked the land to provide subsistence for the household. The arrival of the plow did not entirely change this gendered division of labor. Instead, the plow was vernacularized and feminized as it adopted the name, *mogoma*. This shift also sustained the old forms of division of family labor.

While men entered the cultivation space, they still considered pastoral activity as masculine and agriculture as feminine. Women also reinforced this idea of cattle being the preserve of men and cultivation being a woman's domain. According to men and women of Bobirwa, "*tiro ya mosadi ke mogoma, tiro ya monna ke dikgomo* (a woman's job is to hold the plow while a man's is to deal with the cattle)."⁵⁴³ As a result, men reserved for themselves the work of harnessing the oxen to the plow and driving them while women maintained their traditional duty of cultivation. Only this time (after the 1920s) they cultivated by holding the plow rather than the hoe. But holding the ox-drawn plow was as much a space of women's autonomy as was the use of the hoe for cultivation. It reflected their expertise and massive experience in cultivation, both of which men lacked and therefore deferred to. It also reflected their continued dominance in household subsistence because, by controlling the plow, they possessed authority over how cultivation had to be done and what types of crops to plant. Symbolically, *tshwara*

and the African Woman During (British) Colonization, 1916-1960: The Case of Bamenda Province", pp. 87-119.

⁵⁴³ Interview with Bathaloganyi Phuthego Molosiwa, Mogapi, December 26, 2010; Moagi Motsumi, and Keamogetse Mashaba, Molaladau, February 5, 2011; Mooketsi Maunatala, Bobonong, February 6, 2011.

mogoma represented a nuanced way in which men and women who lacked cattle and plows were accorded access to subsistence. It became both a practice of courtesy and a social security measure premised on reciprocity. While the person whose *mogoma* was being held benefitted from free labor, the person who was holding *mogoma* also benefited by having access to the harvest.

The plow did not only represent a major shift in technological developments. Rather, it collapsed the pre-colonial Babirwa's gender specific production systems and gave new cultural and economic value to crop production. Its ability to bridge gender boundaries was perhaps over-celebrated by Khama earlier in 1895:

It is a sure sign of advance when you see the men use the ploughs, which have come to us from Sweden and America; the men are proud to drive oxen in a plough. A little Bechuana boy is said to have described his home as a place where women work and men dress their hair and fight and talk; but this is no longer true. This generation of women can, many of them, cut out dresses and sew for themselves and sew for their husbands as well.⁵⁴⁴

To Khama, the plow represented progress and modernity with gender equality becoming a feature of social relations in households. Indeed the plow did not only bridge gender differences, it also freed up some time for women to do things other than cultivation. Nonetheless, while the entrance of men into cultivation brought a semblance of gender equality in what used to be an exclusively female domain, the plow brought extensive cultivation of large areas, leading to increased workload for women. As a result, men's involvement in cultivation did not reduce women's agricultural work. Their

⁵⁴⁴ "King Khama interviewed by a lady", *Christian World*, September 12, 1895. Cited in Neil Parsons, *King Khama, Emperor Joe and the Great White Queen: Victorian Britain through African Eyes* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 125.

entrance in the cultivation sphere only broke down cultural barriers that, in pre-colonial times, had enforced strict sexual polarity in crop production.

The foregoing argument is an intervention to Jean and John Comaroff's ideas of crop production having a culturally devalued role among the Tswana of colonial South Africa.⁵⁴⁵ Cattle herding among the South African Tswana, they argue, had a paramount ideological and religious significance in being segregated from all household-agricultural activities as an exclusively male domain. These contrasting religious values between the arable and the pastoral economies, Jean and John Comaroff argue, divided the environment into "pure" and "impure" ritual spaces. The symbolic dichotomy between the male-pastoral and the female-domestic (as crop production was viewed) domains is said to have conceptually accommodated and orchestrated basic features of sexual polarity. Such religious notions reinforce ideas of practical segregation of productive tasks. That is, cattle are conceptually thought to be opposed to women as the respective embodiments of "pure" and "impure" ritual spheres respectively.⁵⁴⁶

I acknowledge that the pre-colonial gendered economy of the Babirwa was ritual. But it was more practical in the sense that social life was temporal as it was identically divided into contrasting but overlapping seasons. The plow further muddied these ritual-geographical and sexual divides. While men and women seasonally experienced two alternative social orders (the exclusively masculine environment of the cattle post and the female space of domestic and agricultural work), the arrival of the plow ushered in a new heterosexual world experienced during cultivation time. As a result, for the Babirwa, the

⁵⁴⁵ John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, "Goodly Beasts, Beastly Goods: Cattle and Commodities in a Southern Context", *American Ethnologist*, vol. 17, no. 2 (1990), pp. 195-216.

⁵⁴⁶ Margaret Kinsman, "'Beasts of Burden': The Subordination of Southern Tswana Women, ca. 1800-1840", *Journal of Southern African Studies* vol. 10, no. 1 (1983): 39-54.

opposition between these two phases of dispersal and concentration was not as radically expressed as it was in South Africa. The Babirwa women and men in the Bangwato Reserve no longer inhabited distinct and geographically remote physical spheres of activity. The plow also brought a sense of ownership of agricultural production for men as they were directly involved in cultivation. Fittingly, the use of the plow gained momentum at the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s when migrant labor dramatically increased in the Bangwato Reserve. Many young men reinvested their cash earnings in plows and cattle, thus improving the Babirwa's adaptability to an environment of high rainfall variability and drought, but also transforming gender relationships, gender roles and the gendered nature of work.

Conclusion

This chapter has addressed the question of struggles over land between the Babirwa, the colonial government and the Bangwato chief, Khama. This contest eventually led to the resettlement and centralization of formerly scattered and politically autonomous Babirwa groups under the hegemonic authority of Khama in the Bangwato Reserve. While acknowledging imperial power's triumph in dispossessing the Babirwa of their ancestral lands, the Babirwa were not simply victims, but competitors and challengers of colonial attempts to reshape their ethnic identity.

The chapter has therefore challenged the "invention of ethnicities" narratives of the 1990s, which represented ordinary Africans as passive conduits for imperial interests in the formation of ethnic identities. The Babirwa did not only contest their loss of lands. In the Bangwato Reserve, they interacted and intermarried with other subjectivities thus producing a new Babirwa ethnicity shaped by socio-cultural and linguistic diversity. The

formation of a fluid and multidirectional ethnicity challenged colonialism's attempts to use the idea of "tribe" to ossify the Babirwa's identity. Young Babirwa men also entered the migrant labor system, the proceeds of which they reinvested in cattle and plows, to creatively adapt to the unstable climatic and ecological conditions of the Bangwato Reserve. Through the reinvestment of migrants' wages in rebuilding herds, the Babirwa also subverted the *matimela* institution, a system of royal appropriation of "strays", which the Bangwato chiefs used to dispossess their subjects to make sure they did not become wealthy and become rebellious.

The Babirwa young men's newly found cash power, together with their rebuilding of herds, however, coincided with the commercialized colonial beef industry of the 1930s and beyond. This commercialization caused a contest between money and cattle as the Babirwa's cultural landscape was gradually being monetized. The changing socio-economic landscape influenced by the cash nexus therefore framed the Babirwa's discourses of the frontier between money and cattle. They expressed this cattle-cash frontier in the saying: *dikgomo tse di senang maoto*, or "cattle without legs", which became a way of incorporating cash in their pastoralist traditions from 1930 onwards.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Dikgomo tse di Senang Maoto, Cattle Without Legs”: Cash, Cattle and Reconfigured Material and Symbolic Systems, 1930-1966

Introduction

Between 1930 and 1966 ecological and social processes – recurrent droughts and intensified migrant labor – combined to produce fluctuations in Bechuanaland’s national cattle herd.⁵⁴⁷ The periods 1933-1935, 1949, and 1959-1965 particularly experienced high cattle mortality in the Bangwato Reserve.⁵⁴⁸ As cattle in communal areas died of drought, *boswa*, inheritance, lost its central position as the primary avenue for the Babirwa young men’s herd accumulation.⁵⁴⁹ Many young men abandoned their duties as herders to seek wage work in South Africa, leading to the increase in the inflow of cash remittances.⁵⁵⁰ A lot of these young migrants in turn reinvested their cash earnings in cattle.⁵⁵¹ Combined with a highly commercialized colonial beef industry that excluded

⁵⁴⁷ *Basutoland, Bechuanaland, and Swaziland: Report of an Economic Survey Mission* (London: HSMO, 1960), p. 183; Jack Halpern, *South Africa’s Hostages: Basutoland, Bechuanaland and Swaziland* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 297; Sir Allan Pim, *Report of the Economic Commission Appointed by the Secretary of State for Dominions Affairs* (cmd., 4368, London, 1933), p. 110.

⁵⁴⁸ There are no official sources that give accounts of cattle that died in the Babirwa area. However, I have inferred that since the Babirwa were incorporated into the Bangwato Reserve, accounts of cattle mortality documented in colonial sources included Babirwa herds. See for example, “Report to the Government of the Bechuanaland Protectorate on the Beef, Cattle and Meat Industry”, by Glen Rex Purnell and W.S. Clayton (October 1963); *Basutoland, Bechuanaland, and Swaziland*, p. 183; Jack Halpern, *South Africa’s Hostages*, p. 297; Sir Charles Rey, *Monarch of All I Survey: Bechuanaland Diaries, 1929-37*. Edited by Neil Parsons and Michael Crowder (Gaborone: Botswana Society; New York: Lilian Barbe Press Inc.; London: James Currey, 1988), entries for February 20 and November 10, 1930; Sir Allan Pim, *Report of the Economic Commission*, p. 110.

⁵⁴⁹ Historically the Babirwa sons labored for their fathers, herding cattle that would be used to provide their bridewealth when they were old enough to get married. These cattle were also the heritage of these sons through the institution of *boswa* and the pastoral estate of a departed father. Interview with Headmen of arbitration, Onketetse Serumola and Adam Masilo, Bobonong, February 9, 2011.

⁵⁵⁰ Wazha G. Morapedi, “Migrant Labour and the Peasantry in the Bechuanaland Protectorate, 1930-1965”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 25, no. 2 (1999), pp. 8-9. According to Schapera, migrant labor replaced cattle herding as a rite of passage and initiation into manhood. Isaac Schapera, *Migrant Labour and Tribal Life: A Study of Conditions in the Bechuanaland Protectorate* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1947), pp. 116-117.

⁵⁵¹ Wazha G. Morapedi, “Migrant Labour and the Peasantry”, pp. 8-9.

communal producers, the purchase of cattle with migrant wages sharpened herd ownership inequalities.⁵⁵² Being the quintessential instrument of building a herd, cash therefore shaped the Babirwa's late colonial discourses of social transformation. They imbued it with symbolic meaning, as *dikgomo tse di senang maoto*, or cattle without legs, to incorporate it into their cultural and social milieu.⁵⁵³

This chapter examines the multiple ways in which the Babirwa collapsed the boundaries between cash (the British Pound and, in the 1960s, the South African Rand) and cattle to embrace the emerging monetized economy with their invention of the token currency, "cattle without legs" between 1930 and 1966. My reading of available evidence stands in sharp contrast to ethnographic works that emphasize notions of Southern Africans' use of cattle to resist the impersonal logic of cash and therefore see Africans as wedded to a timeless traditional way of life.⁵⁵⁴ Oral sources, in particular do not reflect such paranoia about cash in late colonial Bobirwa.⁵⁵⁵ This era, symbolizes the birth of a

⁵⁵² Pauline Peters, *Dividing the Commons: Politics, Policy and Culture in Botswana* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1994), p. 65; Botswana National Archives (hereafter BNA), S.263/6, Bechuanaland Protectorate Annual Report, 1939; BNA, DCGH. 3/5, Tour reports, native areas, 1939-1944.

⁵⁵³ But the effects of cash on their life ways were minimal at the time and therefore did not necessitate its serious incorporation into their symbolic systems. This was due to the limited supply of cash. As a result, they only interacted (but rarely) with it at the material level as a commodity and a medium of exchange of things. Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, "Beasts, Banknotes and the Colour of Money in Colonial South Africa", *Archaeological Dialogues*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2006), pp. 125-128.

⁵⁵⁴ James Ferguson, "The Bovine Mystique: Power, Property and Livestock in Rural Lesotho", *Man*, New Series, vol. 20, no. 4 (1985), pp. 647-674; Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, "How Beasts Lost Their Legs": Cattle in Tswana Economy and Society", in John Galatay and Pierre Bonte (eds.), *Herders, Warriors and Traders: Pastoralism in Africa* (Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford: Westview Press, 1991), pp. 33-61; Despite shifting their earlier position of money as exclusively promoting the expression of individual desires, and recently acknowledging that like cattle cash has the ability to produce social relations, Jean and John Comaroff have argued that nineteenth century Tswana feared its corrosive power to the extent of converting whatever earnings they got into cattle to protect established traditions, identities and social networks. Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, "Beasts, Banknotes and the Colour of Money", pp. 107-132.

⁵⁵⁵ Interview with Headmen of arbitration, Onketetse Serumola and Adam Masilo, Bobonong, February 9, 2011; Bathaloganyi Phuthego and Ketholegile Phuthego, Mogapi, December 25, 2010.

new social order marked by a hybridity made of two value systems, cattle and money, but where the inflow of cash did not reflect a decisive break with the past.

Emerging literature focuses on this social imbeddedness of modern money as opposed to a narrow focus on its material functionality.⁵⁵⁶ This body of scholarship argues that while it retains its intrinsic value as a medium of exchange of goods and services, modern money can be invested with social meaning over time and space. Money, according to these narratives, is a paradox. It has the ability to knit together social networks while, on the other hand, its corrosive power can break preexisting social networks and thus hinder the development of new ones. As Keith Hart argues, money is a tensioned commodity and social construct that “expresses both individual desires and the way we belong to each other.”⁵⁵⁷ There are strong resonances between these paradoxes. My objective, however, is not to resolve this tension, but to foreground it in order to highlight the dynamism and historical salience of cash. In congruence with the social networks it creates, cash is not immutable but “a changing recursive process that is constantly renegotiated and redefined.”⁵⁵⁸ Thus, it has variation and adaptability over space and time.

⁵⁵⁶ See among others, Bill Maurer, “The Anthropology of Money”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 35 (2006), pp. 15-36; Emily Gilbert, “Common Cents: Situating Money in Time and Place”, *Economy and Society*, vol. 34, no. 3 (2005), pp. 357-388.

⁵⁵⁷ Keith Hart, “Notes Towards an Anthropology of Money”, *Kritos: Journal of Postmodern Cultural Sound, Text and Image*, vol. 2 (2005). Unpaginated. <http://intertheory.org/hart.htm>. Accessed October 30, 2012. Hart’s argument is based on his 1986 article in which he sees an irreconcilable conflict between the intrinsic and symbolic value of money. While providing a useful corrective to ideas that money is strictly material, this notion of irreconcilability in the dual meaning of money obscures the dynamism and ambivalence of money. See Keith Hart, “Heads and Tails? Two Sides of the Coin”, *Man*, vol. 21, no. 4 (1986), pp. 637-656.

⁵⁵⁸ Emily Gilbert, “Common Cents”, p. 370.

The Babirwa's reference to cash as "cattle without legs" was therefore a particular way through which its material and symbolic value were projected in cattle.⁵⁵⁹ As a symbolic token, the "cattle without legs" created links between people, places and things, or commodities, across space and time. This chapter captures the Babirwa's creative adaptations to a monetized colonial economy up to the 1966 when a severe and prolonged drought almost wiped out all the cattle in Bobirwa, and independence ushered in new land policies that perpetuated herd ownership inequalities to promote a Tswana nation-state under the control of cattle owning political elites.⁵⁶⁰ By examining the intersection between two value systems, the chapter reveals the Babirwa's intellectual ability to enlarge the so-called timeless values, so imbedded in ethnocentric ideas of the economically irrational African pastoralist at the time.⁵⁶¹

I also reveal points of tension in the Babirwa's changing material and symbolic value systems as cash brought generational conflicts and new forms of disease and witchcraft that forced the Babirwa to engage into processes of reconfiguration of certain practices and traditions. Borrowing from Jean and John Comaroff's idea of cattle being valued for their social, political, religious and economic functions, I show the interplay between the material utility and symbolic value of cattle and cash to the Babirwa in a period when ideas of private property and strict adherence to market-oriented cattle

⁵⁵⁹ This argument is supported by historians, Guyer and Belinga, argument that linguistic and cultural imports are central to the construction of commodities as wealth or things of value. Jane I. Guyer and Samuel M. Eno Belinga, "Wealth in People as Wealth in Knowledge: Accumulation and Composition in Equatorial Africa", *Journal of African History*, vol. 36, no. 1 (1995), pp. 91-120.

⁵⁶⁰ A.C. Campbell, "The 1960's Drought in Botswana", in M.T. Hinchey (ed.), *Proceedings of the Symposium on Drought in Botswana* (Gaborone: Botswana Society, 1978), pp. 98-109.

⁵⁶¹ Ideas about African's irrational imperatives of pastoral activity followed Herskovitz's notion of the "cattle complex" which claimed that Africans only hoarded cattle for cultural and mystical beliefs without regard for their economic functionality. See, Melville J. Herskovits, "The Cattle Complex in East Africa", *American Anthropologist*, vol. 28 (1926), pp. 230-272.

keeping were being touted as the central motif of colonial economic policy.⁵⁶² In this way, this chapter advances the idea of the cultural, environmental and historical utility of cattle and cash, and therefore rescues African cattle from the modernist expressions that condensed African pastoral ideologies strictly in cultural forms.⁵⁶³

The chapter relies on personal reminiscences, folkloric conceptions, sayings and vernacular terms, rumor and gossip, as well as my experiential knowledge, as a native of Bobirwa and a former cattle herder. These sources contain information that relates to the manner in which the Babirwa appropriated cash and imbued it with multiple symbolic meanings as they sought to negotiate emerging socio-ecological transformations. This chapter is not arranged chronologically like the previous ones. It is a thematic chapter, which examines processes where there were a lot of continuities. Thus, I move back and forth in time to capture recurring processes and phenomena as they occurred at different times.

First, I demonstrate how migrant labor affected the Babirwa's cattle keeping practices and the ways in which it nearly corroded their moral fiber. In this section, I look at the social cleavages that were caused by migrancy as it caused herding labor shortages and brought a rift between older men (the patriarchy) and their sons over the control of young men's labor and the independence that these young men gained by investing their cash earnings in cattle. I also explore the contribution of cash to other emerging social fault lines. Despite the lack of legs of the symbolic cattle that was cash, it had the ability

⁵⁶² Jean and John L. Comaroff, "Goodly Beasts, Beastly Goods: Cattle and Commodities in a South African Context", *American Ethnologist*, vol. 17, no. 2 (1990), pp. 195-216.

⁵⁶³ Dorothy Hodgson's edited volume challenges this myth of pastoral cultures in Africa, arguing that pastoralism is a contested and negotiated domain that changes with socio-economic and ecological transformations over time and space. Dorothy Hodgson, *Rethinking Pastoralism in Africa: Gender, Culture, and the Myth of the Patriarchal Pastoralist* (Athens: Ohio University Press; Oxford: James Currey, 2001).

to travel long distances and traverse diverse social and geographic boundaries. This fluidity of movement produced moral ramifications, such as nuanced forms of prostitution, and a dramatic rise in premarital pregnancy and unarranged marriage unions.

The chapter then proceeds to examine the differentiated ways in which the Babirwa used their intellectual faculties to negotiate the threat that cash posed to their cultural landscape by drawing it into their symbolic social relations, with special reference to the reconfiguration of funerary practices, bridewealth exchanges, and the doctoring of cattle and human bodies. Lastly, I explore the rise of a new form of witchcraft where it was believed that some people accumulated their wealth through using noxious medicines to turn others into the living dead. The belief in this witchcraft of greed, I argue, was a result of the insecurities caused by the ecological collapse and the rising tide of migrant labor and sharpening socio-economic differentiation during the 1960s.

A Tensioned Social Landscape?: Migrant Labor, Cash and Shifting Domains

Colonial rulers in Southern Africa manipulated gender and generational hierarchies and labor conditions in order to maintain authority and control over both male and female subjects.⁵⁶⁴ They did this through seemingly contradictory restrictions and permissions of the movement of young men and women between highly gendered spaces. This section reveals the intricate role that relationships between physical mobility, gender ideology, labor relations and cash played in the production of power in Bobirwa between 1930 and the 1960s. I contend, like Benedict Carton, that colonial authorities forged alliances with

⁵⁶⁴ Benedict Carton, *Blood From Your Children: The Colonial Origins of Generational Conflict in South Africa* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000); Teresa A. Barnes, "The Fight for Control of African Women's Mobility in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1900-1939" *Signs*, vol. 17, no. 3 (1992), pp. 586-608.

local male leaders in order to reinforce traditional patriarchal hierarchies.⁵⁶⁵ These alliances were enforced by making sure that young men who worked in the mines engaged in circulatory migration, whereby they were given only short contracts renewable only after their return home and cultivation was over.

Thus the African notion of the oscillatory movement of time influenced the colonial mind as migrants' contracts were seasonal, the most important season being the cultivation time. These temporary retreats of *makonteraka* (an adaptation of the English word, "contract"), as the miners were called, enabled the Babirwa patriarchy, especially fathers, grandfathers and uncles, to have access to the earnings of youthful migrants through the practice of *dithogo* (heads), which I describe in detail in the next section. Circulatory migration also enabled the colonial government access to migrants' earnings through the exaction of taxes.

According to existing body of scholarship on migrant labor in Southern Africa, the state allowed the movement of young men—but only under certain circumstances.⁵⁶⁶ Young men's mobility was deemed permissible only if it retained the colonial authority's ability to profit off of their labor. Most importantly, these narratives argue, young men working in the mines were given short-term contracts so that the state could exact taxes on them whenever they returned home. This, paradoxically, went against the interests of the traditional patriarchy – who were used to appropriating the labor of young men through fiat – but ultimately reinforced colonial control throughout the region. Despite such intensive discussions of power and hierarchy, young migrant men show little agency

⁵⁶⁵ Benedict Carton, *Blood From Your Children*; Elizabeth Schmidt, "Patriarchy, Capitalism and the Colonial State in Zimbabwe", *Signs*, vol. 16, no. 4 (1991), pp. 732-756.

⁵⁶⁶ Benedict Carton, *Blood From Your Children*; Elizabeth Schmidt, "Patriarchy, Capitalism."

or ability to produce their own power dynamics in these narratives. They seem to behave according to the whims of those above them in the hierarchy of authority: either the patriarchy or the state—or both. Little room is left for a discussion on the role that movement plays for those the state and traditional authority was built upon—the migrants.

This section gives voice, authority, and history to the otherwise exploited youthful migrant men whom Botswana's (migration) histories have largely ignored.⁵⁶⁷ I grant power and authority to those historical actors that often seem subject to the whims of state and patriarchal authority in Botswana's migration historiography. Whereas existing narratives? discussed the state's role in defining movement and gender, I assert that labor migrants often defined their own sense of selfhood, united through common experience, and ultimately subverted the authority of the state and the patriarchy in their migrations.⁵⁶⁸

In Bobirwa, youthful migrant men invented the clandestine migration strategy called *go thoba*, "sneaking off", which took place under cover of darkness and therefore necessitated going in groups in order to bring a sense of security. By sneaking off, the Babirwa young men, most of whom lived at the cattlepost herding their fathers' cattle, were able to free their labor from the control of the patriarchy. Also, by the 1930s, migrant labor had become bound up with the responsibility of paying taxes with the colonial government automatically registering all male migrants who entered into mining

⁵⁶⁷ For discussions on migrant labor from Botswana, see Isaac Schapera, *Migrant Labour and Tribal Life*; Wazha G. Morapedi, "Migrant Labour and the Peasantry", pp. 197-214.

⁵⁶⁸ Wazha G. Morapedi, "Acculturation and Botswana Migrant Miners in South Africa, 1930-1980," *Afrika Zamani* (CODESRIA) Nos. 15 & 16 (2007-2008): 45-62.

contracts as taxpayers.⁵⁶⁹ As some of my informants told me, sneaking off also helped them to avoid registration under the migrant labor system and documentation by the state as taxpayers.⁵⁷⁰ By the late 1930s, concerns about high rates of male youth migrations dominated the Native Advisory Council (later, African Advisory Council) meetings, with the chiefs imploring government to put an embargo on migration for six months during ploughing. From the 1940s, District Commissioners also joined calls for stay-at-home policies, citing “an unparalleled [illicit] exodus of native [young men].”⁵⁷¹ The alarm raised in the 1930s and 1940s was to continue to ring well into the 1960s. A late 1950s report on the state of the cattle industry warned that the absence of herders was bound to destroy the mainstay of the country’s economy.⁵⁷²

Although the state, in confluence with the patriarchy, may have held significant authority and control, the exploited had their own histories, modes of identification, and ability to assert their own power. *Go thoba* constituted simultaneous subversion of colonial and patriarchal authority as young men deserted cattle posts and “illegally” crossed borders into the Transvaal and Southern Rhodesia to look for wage work in the mines and farms respectively. Feeling liberated, these young men gained control of their earnings, most of which they re-invested in cattle. An old expression, *mphada molelo o hadela mpeng ya gage* (everyone benefits from the sweat of their brow) became common parlance among migrants to describe this emerging individualism. As one former migrant confirms: “I gave my father only a little of my money. The rest I bought cattle and a

⁵⁶⁹ Isaac Schapera, *Migrant Labour and Tribal Life*, p. 116.

⁵⁷⁰ Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema, Bobonong, February 9, 2011; Molatedi Seree (former migrant), Mogapi, December 26, 2010.

⁵⁷¹ Botswana National Archives (hereafter BNA), S. 436/12, Bechuanaland Protectorate Annual Reports, 1935.

⁵⁷² G.C. Ryan, *Report to the Bechuanaland Government on the Livestock Industry* (London: HMSO, June 1958), p. 4.

plough.”⁵⁷³ This response is a reflection of the individuating effects of cash as migrants attempted to subvert the moral economy of the Babirwa.

I define moral economy as a production system premised on maximal investment in social networks in a society facing threats of dispossession by drought and disease and changing socio-economic circumstances. As Thomas Spear writes of the moral economy of the mountain farmers of northeastern Tanzania, “individual wealth and power carried social responsibilities for the general welfare of all and antisocial or immoral acts which threatened these values brought the possibility of famine, defeat, or death.”⁵⁷⁴ These social networks are tapped during times of dearth, and for the Babirwa, social networks became central to survival from the 1930s as migrant labor siphoned away herding labor.

As more young men deserted cattle posts, the Babirwa developed new mechanisms of building social capital to offset the ensuing shortage of herding labor. They reconstituted the expression, *motho ke motho ka batho*, “a person thrives because of other people,” which became central to the changing power dynamics. Like in pre-colonial times, the relationship between the wealthy and the poor began to be mediated more and more by the accumulation of wealth in people as wealthy cattle owners appropriated kin and non-kin labor with which to build and sustain herds. These had the benefit of foster children who were made available to them through a new practice called *adima*, borrowing, whereby the poor would send their boys to go herd the cattle of their wealthy relative or neighbor.⁵⁷⁵ This arrangement accorded the wealthy free herding

⁵⁷³ Personal communication, Balekudi Madema, Gobojango, June 4, 2011.

⁵⁷⁴ Thomas Spear, *Mountain Farmers: Moral Economies of Land and Agricultural Development in Arusha and Mweru* (Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota, 1997), p. 12. Spear borrowed the idea of moral economy from James Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

⁵⁷⁵ Interview with Dikgang Montsosi, Bobonong, July 10, 2011; Mbat Mashaba (a highly respected matriarch and one of the oldest women in Molaladau), Molaladau, July 15, 2011.

labor. At the same time, it provided a safety net for the poor as they, and/or their children, became the protégés of the wealthy and therefore benefitted from the milk, as well as draft animals for ploughing their fields.⁵⁷⁶

Despite the changing landscapes of power and wealth, where cash threatened to drive society towards individualism, the Babirwa reconfigured traditional mechanisms of wealth distribution and redistribution to maintain a sense of social responsibility. Their moral economy was not a simple romantic rejection of emerging socio-economic transformations. The Babirwa did not resist cash by tenaciously holding onto timeless traditions. Instead, they integrated cash with their traditional wealth redistribution mechanisms, in the process transforming it into negotiated property as “cattle without legs.” The acquisition of money thus shaped new meanings of property, particularly in that property – in this respect, cattle and cash – in colonial Bobirwa became a field of power and negotiation in which the relationship of state, community and individual was defined.

Subsequently, cash also became a site of struggle between labor migrants and the colonial state. When I asked former migrant, Balekudi Madema, if he did not pay taxes, he retorted: “What taxes? *Mphahela*, “give me in return for nothing?”, as the Hut Tax was known in Bobirwa, we all tried to avoid it. But we were forced to pay.”⁵⁷⁷ Indeed colonial tax was very exploitative and according to one wealthy cattle owner, whom I footnote above, Gaotwaelwe Mooketsi, it was “a form of theft because it forced us to part

⁵⁷⁶ Interview with Gaotwaelwe Mooketsi (a wealthy farmer, who built his large herds by reinvesting his wages in cattle from the 1950s), Mogapi, December 25, 2010; Dikgang Montsosi, Bobonong, July 10, 2011; Mbat Mashaba, Molaladau, July 15, 2011.

⁵⁷⁷ Interview with, Balekudi Madema, Gobojango, June 4, 2011.

with our cattle.”⁵⁷⁸ Botswana historian, C.J. Makgala, has indicated that until the end of the 1920s, the *dikgosi* satisfactorily executed their duty as tax collectors. But from the 1930s, tax collection caused hostility between subject groups and a new breed of Tswana *dikgosi* who deployed regiments to impound cattle from those subject groups who displayed recalcitrant behavior or defaulted.⁵⁷⁹

In the Bobirwa area, the Bangwato chief, Tshekedi Khama’s expropriation of households of their herds drove a wedge between him, as a representative of the patriarchy, and the colonial authorities. For instance, in 1932, Resident Commissioner Charles Rey admonished a representative of Bangwato chieftaincy for divesting the Babirwa of Molaladau of their cattle and for using tribal revenue for personal enrichment.⁵⁸⁰ A Resident Magistrate in Serowe, Bangwato Reserve, had also complained that Kgosi Tshekedi Khama was underpaying his tax collectors, in turn inducing them to steal from subject peoples, including the Babirwa. He further pointed out that such exploitation produced a new breed of cattle-owning middle class, observing: “A Hut Tax collector’s position has become the most desirable one by most natives. A man who is appointed a Hut Tax collector invariably establishes a new cattle post in the area to which he is appointed.”⁵⁸¹

Such depredations by the *dikgosi* and their tax collectors (whose notoriety for swindling people earned them the label: *dintša tsa kgosi* or the chief’s dogs) on subject peoples sparked a wave of defaults. Men and women informed me that nuanced methods

⁵⁷⁸ Interview, Gaotwaelwe Mooketsi, Mogapi, December 24, 2010.

⁵⁷⁹ C.J. Makgala, “Taxation in the Tribal Areas of the Bechuanaland Protectorate, 1899-1957”, *Journal of African History*, vol. 45, no. 2 (2004), p. 281.

⁵⁸⁰ Isaac Schapera, “Political Organization of Ngwato in the Bechuanaland Protectorate”, in Fortes and Evans-Prichard (eds.), *African Political Systems* (London: Oxford University Press for the International African Institute, 1940), p. 67.

⁵⁸¹ BNA, S. 12/5, Nettelton to Financial Secretary, September 25, 1932.

of evasion were the common norm throughout the colonial period. Some men simply took to flight. Most importantly, many men flouted traditional birth practices as they sought refuge inside the huts of the *batsetse* (sin. *motsetse*), “women who have given birth”, or nursing mothers.⁵⁸² The *batsetse* were kept in seclusion for about six months and a log called *mopakwana* placed in front of the house as a symbol of illnesses that might affect the child should a sexually active man step over it and into the house. *Mopakwana* also referred to a child who would display signs of malnutrition or other illnesses while still young. It was believed that men’s feet carried polluting heat, which could potentially harm the child. Thus, men were forbidden to enter the huts of the *batsetse* lest their sexual pollution should attract the spirits of ill-health towards the baby. The *Dintša tsa kgosi* – exclusively male – knew better than to enter a *motsetse*’s house as that could attract retributive justice from the entire community or attract the wrath of ancestral spirits. As a result, the house of the *motsetse* provided refuge to men who wanted to evade taxes. In the end, despite the fact tax payment was a masculine domain, women played an important role in protecting their male kin from the expropriations of the tax collectors.⁵⁸³

Moreover, as people felt dispossessed, they started stealing cattle from white settler farms.⁵⁸⁴ By 1932, police were reporting cases of stock theft in the Tuli Block farms. The Babirwa had a tendency to cut farm fences, driving their cattle into the farms to graze there. Afterwards they would drive out their cattle together with part of the

⁵⁸² Interview with, Baagi Ngwako (former tax collector, 1940), Bobonong, June 12, 2011; Mabati Mashaba, Molaladau, July 15, 2011.

⁵⁸³ Interview with Ketholegile Phuthego, Mogapi, December 25, 2010; Moloko Makgoba, Sefhophe, December 25, 2010; Mbati Mashaba, Molaladau, July 15, 2011.

⁵⁸⁴ BNA, S. R.M. Nettelton to Captain C.W. Martin (police chief and Tuli Block farmer), May 31, 1932.

settlers' herd.⁵⁸⁵ Some simply engaged in banal criminality, robbing the settler farmers in broad daylight.⁵⁸⁶ Stealing might even have occurred within communities, but the archival record is silent on intra-community cattle thefts. This silence reinforces my argument that colonial officials had little interests in what was happening within African communities, unless colonial policy was threatened.

Nonetheless, these depredations together with the ensuing ecological collapse induced many young men *go thoba*, leaving their fathers' cattle unattended. From 1930, drought and foot and mouth disease had incredibly impacted an array of social domains, most importantly the relationship between fathers and their sons. Diana Wylie has indicated that a severe and prolonged drought between 1927 and 1937 led, for the first time to an exodus of young men to the mines in the history of the Bangwato Reserve.⁵⁸⁷ Wylie's assertions are further confirmed by the elation with which colonial officials described the migration of young men from the Bangwato Reserve. A district commissioner at Serowe noted in 1936: "a permanent labour source has now been created in this [Bangwato] Reserve whereas about five years ago it was almost impossible to get a native to go to the Gold Mines."⁵⁸⁸ This rise in wage labor migration was to reshape power dynamics in Bobirwa. Labor historian, Benedict Carton, has also described the generational dynamics of the 1930s in South Africa where Zulu migrant labor

⁵⁸⁵ BNA, S. R.M. Nettelton to Captain C.W. Martin (police chief and Tuli Block farmer), May 31, 1932.

⁵⁸⁶ One session of the European Advisory Council quoted one settler farmer, Mr. L.E. Cordeur as having complained: "native men stand up to me, armed with sticks. They defy me with choice language, driving my cattle away while I watch helplessly," Minutes of the 39th session of the European Advisory Council, October 21, 1946.

⁵⁸⁷ Before 1927, labor migrations from the Reserve were few and far apart. Diana Wylie, "The Changing Face of Hunger in Southern African History, 1880-1980", *Past and Present*, vol. 122 (1989), p. 122.

⁵⁸⁸ BNA, DCS 21/9, district commissioner, Serowe, G.E. Nettelton, annual report for Serowe for 1935, January 6, 1936.

undermined patriarchal authority as cash shifted the balance of power in favor of young men.⁵⁸⁹

With recruiting agents for the South African mines abounding into the Bangwato Reserve for the first time since the rise of migrant labor during the late nineteenth century, it was easy to find wage work.⁵⁹⁰ Yet the emphasis of colonial medicine on the physicality of mine recruits made securing work in the mines an uncertain prospect due to high rates of rejections of the so-called physically unfit.⁵⁹¹ *Go thoba* therefore became a response to the changing medical landscape where able-bodiedness was assuming new contested meanings. It was a strategy to subvert colonial emphasis on the physical vitality of young men's bodies. With their villages and cattle posts located near the Transvaal border to the southeast and the Rhodesian border to the east, many of the Babirwa young men did not sign up for mining contracts, a process that would have required physical examination to determine their able-bodiedness. Instead, they slipped across these porous borders to find work on settler farms where they got hired without having to produce certificates of physical fitness.⁵⁹² Emphasis on physical vitality discriminated against older men and excluded them from mine work. As Resident Commissioner, Charles Rey, reminded councilors serving in the African Advisory Council in 1936, mine work was "a young man's job" and interference with "the choice of the recruiter" would not be

⁵⁸⁹ Benedict Carton, *Blood From Your Children*.

⁵⁹⁰ Wazha G. Morapedi, "Migrant Labor and the Peasantry", pp. 200-201.

⁵⁹¹ Julie Livingston, *Debility and the Moral Imagination in Botswana* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), p. 120.

⁵⁹² Interview with Odirile Baakile, Tsetsebjwe, July 2, 2011; Headmen of arbitration, Onketetse Serumola and Adam Masilo, Bobonong, February 9, 2011.

tolerated.⁵⁹³ Medical anthropologist Julie Livingston also notes about the Southern Bechuanaland:

Two historical processes – labor migration and colonial medicine – intersected and shaped one another in the 1930s and 1940s.... Together they determined a new context in which local meanings of able-bodiedness were shaped by external standards.... Changing definitions of able-bodiedness sowed the seeds of a new socio-economic hierarchy that was only just beginning to emerge, one in which youthful vigor, extra weight and deep breathing could be converted into [wealth] in ways that the wisdom and experience of age could not.⁵⁹⁴

The exclusion of older men and the other classes of the “physically frail”, including children and women, from mine employment exposed these categories of people to the depredations of drought and foot and mouth disease as the herding labor of young men was carefully selected and siphoned away. The labor of young men was important to household subsistence because they did the milking and preparing of oxen for ploughing alongside looking after the cattle at the cattle posts.⁵⁹⁵ According to colonial medical reports at the time, many of the highly mobile and fit young men negotiated the ecological misfortunes of the time by earning cash.⁵⁹⁶ Existing narratives on famine in colonial Southern Africa have also demonstrated that during times of ecological and economic distress, because of their mobility and social capital, the physically fit young men had a better chance of survival than the frail old men, women and children.⁵⁹⁷

⁵⁹³ BNA, S. 387/5, Extracts from the minutes of the 17th session of the Native Advisory Council meeting, May, 1936.

⁵⁹⁴ Julie Livingston, *Debility and the Moral Imagination*, p. 140.

⁵⁹⁵ Wazha Morapedi, “Migrant Labour and the Peasantry”, p. 201.

⁵⁹⁶ BNA, S. 179/4, Principal Medical Officer, Dr. Shepherd, May 4, 1931; BNA, S. 179/4, Bechuanaland Protectorate Annual Medical Reports, 1933-35.

⁵⁹⁷ Meghan Vaughan, *The Story of an African Famine: Gender and Famine in Twentieth-Century Malawi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Diana Wylie, *Starving on a Full Stomach: Hunger and*

The validity of this argument is, however, historically contingent. Mine work of the 1930s and onwards was a debilitating occupation. Injuries and disease contracted in the mines produced disability. Whenever the migrants got injured or contracted disease, they were sent back home. Medical historian, Randall Packard's influential work highlights the debilitating effects of Tuberculosis (hereafter TB) in rural South Africa as repatriated infected migrants propagated the contagion within their households and communities. According to Packard, Tuberculosis was kept in a latent form for longer periods at the mines because of nutritional diets, but once it manifested itself, the migrants were sent back to their communities.⁵⁹⁸ Former migrants whom I had conversations with also reinforced Packard's argument. These remembered with a sense of nostalgia, a *Fanakalo* veneration of a place in the Transvaal called Western Deep Level *ku inyama izo phele ku phela mazinyo e indoda*, the English rendition of which is "where meat doesn't get finished, and what deteriorates are the teeth of a man."⁵⁹⁹ For the Babirwa men, teeth are a symbol of masculinity and physical strength because they are used to eat meat. Any man who can no longer do physically taxing work is said to have lost his teeth. As a result, mine migrants whose bodies were weakened by TB accepted with resignation their repatriation following months of physical exertion because they had "lost the teeth to do work."

the Triumph of Cultural Racism in Modern South Africa (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001).

⁵⁹⁸ Randall Packard, *White Plague, Black Labour: Tuberculosis and the Political Economy of Health and Disease in South Africa* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989).

⁵⁹⁹ *Fanakalo* is a creolized mining language, which combines numerous Southern African languages, including Xhosa, Zulu, Tswana, Afrikaans, and so on. This information was provided by former migrant laborers to the South African mines, such as Molatedi Seree of Mogapi, Mooketsi Maunatlala of Bobonong who I respectively interviewed on December 25, 2010 and February 6, 2011.

These repatriated migrants became vectors, spreading the TB contagion within and without their families. Official impressions in the Bangwato Reserve indicated at the end of the 1930s:

Disease is ravaging subject groups who have higher numbers of migrants. Many have retreated to the cattle posts hoping to benefit from milk and wild plants and traditional medicine. They do not seek European medicine. Only 290 cases of Pulmonary TB and 93 cases of Vertebral TB were treated in 1938.⁶⁰⁰

But the retreat to the cattle post offered very little reprieve as drought and foot and mouth disease had respectively affected breeding stock, reduced the milk intake and destroyed much of the veld food plants to which the Babirwa often took recourse during times of distress, leading to an epidemic of deficiency diseases, particularly scurvy.⁶⁰¹ By the end of the 1950s, approximately one percent of the total population of Bechuanaland had a highly infectious TB strain.⁶⁰² This estimation, however, did not account for the many cases of infections and casualties that went unreported because sufferers had retreated to the cattle posts. As a result, TB ravaged communities and produced a new breed of the disabled. One old woman in Gobojango remembered very skinny men and women who coughed a lot and could hardly do any work. “*E ne e le makodopo a a gotholang hela* (they were just coughing skulls),”⁶⁰³ she said. The reference to people as “coughing skulls” reflects the anxieties about an unknown disease and a pervasive sense of material insecurity as TB eroded all forms of labor. [this is all very good, but, again, how does this reflect how able-bodiedness assumes new and ‘contested’ meanings?]

⁶⁰⁰ Bechuanaland Annual Medical and Sanitary Report, 1939.

⁶⁰¹ Diana Wylie, “The Changing Face of Hunger”, p. 122.

⁶⁰² BNA, S. 438/2/3, Report on a visit to Bechuanaland by World Health Consultant, Antony Geser, June 4-7, 1958.

⁶⁰³ Interview, Modjaji Makarapa, Gobojango, June 4, 2011.

TB seems to have dramatically increased mortality rates in Bobirwa to the point of forcing communities to reconfigure their funerary practices. Previously men and women were respectively buried in the cattle byre, and behind the house and under the thrashing floor. From the 1930s burial sites were moved to the outskirts of the villages, without due regard for gender, but in an attempt to banish the disease.⁶⁰⁴ These were gendered spaces in which the burial of men in the cattle byre connected them to cattle while the burial of women either behind the house or under the thrashing floor reflected their role as custodians of subsistence and the domestic space. Still, people who were known to have died of TB were not buried in these designated sites. My father tells me that my grandfather's brother, who died of TB was buried somewhere in a small forest, and nobody can locate the burial site today. Several of my informants also told me that some of their relatives who died of TB were buried further away in isolated places and they cannot locate the burial sites. Forgetting and remembering are socially mediated processes. From my discussions with my father, I learned that everyone whose relative died of TB had a duty to forget about the deceased because "when you keep thinking about ancestors that is when they will visit you." But this new burial practice was not just about forgetting and remembering. It was more about banishing a previously unknown contagion. That is, a deliberate, reasoned intervention into disease vectors rather than an exclusively metaphysical response. When asked why it was necessary to prescribe isolated burial sites for the TB dead, an eighty-five year old *ngaka*, "traditional medical practitioner and diviner", explained:

Our cattle had no care because many men were sick. The disease was brought from foreign lands. Even the white man's medicine failed to treat

⁶⁰⁴ Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema, Bobonong, February 9, 2011.

it. So there was need to isolate it by throwing away those who died of it and making sure that their spirits would not return to the village. Failure to isolate those who died of this disease would increase its spread.⁶⁰⁵

This recollection provides insights into the indigenous strategies that the Babirwa often employed to deal with natural phenomena that they did not comprehend. Further prompting revealed that the corpses of the TB dead were mutilated by cutting their legs and the corpses buried in a sitting position. “It was a way to stop the spread of the disease,” remembers the *ngaka*.⁶⁰⁶ It seems the Babirwa, who believed that the spirits of the dead could continue to influence the realm of the living, thought that the spirits of the TB dead would walk back into the village and spread disease. In the Babirwa thought about the relationship between the realms of the dead and the living, ancestral spirits were central to the direction in which life progressed. Health and illness, fertility, social relationships and prosperity depended on whether or not the living respected the ways of their ancestors. Whenever ancestral spirits were unhappy with their descendants, they would be reborn into their lives and cause them to suffer.

Bereaved persons were mostly in danger of contracting TB because the lingering specter of *sehihi*, or dark spirit, would contaminate anyone who had had contact with the deceased. The *sehihi* in this context was the contagion or the virus that spread disease. The scientific validity of the Babirwa’s notion of the “dark spirit” that propagates disease was to be echoed in a medical officer’s commentary about the trajectory of TB in 1961. The report warned that the family had become “a source of infection and thus a danger to

⁶⁰⁵ Interview with *ngaka* Moraka Mohwasa, Mabolwe, July 10, 2011. Moraka, who was born Shimane, acquired his new name because of his ability to help people with powerful medicines to increase the calving rates of their cattle. His ability to make cattle therefore earned him the name, Moraka or Cattlepost. Such traditional doctors are known as *dingaka tsa di kgomo* or cattle doctors to differentiate them from other specialists.

⁶⁰⁶ Interview with Moraka Mohwasa, Mabolwe, July 10, 2011.

all people in the village.”⁶⁰⁷ Hence, to the Babirwa, transgression of the new funeral practices would bring this new disease called *sehuba*, sputum, of which the symptoms were chest pains and profuse coughing. The burying of the TB dead in far isolated burial sites and with their legs cut was therefore a way of completely banishing their spirits from the realm of the living and throwing such diseased spirits into eternal oblivion.

A recent archaeological study about the varied cultural landscape in eastern Botswana has also revealed that earlier (around the 12th century) inhabitants of the Shashe-Limpopo confluence buried their dead in a crouching position.⁶⁰⁸ Although the study does not provide reasons for such a burial practice, oral sources from present Bobirwa are suggestive. The Babirwa believed that if their TB dead were buried lying down, death could easily assume the shape of the body and spread out like wildfire. The burying of corpses in a sitting position was therefore a re-appropriation and reconfiguration of an old burial practice to try and localize disease and prevent death from spreading.

Added to the debilitating effects of TB was syphilis, which was a result of changing sexual morality. In his survey on migrant labor in Bechuanaland, Isaac Schapera, the doyen of Botswana studies, observed that migrants used cash to induce sexual favors from girls. “Some men spent [cash] recklessly on liquor, women and some temptations,”⁶⁰⁹ he revealed. Eminent figures in Bobirwa also talked about “*banyana ba*

⁶⁰⁷ BNA, S. 490/1, Medical Officer of Health to All Tribal Territories, etc, March 3, 1961.

⁶⁰⁸ Sarah M. Mothulatshipi, The recent archaeological research of the Shashe-Limpopo confluence zone: a perspective from eastern Botswana. Paper presented at the *Biennial conference of the Society for Africanist Archaeologists (SAfA 2006)*. Calgary, Canada, 2006.
<http://cohesion.rice.edu/CentersAndInst/SAFA/emplibary/Dingalo,SM.SAfA2006.pdf>. Accessed June 1, 2012.

⁶⁰⁹ Isaac Schapera, *Migrant Labour and Tribal Life: A Study of Conditions in the Bechuanaland Protectorate* (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 203.

okwa ke sepache go buduluga, or “girls being enticed by a bulging purse.”⁶¹⁰ This changing sexual morality was primarily due to the fact that, with cattle succumbing to ecological collapse, working in the mines replaced cattle herding as a producer of masculinities and a vehicle to manliness. Like with their originals, the ownership of “cattle without legs” was therefore gendered. This symbolic power of cash enabled young migrant returnees, who considered themselves adult men, to manipulate the social system and therefore blatantly flout sexual morals by sleeping with multiple partners. Cash bestowed upon these young men the type of power similar to the one previously enjoyed by the *bakhumi*, elderly men who possessed cattle wealth: a kind of power that enabled them to engage in polygamous marriages. The difference, however, was that the young men’s power was illicit and therefore morally reprehensible.

The result of changing sexual practices was the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, particularly syphilis, which in Bobirwa became known as *rrasephiphi* (or man of the dark), a word that implied that the disease was caused by *rre*, a male person, and in darkness, *diphithi*. There were two primary reasons for associating syphilis with men and darkness. First, sexually transmitted syphilis was unknown among the Babirwa before the 1930s. Writing about syphilis and racism in South Africa, medical historian, Karen Jochelson, recounts a dual pathology in the medical history of Southern Africa where venereal syphilis spread in tandem with a non-venereal endemic form of syphilis long present in the drier parts of the sub-continent. She demonstrates that before 1930, what existed in the entire Southern Africa was yaws, a form of syphilis not associated with

⁶¹⁰ Interview with, Kgosi Mmirwa Malema and headmen of arbitration, Onketetse Serumola and Adam Masilo, February 9, 2011.

sexual contact.⁶¹¹ According to Jochelson, the new sexually transmitted syphilis, which was initially prevalent only among Europeans, followed migrants' routes to spread across the region.

Syphilis seems to have spread so fast that it became a source of concern for colonial officials. In November 1930, Resident Commissioner, Charles Rey, with his usual condemnation of the African, claimed that ninety per cent of the Bechuanaland population suffered from venereal disease.⁶¹² Equally, other colonial officials argued that by the 1940s, Bechuanaland was a "highly syphilized" country, with thousands of cases treated annually.⁶¹³ Secondly, since many of these young men were not married and could not be sanctioned to have sex as they wished, they could only *kukuna* or sneak into the houses of girls under stealth of darkness late at night and leave in the earliest hours of the morning, still under cover of darkness. Thus sexual relationships between unmarried couples were a site of darkness, beyond the purview of adults.

While having multiple and concurrent sexual relationships may have contributed to disease, prostitution seemed to have also developed during this time. As young migrant men showed off their expensive western clothes and boasted of "cattle without legs" in their pockets, girls, whose chances of migration were limited because of patriarchal and state constraints, sought recourse to sex work, but in very nuanced ways. The following

⁶¹¹ Karen Jochelson, *The Colour of Disease: Syphilis and Racism in South Africa, 1880-1950* (New York: Palgrave and Oxford, 2001).

⁶¹² Sir Charles Rey, *Monarch of All I Survey: Bechuanaland Diaries, 1929-1937*. Edited by Neil Parsons and Michael Crowder (Gaborone: Botswana Society; New York: Lilian Barber Press; London: James Currey, 1988), entry for Friday November 28, 1930. For a biographical sketch of Rey, see the preface, prologue and epilogue provided by Neil Parsons and Michael Crowder in this book. Rey comes across as a self-delusional man of colonial grandeur, with larger-than-life attitude and contempt for African behaviors, cultures and beliefs.

⁶¹³ BNA, S. 426/4/1, report of the commissioner appointed by the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs to advise on medical administration in Bechuanaland Protectorate, 1946

folk song brings our attention to the role of cash and alcohol in the rise of prostitution in Bobirwa.

Sikisi pense mo sune (six-pence for a kiss)
Sheleng mo tshware ka lebele (shilling for touching the breasts)
Ponto ke bula dirope (a pound opens the thighs)
Bojalwa jo ra bo nwa (while we drink alcohol)

Today this song dominates various public spaces, sung primarily for entertainment purposes during social and cultural festivities. But from the 1930s it was mainly used to spite girls who had multiple concurrent partners, as well as to demonize prostitution, notes one of the most renowned folk musicians in Botswana, Johnny Kobedi (now deceased).⁶¹⁴ This folk conception of prostitution is supported by ethnographic studies of the time. A 1959 survey, carried out by Field Recording Unit of the Library of South Africa, which sought to record Tswana music, speaks of Bechuanaland women making “considerable profit through prostitution and illicit liquor selling under the cloak of pseudonyms, which could not readily be traced.”⁶¹⁵ In her study of prostitution in colonial Kenya, Luise White found out that prostitution was a dignified form of labor. She therefore referred to the sex services that Kenyan women provided migrant men as “the comforts of home.”⁶¹⁶ This materialistic paradigm may obscure the underlying moral ramifications of prostitution in an African society, but it also reflects women’s ability to use their bodies as realms of power to gain access to the wealth of men.

⁶¹⁴ Interview with Johnny Kobedi, Gaborone Bus Rank, November 10, 2010.

⁶¹⁵ The Field Recording Unit of the Library, “Recording of the Tswana Tribe: Western Transvaal and Bechuanaland Protectorate, October-November 1959”, *African Music*, vol. 2, no. 2 (1959) p. 63 and p. 64.

⁶¹⁶ According to White, it was only from prostitutes that migrant men could acquire what they could not provide for themselves, which is sex. Unfortunately, White approached her subject of “the comforts of home” from a purely materialist perspective. She conceptualizes prostitution as a labor process, within which women were only interested in making a living and men were acquiring a service. Luise White, *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

For the Babirwa elderly (men and women), sex work was a perversion because it impacted negatively on the institution of marriage. Such violations of sexual morality therefore produced a new social description for girls: that of *lebelete* (plu. *mabelete*). The word *lebelete* was initially associated with a wayward female cow that would “bitch” around, always straying away from the main herd [spreading disease? (if the parallel is going to make any sense)]. Such a cow was described as *kgomo ya lebelete*, “the bitching cow.”⁶¹⁷ Girls who had multiple and concurrent partners were labeled *mabelete* and therefore had the potentiality to spread disease as they could carry the contagion from one sex partner to the other.⁶¹⁸ The construction of the *lebelete* produced new knowledge and language about syphilis as people continued to find ways of understanding it. Syphilis changed from being a disease spread by a “man in the dark,” (although it maintained its original name, *rrasephiphi*) to a woman’s disease, effectively transforming women into vectors. Men who contracted syphilis after sexual contact with the *mabelete* could be heard claiming that these girls “bit them.”⁶¹⁹

For this reason, contracting syphilis became known as *go lomiwa*, or “being bitten.” Consequently, a new cautionary expression was coined, which ran thus: *kgomo ya lebelete ya loma*, translating directly into “a wayward female cow bites.” The idea of “the biting wayward female cow” was derived from the Babirwa’s knowledge of a woman’s genitals as *kgomo* because a woman’s reproductive capacity could be converted into cattle, either by producing daughters who would be married off for cattle or sons who would provide herding labor. It therefore became common parlance to hear people

⁶¹⁷ Interview with, Bathaloganyi Phuthego Molosiwa, Mogapi, December 25, 2010.

⁶¹⁸ Interview with ngaka Sekonopo, Mahalapye, August 22, 2011; Mbat Mashaba, Molaladau, July 15, 2011.

⁶¹⁹ Interview with ngaka Sekonopo, Mahalapye, August 22, 2011; Mbat Mashaba, Molaladau, July 15, 2011; Moreki Montsosi and Thaloganyo Goromente, Bobonong, March 13, 2011.

saying: “*o jele kgomo ya lebelete* or he has eaten a wayward cow,”⁶²⁰ says *ngaka* Sekonopo.

Migrant labor, disease, and the ongoing ecological collapse produced a new generation of the disabled and therefore impacted negatively on cattle farming as some young mine returnees had lost habits of pastoral industry cultivated in them prior to migrating, or they simply could no longer herd cattle due to illness and injuries. On the other hand, this period produced a cattle-owning young generation of men whose newly found independence and monetary wealth empowered them to take over the pastoral reigns from their fathers. Thus, the material utility and symbolic representation of cattle in the life ways of the Babirwa did not disappear. What changed was the dynamics of power in society as young men accumulated their own wealth and became the primary household providers in the stead of their fathers.

The foregoing argument provides a useful corrective to universalizing theories that cast cash as a corrosive commodity. Jean and John Comaroff, in particular, have opined that modern money undermines the integrity of cultures as it promotes individualism and erodes older community solidarities.⁶²¹ This assertion is belied by transformations in the Babirwa society where cash only shifted the dynamics of power rather than destroying social networks. As the mining industry continued to “harvest the most robust labor” in the form of young able-bodied men, the social hierarchy was

⁶²⁰ Personal communication, *nkgaka* Sekonopo, Mahalapye, August 22, 2011. Sekonopo is one of the well known herbalist-cum-diviner in the whole of Botswana. He was also once the leader of The Dingaka Association, an organization registered with the Registrar of Societies to represent the *dingaka* and legalize their practice in Botswana.

⁶²¹ Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, “Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South African Postcolony”, *American Ethnologist*, vol. 26, no. 2 (1999), pp. 279-303; Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, “Beasts, Banknotes and the Clour of Money”; Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, “How Cattle Lost their Legs.”

inverted.⁶²² Fathers lost control of the labor of their sons, who reinvested their cash earnings from the mines into cattle, built their own herds and became a new socio-economic class of the *bakhumis*. Together with the ongoing ecological collapse, this independence of young men weakened the traditional rule of the elderly, eroded patriarchal authority and symbolically and materially transformed the once providers into dependents: fathers into sons. That is, some fathers, who were excluded from wage work by colonial medicine's explanation of able-bodiedness as a generational attribute, were no longer able to provide for their families and therefore depended on their sons for sustenance. In the Babirwa discourses of gender and masculinities, these fathers who depended on their sons' wages had lost power and authority and were therefore relegated to the social position of sons.

Whereas the state and traditional authorities (chiefs and elders) required the labor of young men as a means to build their own authority, these young men often rejected this outside control in hopes of retaining their own power. The power struggle in colonial Botswana did not reside in strict polarities between subject and state/capital, but on a complicated array of negotiations between the state, capital, traditional authorities, young men, women and young women. Power in this sense was therefore much more fluid, less defined, and subject to historical contingency.

The Cash-Cattle Intersection and an Enduring Cultural Landscape

As migrants' cash earnings continued to make inroads into the Babirwa's culturescapes, power became expressed in the intersection that developed between cash and cattle. This intersection produced a form of indigenized capitalism comprising elements from the two

⁶²² Julie Livingston, *Debility and the Moral Imagination*, p. 109.

value systems. Incorporated into the Babirwa's cultural milieu, as cattle without legs, money became a symbol of a whole complex of economic and social relations, which can be summarized as capitalism. That is, it created a network of people, places and commodities⁶²³ The Babirwa's incorporation of cash into their bovine ideology challenges historian Philip Steenkamp's claims of indigenous opposition to capitalism in colonial Botswana.⁶²⁴

The Babirwa understood the material utility of cash and therefore could not have simply resisted capitalist development. This is the reason young men entered into wage employment, the earnings of which they reinvested into cattle and farm implements. The Babirwa also used cash to purchase funerary equipment, to give bridewealth, to buy food and to pay taxes. However, they were also aware of the individuating effects of cash as a value system. As a result, they imbued it with symbolic meaning as *dikgomo tse di senang maoto*, "cattle without legs", and therefore forced it to bear the imprint of human relations the way cattle did.

I seek not to suppress the materiality of cash in favor of its symbolic value. Rather, the primary objective is to foreground the inherent resonances in this dual meaning of money because, for the Babirwa, the intrinsic and symbolic meanings of cash worked in tandem. I examine the enduring process of intellectual development among the Babirwa, and their reconfiguration of cultural practices, as they employed the token

⁶²³ Emily Gilbert, "Common Cents", p. 367.

⁶²⁴ Using a class-based analysis of development, historian Steenkamp once argued that despite colonial efforts to develop Bechuanaland's cattle industry, such attempts only produced "uneven development of capitalism" where a certain class benefitted while the rest displayed hostility to western ideas. Steenkamp's analysis bifurcates Bechuanaland's society into capitalists and non-capitalists. He opines that colonial development failed because of indigenous opposition to western capitalism as the state "lacked significant coercive power" to force capitalist development into anti-capitalist local communities. Philip Steenkamp, "Cinderella of the Empire"? Development Policy in Bechuanaland Protectorate in the 1930s, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2 (1991), pp. 292-309.

currency of “cattle without legs,” to incorporate the cash nexus into their pastoralist ideology.

With the colonial cattle industry designed for export and increasing levels of migrant labor from the 1930s, cash flowed into Bechuanaland in larger amounts than it did before.⁶²⁵ Like cattle, it became central to the production of social identities, such as gender, generation and class. It also affected the gendering of work, and influenced food systems and funerary practices, in new and profound ways. The appropriation of cash into the symbolic cultural practices of the Babirwa only strengthened the socio-cultural position of cattle rather than jettison it.

To understand better the ways in which the Babirwa’s culturescapes became reconfigured because of this material and symbolic intersection between cash and cattle, I will make references to pre-colonial practices time and again. This movement back and forth in time and space will help the reader to grasp the historical context and changes through which cash affected the Babirwa’s traditions and institutions. By moving back and forth in time and space, I will also demonstrate the historical utility of concepts, terms and modes of expression that were retained and given new meanings and new ones that got invented as cash assumed symbolic value.⁶²⁶

Before the Babirwa adopted cattle in the second half of the nineteenth century, it was customary for a young hunter to surrender his first kill to the *malome*, maternal uncle, in a practice called *dithogo* (heads). The *dithogo* were gifts, primarily the “first

⁶²⁵ Philip Steenkamp, “Cinderella of the Empire”?

⁶²⁶ Language has a particular way of creating social reality. In his history of the Lakes Region, Schoenbrun weaves a story of social change based on the movement of language across space and time. David Lee Schoenbrun, *A Green Place, A Good Place: Agrarian Change, Gender, and Social Identity in the Great Lakes Region to the 15th Century* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann; Kampala: Fountain; Nairobi: EAEP; Oxford: James Currey, 1998)

fruits” of labor, which nephews and nieces were required by custom to give to their *malome*.⁶²⁷ The noun *malome* is derived from the adjective, *loma* or “bite.” *Malome* therefore literally translates into “one who bites” and in the non-cattle herding Babirwa society of the pre-1850 period it symbolized the first person to taste the kill. The primary reason why the *malome* was so important (and still is) was because of his great influence and power in marriage negotiations and arrangements for his nephews and nieces. It was (is) required by tradition that any of a sisters’ children who wants to get married should first inform the *malome*, who would in turn discuss the issue with his sister (and her husband) before other relatives could be told.

The gesture of surrendering the first kill to the *malome* therefore had resonance with his influence as the first person to sanction and bless his sisters’ children’s marriage. For this reason, it was believed that the *malome*’s blessings would pervade other spheres of social life such as to bestow good luck upon nephews who surrendered their first kill to him and make them successful in future hunts. On the other hand, any violation of this practice, particularly through attempts at subverting the power of the institution of *malome*, the nephews were warned, would attract the wrath of the ancestral spirits in successive hunts, leading to bad luck, loss of the way back home, injury or even death.⁶²⁸ The *malome*’s invocation of transcendental retribution on nephews who refused to give him *dithogo*, however, emanated from his assumed material greed. While on the one hand the practice of *dithogo* instilled on the young men a sense of awareness of traditional

⁶²⁷ Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema, Bobonong, February 9, 2011; Kgosi Kethalefile Gabanamotse, Tsetsebjwe, July 2, 2011.

⁶²⁸ Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema, Bobonong, February 9, 2011; Kgosi Kethalefile Gabanamotse, Tsetsebjwe, July 2, 2011.

protocol, it also gave the *malome* power to willfully divest his nephews of their possessions.

The idea of “the first taster” was also evident in the hierarchical manner in which agricultural produce was eaten. People could eat of their harvest only after the “*go loma*” (lit. to bite) ritual had been performed. *Go loma* involved the tasting of the harvest by uncles before the rest of the household could eat. In this ceremony, which involved beer drinking and fun fare, the *malome* was entitled to select the best produce from his sister’s field, to take home as *dithogo*. From there he would give permission to the entire household to start harvesting. However, the *malome* had no power to impose *dithogo* on his nieces’ and nephews’ harvest. But the threat of transcendental retribution caused them to invite him to “bite” from their fields before anyone else could.⁶²⁹ The influence of the *malome* over crops, an exclusively women’s domain, rather than only over the fruits of hunting, reflects the intrusion of masculine power in this sphere. That is, while I acknowledge that crop cultivation was a space of autonomy for women, as Nancy Jacobs says of the South African Tswana, men always found a way to intrude in household subsistence because, with the exception of cattle products, and perhaps hunting, they had no other means of producing food independent of women.⁶³⁰

With the arrival of cattle from the 1850s, the *dithogo* tradition was reconfigured. Young men who started their cattle posts were required to give the first calves to their uncles. When cash arrived and it was imbued with symbolic meaning as “cattle without legs” from the 1930s, young men were required to surrender their first paychecks to the

⁶²⁹ Interview with Moloko Makgoba, Sefhophe, December 25, 2010; Ketholegile Phuthego, Mogapi, December 25, 2010.

⁶³⁰ Jacobs, Nancy, *Environment, Power, and Injustice: A South African History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 29; Interview with Moloko Makgoba, Sefhophe, December 25, 2010; Ketholegile Phuthego, Mogapi, December 25, 2010.

patriarchy in the form of *dithogo* or incur the wrath of the *badimo*. After receiving the paycheck, the *malome* would take what was due to him and distribute the rest among the migrant's parents, including the *rrakgadi*, paternal aunt, who, if marginalized, could inflict the *kgaba* curse (see chapter 2) on her nephew. But with their newly found independence from patriarchal authority and their monetary wealth, young men were increasingly reluctant to give the heads as they saw such practice as exploitative. Such contests between the *malome* and their nephews were to be expressed in a folk song. This song was popular in drinking spots in the 1960s:

Setogolo ntsha dithogo (nephew give the heads)
A malala swi (you sleep, you die)
Dithogo tsa eng malome (what kinds of heads)
Sengwe le sengwe ke dithogo (anything is the heads)

Ketholegile Phuthego, who in the 1960s used to brew and sell *bojalwa*, sorghum beer, testified that most of her elderly clients, primarily men, would heartily sing this song once they got drunk.⁶³¹ As the verse, “anything is the heads”, indicates, the reconfigured practice of *dithogo* from the 1930s gave the *malome* more leverage to demand any material possession from their nephews. But the inverse was true as the young men increasingly determined what or how much they gave as *dithogo*. As the song reminds us, the *malome* could invoke the threat of the *badimo* (spirits of ancestors) on recalcitrant nephews who refused or simply neglected to “give heads” to their uncles. The verse, “you sleep you die,” is a warning to nephews that failure to “give the heads” would attract the wrath of the *badimo*.

Thus, despite the growing independence of young men, fathers and uncles directed the distribution of migrant wages. They also invoked the longstanding idiom of

⁶³¹ Interview with, Ketholegile Phuthego, Mogapi, December 25, 2010.

cattle meat distribution whereby the *malome* was entitled to the *thogo* (head) and the *rrakgadi* was entitled to the thigh to sustain a culture of giving among young men as it was tradition. Whenever there was a marriage ceremony, ritual or festival, before the meat could be cooked the carcasses would be *shomiwa*, or “presented” to the *malome* and *rrakgadi*, who would authorize its cooking.⁶³² From there, the *malome* would be given the head while the *rrakgadi* got the thigh which they took uncooked to their respective homes as relish. Violation of this practice could bring marital problems to the newlyweds or inhibit the power of the ancestors to heal if the ceremony was a ritual of healing such as *phaso*, or the propitiation of ancestral spirits.⁶³³ As with meat, the young migrant would be induced – through threats of transcendental retribution – to surrender his first paycheck to the *malome*, who would take what was due to him and distribute the rest amongst other relatives, paternal aunts, and the father, who were entitled to the earnings.

Such mystical sanctions therefore perpetuated seniority rules, particularly those that benefitted the patriarchy and reflected the continuity of African time. Unlike the “forward-marching time” of the West, which is conceptualized as stopping when death occurs, African time pervades the afterlife as ancestral spirits are reborn into the world of the living. By surrendering his earnings the young man would be ensured of the protection of the *badimo* against injuries at the mines and predation from thieves. This invocation of ancestral spirits represents time as a continual phenomenon, ensuring a link between the realm of the living and that of the departed.

The negotiation of migrants’ wages, through the invocation of ancestral spirits and the reconfiguration of social mechanisms of sharing, was, however, not only induced

⁶³² Interview with Moreki Montsosi, Thaloganyo Goromente and Baagi Mmereki, Bobonong, March 13, 2011.

⁶³³ Interview with, *ngaka* Moraka Mohwasa, Mabolwe, July 10, 2011.

by patriarchal greed. For the Babirwa, work was not only about strength and the ability to breathe deeply as conceptualized by colonial medicine.⁶³⁴ The boundary between work and education was highly fluid. Children learned while working under the supervision of seniors of the same gender, who cultivated in these children a sense of social responsibility and emotional maturity. These virtues were very central to work or *tiro*, “doing”, which, contrasted with the highly ambiguous new activity of *mmereko*. The Babirwa coined the concept, *mmereko*, by vernacularizing the English word, “work.” In contrast to the alienating *mmereko*, *tiro* could never be alienated from its human context and transacted as mere labor power. It was an intrinsic dimension of the everyday act of “making selves and social ties.”⁶³⁵

By entering into *mmereko*, which took young men beyond the purview and direction of their seniors, boys were bound to become reckless and lose a sense of social responsibility. Attempts to control the earnings of youthful migrants were therefore not simply induced by patriarchal greed, the patriarchies’ insecurities and their fear of the ensuing moral breakdown. Rather, fathers, grandfathers and uncles negotiated migrants’ wages in order to continue cultivating a sense of social responsibility in them and mitigating the dangers associated with lack of proper social development in boys.

Cash also became central in the reconfiguration of the Babirwa’s funeral practices. In pre-colonial Bobirwa, death was a gendered phenomenon. The *bakhumi*, men who possessed cattle wealth, were buried in the cattle byre and their bodies shrouded in an ox hide while the *bakhumanegi* (poor men) and the *bashimana*, young men, could be buried anywhere outside the kraal. All men were buried in a sitting position as a

⁶³⁴ Julie Livingston, *Debility and the Moral Imagination*, p. 119.

⁶³⁵ Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, “Beasts, Banknotes and the Colour of Money”, pp. 112-113.

symbol of eternal activity. This idea that the *bakhumi* were eternal overseers of the family while the *bakhumanegi* and the *bashimana* continued to herd their cattle in the afterlife was derived from a saying that developed after the ecological collapse of the late nineteenth century, *ga gona kgomo ya boroko* or “sleep does not produce cattle.”⁶³⁶ In this harsh environment of erratic rainfall, seasonal grazing and recurrent epidemics, building a herd required men who would work day and night. The cautionary expression, *ga gona kgomo ya boroko*, was to be connected to yet another expression, which provides ethnographic insights into the difficulties of building herds at the time. The expression, *ka e thoka, ka thoka boroko, ka e rua ka thoka boroko*, or “I lack it, I lack sleep, I have it, I lack sleep”, articulated the need to deprive oneself of sleep in order to build and sustain a herd.⁶³⁷

On the contrary, women were buried lying down behind the mud hut as a symbol of their role as the custodians of the home. It was believed that the spirit of the woman, particularly the family matriarch would bring reproductive health to her descendants and therefore promote their fertility. But, even between women, just like between wealthy and poor men, death was a field of power. The corpses of infertile women would be sprinkled with corn and buried under the *segoto*, cemented thrashing floor, at the fields, effectively throwing their spirits into oblivion. This process of gendered burials feminized and masculinized death respectively. It erased the memories of infertile women and poor men from society as they were thrown into spiritual oblivion while perpetuating

⁶³⁶ Interview with Bathaloganyi Phuthego, Mogapi, December 25, 2010; Dikgang Montsosi, Bobonong, July 10, 2011.

⁶³⁷ As I have described in chapter three above, at the end of the nineteenth century, a pandemic of rinderpest combined with drought to decimate Botswana’s cattle. From there onwards, dramatic fluctuations of herd populations became common due to recurring outbreaks of drought and foot and mouth disease.

the dominance of wealthy men and matriarchs posthumously, and as a collective known as the *Badimo*, “those who reside above the realm of the living.”⁶³⁸ However, by the 1960s, death was becoming ungendered as the *kesi*, coffin, was being adopted and both male and female corpses were buried in a lying position at one designated burial site. The word *kesi* is an adaptation of the Afrikaans term, *kis*.⁶³⁹

The word, *kesi*, became common parlance in the 1960s as coffins replaced cattle skins and other forms of traditional shroud as the quintessential funerary. Between 1959 and 1965, a prolonged drought with insidious effects ripped across the whole country. The Bobirwa area with its low and erratic rainfall and generally poor soils for crop cultivation experienced a severe famine. The failure in crop yields and the death of cattle due to hunger and thirst caused epidemics of nutrition-based human diseases, such as scurvy, and raised the incidence of TB.⁶⁴⁰ In response to this severe famine, the colonial government, through the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief (OXFAM), engaged in a massive relief program that provided food to the affected areas.

A story connected to this ecological collapse and famine in the village of Mogapi is suggestive of the advent of the coffin among the Babirwa at the time. One poor white handyman, Lambert, who lived in the village of Mogapi, remembers Kgosi Gabatshabe Baipidi, collected the boxes (which were used by the colonial famine relief programs to

⁶³⁸ Interview with *ngaka* Sekonopo, Mahalapye, August 22, 2011; Bathaloganyi Phuthego, Mogapi, December 25, 2010.

⁶³⁹ There is no archival record as to when Africans in Bechuanaland started using the coffin for burial, but oral sources are suggestive. Systematic research needs to be carried out about the *kesi* and its role in reshaping the people of Botswana’s conceptions of death and how it has impacted their beliefs systems.

⁶⁴⁰ BNA, S. 438/2/3, Report on a visit to Bechuanaland by World Health Consultant, Antony Geser, June 4-7, 1958.

supply rural communities with food) and made coffins out of them.⁶⁴¹ The people of Mogapi remained ambivalent about the coffins and rarely used them to bury their dead for some time. But faced with the unenviable prospect of losing their cattle to drought and foot and mouth disease, the Babirwa took recourse to converting them into cash, the “cattle without legs,” with which, in turn, they purchased Lambert’s coffins. The use of the coffin for burial transformed the funerary practices of the Babirwa in that it necessitated the burial of men in a lying position, thus putting their bodies to sleep, *robatsa*.

The Babirwa believe that the coffin contributed to the ecological deterioration of the 1960s. Linking death to the productivity of the environment and the coffin to ecological collapse, one *ngaka ya dikgomo* ethno-veterinary medicine specialist, *ngaka* Sephetso, told me a story of human suffering brought by the coffin:

When we die, our spirits go up, but our bodies return to the land from which our cattle graze and crops are grown. The dead, who benefitted from the land, must give their bodies back to the land so that the next generations can also benefit from it. Failure to feed the body to the land brings cattle diseases, lack of rain, drought, the death of cattle and hunger. Since we started burying our dead in these boxes, there was drought after drought and disease after disease. There is something wrong about the coffin.⁶⁴²

This testimony reveals the ambiguous power of nature, which in Sebirwa parlance is *tholego* or the order of things. *Tholego* denotes that which is primordial, which should not be tampered with. Tampering with *tholego* disturbed the way it operated and caused suffering. The power of nature was generally understood to be friendly but hostile when

⁶⁴¹ Commendable efforts by the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief (OXFAM) dominated speeches during the presentation of Botswana’s independence bill in 1966. See Botswana Independence Bill [HL], HL Debates, *Hansard*, vol. 275, cc 790-813, (June 30, 1966).

⁶⁴² Interview with *ngaka* Sephetso, a Mmirwa of Basarwa origin (San or “bushman”), Tsetsebjwe, August 1, 2011.

certain conventions, such as taboos, were no longer being followed. Taboos were constructed to impose order and therefore protect society from uncertain and confusing environments of droughts and disease. The coffin represented a transgression of nature's conventions because it produced states of pollution and afflictions because it was linked to famine and it was also thought to restrict the return of the body to nature.

Prior to the advent of the coffin, the Babirwa practiced eco-friendly burials as corpses were buried near cultivation sites and shrouded in easily biodegradable cattle skins or naked, depending on their gender, so that they could contribute their share of organic matter to the soil. With the coffin and the need for designated burial sites, funerary practices became ecologically unfriendly. Designated burial sites became inaccessible for farming and therefore localized nutrients of bodies to small areas. The use of coffins for burial also cordoned off the nutrients of corpses from the soil, thus breaking the cycle of "the-land-feeds-us-we-feed-the-land." This lack of nutrients reduced the amount of land needed to grow food in a place susceptible to erosion and generally characterized by poor soils.

The droughts and foot and mouth diseases of the 1930s, the 1940s and the 1960s led to dramatic fluctuations in cattle populations, with the average farmers carrying the heaviest brunt of these ecological misfortunes.⁶⁴³ The significant decline of the cattle population in the 1960s, where drought claimed sixty percent of the cattle population in the whole Bangwato Reserve, could easily have broken social networks.⁶⁴⁴ But *dzeo* (marriage), a word, which its English equivalent is "to take", endured as cash assumed the symbolic role of cattle and therefore bore the imprint of human relations. The concept

⁶⁴³ *Basutoland, Bechuanaland, and Swaziland: Report of an Economic Survey Mission* (London: HSMO, 1960), p. 183

⁶⁴⁴ *Basutoland, Bechuanaland, and Swaziland*, p. 182.

of *dikgomo tse di senang maoto*, or cattle without legs, became common parlance in social relations.

With bridewealth known as *dikgomo*, it was fitting to imbue cash with such symbolic meaning whenever it was used in marriage arrangements. This tradition of using cash symbolically as *dikgomo* in marriage endures to date.⁶⁴⁵ It is not uncommon to see a group of men “trekking” money to the natal home of the bride the same way they would do cattle. For instance, if the bridewealth is eight cattle, each cow would be valued at one thousand Pula (approximately \$120.00), and eight men would carry one thousand each. They would pretend as if they are cattle and the rest of the men would trek them, calling them with cattle names. Such exhibitions actually look funny, but they reflect an enduring tradition that has been reconstituted by the inflow of cash.

This use of cash in the consummation of marriages also unsettled a long tradition of agnatic marriages, which involved unions between cross cousins. As anthropologist Per Zachrisson notes about the Babirwa in present Zimbabwe, there were different patrilineal groups who practiced agnatic marriages, “which was part of a wider Sotho pattern of cross-cousin marriages.”⁶⁴⁶ Similar practices have been documented elsewhere in Southern Africa.⁶⁴⁷ Through the expression, *go di busetsa sakeng*, returning cattle to their original kraal, such kin based marriage unions had previously ensured that *dikgomo* were not given to non-relatives or distant communities in the form of bridewealth.

⁶⁴⁵ Interview with Gabatshabe Baipidi, Mogapi, December 26, 2010; As a married man, I have also participated in a couple of bridewealth negotiations where cash was given in lieu of cattle.

⁶⁴⁶ Per Zachrisson, *Hunting for Development: People, Land and Wildlife in Southern Zimbabwe* (Goteborg University: Department of Social Anthropology, 2004), p. 33.

⁶⁴⁷ See Monica Wilson, “The Sotho, Venda and Tsonga”, in Monica Wilson and Leonard Thompson (eds.), *Oxford History of South Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), pp. 131-167.

Despite its lack of legs, however, cash had the ability to travel long distances, traversing diverse social and geographical boundaries. The highly mobile young men therefore took advantage of this portability and fluid movement of cash, getting married and fathering wedlock, legitimate, children in distant communities and therefore beginning a new era of unarranged marriages. Talking about the southeastern Botswana, medical anthropologist, Julie Livingston has argued: “The proactive and productive labor of persons were bound up in one another, and together they constituted the key assets of household, lineage, and community.”⁶⁴⁸ To the Babirwa, these unarranged marriages were seen to be destroying social organization and depriving households of social capital. They were disrupting the moral economy of the Babirwa where, in an environment prone to drought and disease, kin based social networking provided a safety net for households and individuals.

The growing rates of marriage with women in distant communities reduced the chances of marriage for the Babirwa daughters and dramatically increased the population of *mahetwa*, or “those who have been passed by.” The *mahetwa* were a stigmatized social class of women who had gone past marriageable age. As a result, women always felt insecure as they dreaded falling into this perilous social position. Their insecurity became expressed in a folk song: *ngwana wa ga malome nnyale dikgomo di boele sakeng*, “my uncle’s son please marry me so the cattle can return to the family kraal.” Thus, money had economic and moral ramifications as it siphoned cattle away, caused premarital pregnancy and reduced the chances of marriage for daughters.⁶⁴⁹

⁶⁴⁸ Julie Livingston, *Debility and the Moral Imagination*, p. 120.

⁶⁴⁹ Interview with Moloko Makgoba, Sefhophe, December 25, 2010; Mbat Mashaba, Molaladau, July 15, 2011.

Paradoxically, the Babirwa protected and nurtured cash. Like their originals, the “cattle without legs” needed doctoring to protect them against malicious acts of witches, injuries and thefts. This was done through the reconfiguration of the practice of *go thaa lesaka*, or to fortify the kraal. In the Babirwa parlance, the word *thaa* denotes setting a trap or fortifying a structure or a human body with the use of traditional medicines, *dithare*, (plants). Hence “anyone who trespasses on a fortified kraal would be at risk of getting injured or killed,”⁶⁵⁰ concludes *ngaka ya dikgomo* or ethno-veterinary medicine specialist, Moraka Mohwasa of Mabolwe Village. Ethno-veterinary medicine specialists in Bobirwa are also ritual specialists who strengthen cattle posts.⁶⁵¹ As a result, they indicate that injuries for people who trespass on a fortified kraal may include both physical and mental injuries. Mental illness, *deola*, in Bobirwa is mostly associated with witchcraft. It is believed that potent medicines will make the victim behave in an abnormal manner, such as, for instance, thieves claiming that the cows they stole cry inside their bellies. In fact people are always cautioned that if they steal and eat cattle, *di ta lela mo maleng a bone* (they will cry in their stomachs).⁶⁵²

⁶⁵⁰ Interview with, *ngaka ya dikgomo*, Moraka Mohwasa, Mabolwe, July 10, 2011.

⁶⁵¹ A note on ethno-veterinary medicine here must suffice. This is one area that has been neglected by Botswana scholarship. By ethno-veterinary medicine I mean indigenous animal health care, which depends on knowledge, skills, methods, practices and beliefs about using plants to treat diverse diseases and perform certain rituals for protecting animals as productive assets. The field of ethno-veterinary medicine is not systematic and therefore it varies from community to community. This ritualized medical field depends on knowledge of ethno-botany or the indigenous medical, religious and ritual knowledge of plants. In Bobirwa, everyone who is working directly with cattle, such as herders and cattle owners, gets to acquire knowledge about the medical uses of plants for animal health care delivery. But if the problem at hand requires the performance of certain rituals, then specialists are called in. As a country bedeviled by recurring epidemics of cattle diseases, Botswana should think of ways of integrating ethno-veterinary knowledge into the mainstream veterinary medicine. As a result, this is an area that needs serious historical inquiry and documentation. See, for example, Tafira Matekaire and Taona M. Bwakura, “Ethnoveterinary Medicine: A Potential Alternative to Orthodox Animal Health Delivery in Zimbabwe”, *International Journal of Applied Research in Veterinary Medicine*, vol. 2, no. 4 (2004), pp. 269-273.

⁶⁵² Interview with, *ngaka* Moraka Mohwasa, Mabolwe, July 10, 2011; *ngaka* Sephetso, Tsetsebje, August 1, 2011.

In extreme circumstances, the alleged thieves die under mysterious circumstances. One such mysterious cause of death is lightening. The Babirwa believe that powerful *dingaka* can send victims a mythical bird called *tadi*, which kills by lightning strikes. Mostly, thieves who incurred the wrath of the *tadi* were those who stole doctored cattle. The ritual of *go thaa lesaka*, (lit. setting a trap in the kraal), or protecting the kraal, involved doctoring the bodies of the owners of the cattle, their families and the herders. This doctoring of the bodies of people and those of the cattle inside the kraal bound the two together. It created a oneness, between people and their cattle, only to be separated by the *ngaka ya dikgomo* who linked them, through a process called *dirolola*, or “undoing.”

Like cattle, money was also protected through the doctoring of migrants’ bodies. The Babirwa understood that it was the migrants’ physical effort that got converted into wages. These wages were valued for their material utility and symbolic value. They could be converted directly into cattle while at the same time being imbued with symbolic meaning as “cattle without legs.” As a result, before going out to find work, migrants would seek powerful medicines from *dingaka* to protect themselves against injuries and thieves and to counteract malicious attempts on their lives by witchcraft. When they came back from the mines, they would make sure to enter the village at night and immediately proceed to consult a *ngaka* before they could go home. This was done to protect them against malicious acts from relatives, for in Bobirwa “one is bewitched by their close relatives, particularly the *rrakgadi*, *malome* and the *nkuku*, grandmother.”⁶⁵³

Go thaa lesaka, which depended on the interaction between people and plants, in the form of medicines, was intended to repel misfortunes caused by witchcraft and protect the cattle against thieves. This symbolic affinity between people and plants provides glimpses

⁶⁵³ Interview, Ketholegile Phuthego, Mogapi, December 26, 2010.

into the profound significance of nature to cattle keeping. The power of nature could therefore be harnessed for protection, for wealth acquisition and for noxious purposes, such as killing people or simply divesting them of their wealth.

“The Dead Alive Herders”: Ecological Collapse, Social Differentiation, and the Witchcraft of Greed During the 1960s

Between 1959 and 1966, Bechuanaland experienced devastating environmental shocks as a prolonged and insidious drought destroyed one third of the national herd and exposed rural communities to famines.⁶⁵⁴ In the Bangwato Reserve alone, sixty percent of cattle produced on communal lands perished on account of drought.⁶⁵⁵ In the Bobirwa area, as the drought continued to kill large numbers of cattle in the communal areas, herd ownership inequalities sharpened.⁶⁵⁶ Most specifically, migrants’ earnings became the primary avenue through which households could rebuild their herds. This meant that those families who did not have men working at the mines and farms of South Africa could not rebuild their herds. But in the midst of a drought, some migrants were also reluctant to reinvest their cash into cattle.

An increase in the inflow of migrant remittances (whether to buy cattle and farm implements or to support families), however, meant that cash became ever more

⁶⁵⁴ “Report to the Government of the Bechuanaland Protectorate on the Beef, Cattle and Meat Industry”, by Glen Rex Purnell and W.S. Clayton (October 1963); C. Colclough and S. McCarthy, *The Political Economy of Botswana: A Study of Growth and Distribution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 32.

⁶⁵⁵ *Basutoland, Bechuanaland, and Swaziland*, p. 183; Jack Halpern, *South Africa’s Hostages*, p. 297.

⁶⁵⁶ Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema and headmen of arbitration, Onketetse Serumola and Adama Masilo, Bobonong, February 9, 2011. There are no official sources that give accounts of cattle that died in the Babirwa area. However, I have inferred that since the Babirwa were incorporated into the Bangwato Reserve, the sixty percent cattle mortality documented in colonial sources included Babirwa herds. See for example, “Report to the Government of the Bechuanaland Protectorate on the Beef, Cattle and Meat Industry”, by Glen Rex Purnell and W.S. Clayton (October 1963); *Basutoland, Bechuanaland, and Swaziland: Report of an Economic Survey Mission* (London: HSMO, 1960), p. 183; Jack Halpern, *South Africa’s Hostages: Basutoland, Bechuanaland and Swaziland* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 297.

important in material and symbolic relations.⁶⁵⁷ Cash therefore had to be protected from the evils of witchcraft, as did the cattle, which were doctored through the ritual of *thaa lesaka*.⁶⁵⁸ The *dingaka* thus doctored the cattle without legs by fortifying, with powerful medicines, the bodies of young migrant men whose labor produced such cattle.

This section examines the emergence of a new form of witchcraft that profoundly shaped the Babirwa's belief systems during the 1960s. It argues that, faced with a devastating ecological collapse that divested many households of their pastoral holdings, the Babirwa's spiritual fear shaped their discourses of inequalities and therefore produced material insecurities. This argument derives from the pervasive rumor and gossip at the time, which provide glimpses into the changing landscape of witchcraft in Bobirwa. Despite their lack of secure standards of evidence, rumor and gossip are reliable sources of alternative histories because they are part of the broader context of rural communities' cultural knowledge.⁶⁵⁹ Witchcraft is part of the Babirwa's hidden transcript of social life, which cannot be studied from official sources. I therefore use these two modes of expression – rumor and gossip – to examine the discourses of the witchcraft of greed, which shaped the Babirwa's ideas about wealth and poverty in the 1960s.

I start the discussion of this witchcraft of greed with a story told throughout Bobirwa about the birth of a mysterious child who became associated with the death of young men during the 1960s. The setting is the village of Tsetsebjwe, located along the

⁶⁵⁷ By the 1960s, labor migration for Bechuanaland's men had become a way of earning a livelihood rather than a channel to getting cash to buy a specific item. Isaac Schapera, "The Contributions of Western Civilization to Modern Kxatla Culture", *Transactions of the Royal Society of South Africa*, vol. 24 (1936), p. 237.

⁶⁵⁸ Interview with *ngaka* Moraka Mohwasa, Mabolwe, July 10, 2011; *ngaka* Sephetso, Tsetsebjwe, August 1, 2011.

⁶⁵⁹ See, for example, Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumour and History in Colonial Africa* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000); Ann Stoler, "In Cold Blood: Hierarchies of Credibility and the Politics of Colonial Narratives", *Representations*, vol. 37 (1992), pp. 151-189.

northern banks of the Limpopo River, and *en route* to the then Transvaal (now Northern Province). Eighty year old Diakanyo Molebatsi sits with her legs crossed in front her. Meticulously she pecks away at the *marula* fruits from which she will soon produce *marula* wine. Despite her advanced age, Diakanyo is very alert, with a sharp mind:

It is said that one young migrant impregnated a Transvaal woman while working in the mines (she begins while busy working on her *marula* fruits). The young man was so in love with this woman that he decided to marry her. But he new that he could not get married far away from home and without the blessing of his parents. O ntheeditse *akere*, you are listening right? (she asks with that kind of wry smile, which reflects the shift of power from the listener to the storyteller). The young man decided to bring his pregnant girlfriend here, somewhere in Bobirwa, I don't know where, and nobody knows (she continues). Rumor has it that this couple bore a boy with the features of a man. The baby had teeth and a beard but could not cry or talk. Soon rumor spread across village borders that the couple had given birth to a *matholwane*, the little strange man. From there this strange child, who wore an adult man's skin, disappeared and nobody ever saw him again. But from that moment, young men started dying in strange ways.⁶⁶⁰

The foregoing story expresses human imagination and anxiety about the advent of a new form of witchcraft from without the borders of Bobirwa. It tells us that this new form of witchcraft followed migrants as they engaged in oscillating migration, moving to and fro across borders. The disappearance of the little man is a reflection of the Babirwa's lack of comprehension of this new form of witchcraft. Witchcraft is a myth and myths are an integral part of people's lived experiences. They "provide a framework through which experience achieves significance and finds articulation through the flow of social action."⁶⁶¹

⁶⁶⁰ Interview with Diakanyo Molebatsi, Tsetsebjwe, August 1, 2011.

⁶⁶¹ Local people's discourses about and lived experiences of witchcraft, rather than anthropologists' inferences about its ambiguity, are important to understanding the material insecurities to which witchcraft is a response. Isak Niehaus, *Witchcraft, Power and Politics: Exploring the Occult in the South African*

This section draws on rumor and gossip to investigate the symbolism of the new witchcraft of greed whereby some people used witchcraft to transform youthful men into the *matholwane* to accumulate illicit wealth. Based on some *dingaka*'s testimonies of the *matholwane* being "enslaved dead young men", I refer to the *matholwane* as the "dead alive herders."⁶⁶² The *matholwane*, explain the *dingaka*, are miniature human beings (equivalent of the little strange man above) created by powerful *baloi* (sing. *moloi*), witches, who used occult powers to capture a person's *moriti*, shadow, and then gradually took hold of their body parts until the whole person is completely seized. The *moloi* would proceed to replace the body of the victim with a piece of wood given the *setshwano*, image, of the victim. The victim's relatives, convinced that the person was dead, would bury the piece of wood. Meanwhile, the *moloi* reduced the victim's size and removed their tongue so that they could no longer speak and therefore had to toil in silence like children.⁶⁶³

The *dingaka* – who claim to have encountered the *matholwane* on many occasions – describe them as creatures of uniform stature, all of them short, but with facial resemblances to the original victims:

Matholwane is a person that underwent transformation through witchcraft spells. We bury what we believe to be a person's corpse. But this person is alive somewhere, incapable of remembering the past, unable to recognize

Lowveld (Cape Town: David Philip; London, Sterling, Virginia: Pluto Press, 2001), p. 50. Niehaus' commentary is a complete diversion from the modernity of witchcraft school, which narrowly explains the symbolic representation of witchcraft as an idiomatic response to modern exigencies. Peter Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Occult in Postcolonial Africa* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1997); Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

⁶⁶² Interview with, *ngaka* Moraka Mohwasa, Mabolwe, July 10, 2011; *ngaka* Sephetso, Tsetsebjwe, August 1, 2011.

⁶⁶³ The *moloi* can be anybody who uses medicines and occult powers to harm other people. Even the *dinkgaka* could become the *baloi* when they are deemed to be using their medicines and powers for noxious purposes. Personal communication, the *dingaka* Sekonopo, Mahalapye, August 22, 2011; Moraka Mohwasa, Mabolwe, July 10, 2011; Sephetso, Tsetsebjwe, August 1, 2011.

loved ones and doomed to a life of miserable toil under the will of the *matholwane* master. The eyes of a *matholwane* are in truth the eyes of a dead person; not blind, but staring, unfocused, unseeing. The whole face, for that matter, is scary; vacant, as if there is nothing behind it, it seems incapable of expression.⁶⁶⁴

By being small and unable to speak like a child, yet with the strength of a physically fit man, the *matholwane* provides an effective multivocal symbol of witchcraft. It is through its altered state of being that the *matholwane* objectified illicit desire for wealth. Given the image of children, they were similar to the Babirwa sons who would herd their father's cattle without questioning his authority. Also, the *dingaka* describe the *matholwane* in the real-time ethnographic present because the Babirwa's *boloi* or witchcraft, is as much a phenomenon of the present as it is of the past and it forms part of their complex religious and belief systems. The fear and insecurity which people felt in the 1960s therefore reverberates in the ethnographic present, with people still believing in the existence of the living dead as was held many years ago.

Far from being a traditional relic and a pre-colonial coping strategy, witchcraft is a transformative cultural practice that became a local mode of expression for dealing with traumatic social change, increasingly adapting to and being articulated with socio-economic differentiation. Despite the intervention of western modernity, argues Steven Feierman, Africans' agency played an important role in reshaping their traditions. Feierman's Shambaa "peasant intellectuals" in Tanzania appropriated and redefined a long-standing tradition of "healing the land" and "harming the land" to negotiate current socio-economic and political exigencies.⁶⁶⁵ Similarly, the Babirwa did not see the advent

⁶⁶⁴ Interview with the *ngaka* Sekonopo, Mahalapye, August 22, 2011; *ngaka* Moraka Mohwasa, Mabolwe, July 10, 2011; *ngaka* Sephetso, Tsetsebjwe, August 1, 2011.

⁶⁶⁵ Steven Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990)

of western modernity as spelling the disintegration of their pre-colonial worlds. Rather, they drew on their old ideas to reflect points of tension in the social order and the reallocation of resources, in this case cattle.

Boloi among the Babirwa was a form of enduring tradition, predating colonial rule. The advent of the *matholwane* only represented a shift in the practice and discourse of *boloi*, particularly with regard to its symbolism. Before 1960, the Babirwa witches used animal familiars, such as “baboons, which they sent to destroy other people’s crops, a mythical bird called *tadi*, which caused death by lightening strikes, and snakes and scorpions to bite victims.”⁶⁶⁶ Such familiars inhabited the wilderness, only meeting with the witches on the borders between the villages and the uninhabited spaces. This borderland meeting thus produced a symbolic affinity between the witches and the wild, be it animals or plants, all of which could be transformed into noxious substances for destroying lives.

With the tide of migrations rising more than ever during the ecological collapse of the 1960s⁶⁶⁷, this symbolic representation was reshaped. The meeting point between the witches and their familiars moved right into the center of human settlements. The story I began this section with demonstrates that the *matholwane* was an altered human being introduced by migrant workers from across borders. While my informants were not specific about the border through which the *matholwane* entered their area (since Bobirwa shared borders with Zimbabwe and South Africa) we can only infer that it must have been through the South African border where many migrants worked. This inference is further reinforced by Isak Niehaus’ informants in the South African Northern

⁶⁶⁶ Interview with the *ngaka* Sekonopo, Mahalapye, August 22, 2011; *ngaka* Moraka Mohwasa, Mabolwe, July 10, 2011; *ngaka* Sephetso, Tsetsebjwe, August 1, 2011.

⁶⁶⁷ Wazha G. Morapedi, “Migrant Labour and the Peasantry”, p. 203.

Province (which borders Bobirwa), who indicated that illicit wealth producing symbols in their area were brought by Witwatersrand miners during the 1960s.⁶⁶⁸

From my experiences as a native of Bobirwa, witchcraft permeates all aspects of social and economic life. Fear of it is real, and belief in its existence can only be comprehended by someone who has lived it; someone who has seen the fear it inflicts on people. Anthropologist, Adam Ashforth, has recently argued that witchcraft in African societies has historical salience. It is an integral part of peoples' belief systems and therefore its reality cannot be simply denied. According to Ashforth, who briefly lived in Soweto, South Africa, sometime in the 1990, witchcraft produces "spiritual insecurity" or "the dangers, doubts, and fears arising from the sense of being exposed to invisible forces."⁶⁶⁹ This "spiritual insecurity", is often linked to material forms of insecurities as people try to comprehend the trajectory of ecological misfortunes, which dramatically sharpen socio-economic differentiation.

The 1960s created perfect conditions for the pervasion of a sense of insecurity within the Babirwa communities. Since the ecological disaster of the late nineteenth century, Bechuanaland's cattle populations radically fluctuated until the late 1940s.⁶⁷⁰ During these periods of herd decline and rise, the colonial government embarked on huge development programs involving veterinary medicine and borehole drilling to transform the country's cattle industry. Of the £460,000 (just over \$700,000 today) development funds received from the British Imperial Treasury between 1933 and 1939, for instance,

⁶⁶⁸ Isak Niehaus, *Witchcraft, Power and Politics*, p. 50 and p. 56.

⁶⁶⁹ Adam Ashforth, *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 1.

⁶⁷⁰ Sir Charles Rey, *Monarch of All I Survey*, entries for February 20 and November 10, 1930. For an extended period of drought and disease, see Michael Hubbard, *Agricultural Exports and Economic Growth: A Study of the Botswana Beef Industry* (London, New York and Sydney: Routledge & Keagan Paul, 1986), pp. 33-36.

close to sixty-five percent was spent on cattle improvement, with £160,000 expended in borehole drilling alone.⁶⁷¹ The borehole brought more permanent water points and “[unlocked] the grazing wealth of unexploited lands for perennial use.”⁶⁷²

But the borehole scheme became an elitist program, accessible only to large cattle owners. The resources expended in the drilling of a borehole entitled the individual or group of individuals to private ownership of the land on which the borehole was drilled.⁶⁷³ Schapera indicates that those who drilled boreholes could make personal claims to the land they had developed and were “entitled to legal protection” from any form of trespass.⁶⁷⁴ According to reports on the state of the cattle industry, the borehole became the preserve of wealthy Africans who had the financial wherewithal to repay government loans given for drilling and equipment.⁶⁷⁵ These reports also expressed worry about the manner in which the borehole privatized land and pushed small cattle owners into marginal lands. Between the late 1930s and the early 1940s, annual reports explicitly indicated that cattle in lands of marginal quality died of a combination of poor grazing and lack of water.⁶⁷⁶ A 1963 report went further to point out the institutionalization of land dispossession, concluding: “Tribal authorities guarantee the sole use of the land adjoining the boreholes to the participating owner [in the borehole scheme]”⁶⁷⁷

⁶⁷¹ BNA, V. 4/4, Bechuanaland Protectorate Colonial Development Fund, annual reports, 1933-1939

⁶⁷² Michael Hubbard, *Agricultural Exports and Economic Growth*, p. 33.

⁶⁷³ Pauline Peters, *Dividing the Commons*, p. 65.

⁶⁷⁴ Isaac Schapera, *Native Land Tenure in the Bechuanaland Protectorate* (Lovedale, South Africa: The Lovedale Press, 1943), p. 229.

⁶⁷⁵ “Report to the Government of the Bechuanaland Protectorate on the Beef, Cattle and Meat Industry”, by Glen Rex Purnell and W.S. Clayton (October 1963); G.C. Ryan, Report to the Bechuanaland Government on the Livestock Industry (London: HMSO, June 1958). See also BNA, S.376/3, circular memo., January 1962.

⁶⁷⁶ BNA, S. 263/6, Bechuanaland Protectorate Annual Report, 1939; BNA, DCGH. 3/5, Tour reports, native areas, 1939-1944.

⁶⁷⁷ “Report to the Government of the Bechuanaland Protectorate on the Beef, Cattle and Meat Industry”, by Glen Rex Purnell and W.S. Clayton (October 1963), p. 3.

The period between 1945 and 1958 brought prosperity as it was, for the first time in as many decades, a time of unusually good rains for the entire country with no fresh outbreaks of cattle diseases.⁶⁷⁸ Production in African communities focused on rebuilding herds, and by 1959, Bechuanaland had an estimated cattle population of 1,325,000, up from 600,000 in 1939.⁶⁷⁹ Botswana labor historian, Wazha Morapedi's informants told him in 1999 that most of the people who accumulated large herds were migrant workers who reinvested their earnings in cattle.⁶⁸⁰ But elites, such as tax collectors and chiefs, also benefited from this period of prosperity.⁶⁸¹ These took advantage of colonial development initiatives such as borehole schemes and veterinary medicine to produce high quality cattle for the growing beef market in the country and the region.⁶⁸²

From 1959, a prolonged and insidious drought that lasted until 1966 ravaged much of eastern Botswana, killing cattle and undercutting agricultural production.⁶⁸³ However, unlike the 1895/97 drought and rinderpest, which divested everyone of their cattle and subsistence means in equal measure, the new ecological collapse had a differentiated effect on classes of people. While its severity caused a decline in the national herd, classes of cattle owners experienced it differently. Owners of small herds suffered disproportionately because they lacked resources, such as money to buy feed and boreholes to provide water, to protect their investments. Competition for milk between

⁶⁷⁸ John Taylor, "Mine Labour Migration from Botswana to South Africa (PhD dissertation, University of Liverpool, 1981), p. 91

⁶⁷⁹ "Report on the Cattle Industry of the Bechuanaland Protectorate with recommendations for Improving its Organization and Assisting its Future Development", by H.S. Walker and J.H.N. Hobday (October 18, 1939), p. 5.

⁶⁸⁰ Wazha G. Morapedi, "Migrant Labour and the Peasantry", p. 205.

⁶⁸¹ Isaac Schapera, "Political Organization of Ngwato", p. 67; C.J. Makgala, "Taxation in Tribal Areas", p. 281.

⁶⁸² Emery Roe, *Development of Livestock and Water Supplies before Independence: A Short History of Policy Analysis* (Occasional Papers, Ithaca, NY: Rural Development Committee, Cornell University, 1980).

⁶⁸³ Unfortunately existing colonial reports do not provide numerical evidence of the Babirwa's cattle that died. See for example, "Report to the Government of the Bechuanaland Protectorate on the Beef, Cattle and Meat Industry", by Glen Rex Purnell and W.S. Clayton (October 1963).

poor people and calves exposed the calves to hunger and starvation. Using breeding stock for ploughing due to shortage of oxen lowered resistance to drought. Small herd owners were also forced to sell breeding stock sooner than the wealthy. Their losses therefore became easily noticeable and irreversible.⁶⁸⁴

Similar observations about the drought's discrimination against the poor are made by scholars about southern Bechuanaland. In their sympathetic commentary about the plight of the poor, Botswana historians, T. ka-Mbuya and Fred Morton argue: "the small cattle owner had to be content with an ill-nourished herd that had little, if any market value. For the poor and small farmers, opportunities to acquire beasts and build up a personal herd were almost none-existent."⁶⁸⁵ The opposite was true for those with large herds, who tapped into their capital resources – a large pool of labor, boreholes and cash – to sustain their herds. On account of drought during the 1960s, the borehole emerged as the quintessential supplier of water in an increasingly dry Bobirwa environment. With wealthy cattle owners seeking to take advantage of this indispensable resource, the poor, particularly those who depended on loan cattle, *mahisa*, lost the benefit of such cattle. Wealthy cattle owners withdrew the loan cattle in order to pool their resources and convince the government of their ability to repay the borehole loans, leading to stark inequalities in herd ownership.⁶⁸⁶ In addition, large numbers of cattle made it difficult for other people to notice the decline in the herds of wealthy people. As a result, it would always appear as if their cattle were not dying.

⁶⁸⁴ John Holme and Mark Cohen, "Enhancing Equity in the Midst of Drought: The Botswana Approach", *Journal of Social Development in Africa*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1988), p. 32.

⁶⁸⁵ T. ka-Mbuya and Fred Morton, "The South: The Bakwena, Bangwaketse and Bakgatla Reserves", in Fred Morton and Jeff Ramsay (eds.), *The Birth of Botswana: A History of the Bechuanaland Protectorate from 1910-1966* (Gaborone: Longman, 1987), p. 149.

⁶⁸⁶ Interview with Moagi Serumola, Bobonong, March 28, 2011; headman of arbitration, Adam Masilo, Bobonong, February 9, 2011.

Concurrent with the ecological collapse and growing inequalities in cattle wealth, was the rising numbers of returning young migrant men due to injuries and disease, particularly tuberculosis.⁶⁸⁷ Throughout Bechuanaland, the majority of migrants came from subject groups, particularly from poor families.⁶⁸⁸ As most of these injured and diseased young men succumbed to their illnesses, their deaths reshaped the demographic landscape. Although there are no numerical accounts of morbidity and mortality rates, eminent figures indicate that young men were dying at rates unprecedented during the 1960s.⁶⁸⁹ According to informants from poor families, the *bakhumi*, wealthy cattlemen, were working with powerful *dingaka* to turn “our sons into *matholwane* (see page 45) who would labor for them as herders.”⁶⁹⁰

The 1960s also saw the reconceptualization of the *bakhumi*. The *bakhumi* were no longer just large cattle owners. These were men who had graduated into capitalist farmers by taking advantage of colonial initiatives and therefore produced cattle for the market. They owned commercial farms and boreholes around Bobirwa. As the drought worsened, these men sold their cattle to the country’s abattoir situated in the town of Lobatse, about five hundred miles away from Bobirwa. The Botswana Meat Commission, as the abattoir is now called, was not accessible to the *bakhumanegi*, the poor, because of prohibitive

⁶⁸⁷ Colonial reports are replete with accounts of migrants who were dismissed and sent back to their communities because they were sick and unable to do work. See for example, BNA, S.490/1, Medical Officer to DCs, April 6, 1962; BNA, S.590/1, Medical Officer of Health to all tribal Authorities, Divisional Commissioners, DCS, Medical Officers and Medical Missionaries, March 3, 1961; BNA, S.438/2/2, Extract, Annual Medical and Sanitary Report, 1940; BNA, S.438/2/3, Report on a Visit to Bechuanaland by World Health Organization Consultant, Antony Geser, June 4-7, 1958.

⁶⁸⁸ Isaac Schapera, *Migrant Labour and Tribal Life*, p. 162; Wazha G. Morapedi, “Migrant Labour and the Peasantry”, p. 208.

⁶⁸⁹ Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema and headmen of arbitration, Onketetse Serumola, Bobonong, February 9, 2011; *ngaka* Moraka Mohwasa, Mabolwe, July 10, 2011.

⁶⁹⁰ Interview with Thaloganyo Goromente and Baagi Masia, Bobonong, March 13, 2011; Kelebonye Mankga and Goitsemodimo Mankga, Molaladau, July 20, 2011.

transport costs and its emphasis on a set weight minimum for cattle sold there.⁶⁹¹ As such, the new commercial farmers monopolized the abattoir and amassed cash wealth and cattle in tandem.

Being wealthy in these times therefore meant having a lot of cash and cattle. Consequently, rising mortality rates among the young men from poor families created a sense of pervasive material insecurity as it deprived such families of “cattle without legs.” The rise of material insecurities was understandable given the fact that the labor that used to be converted into the cattle without legs was seen to be siphoned away by witchcraft. The witchcraft of what was understood to be illicit wealth production, also produced new forms of disability. Encounters with the *matholwane* rendered those who saw them mute (*semumu*) for a lifetime. In this way, a person who encountered *matholwane* would not be able to reveal their identity to the public, for their facial characteristics bore much of the features of the original victims.

In one of my attempts to seek evidence about the existence of *matholwane*, I was taken to old man Maope (not real name) of Gobojango. The man, I was told, has not spoken since his alleged encounter with *matholwane* about fifty years ago when he was still a young man, herding his father’s cattle at Thune cattle posts. His elder sister, who is now ninety years old, claims that one afternoon he came home running and looking very frightened. The last thing this man said before he fainted was that he saw a relative of the family who was known to have been dead for three months. Neuroscientists reveal that

⁶⁹¹ The Botswana Meat Commission was established in 1954. Since its establishment, this abattoir has continued to monopolize the marketing of Botswana’s cattle to date, with its main market being the European Union. As a result, its primary source of slaughter cattle has always been commercial farms, thus largely excluding small holders who produce lean cattle on a range basis in the marginal communal lands. See Abdi Ismail Samatar and Sophie Oldfield, “Class and Effective State Institutions: The Botswana Meat Commission”, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 33, no. 4 (1995), pp. 651-668.

incidences where people suffer brain disorder due to traumatic stress and lose their speech-making abilities are not uncommon. This neurologic and sensorimotor speech disorder is called Acquired Apraxia of Speech.⁶⁹² The idea that traumatic experiences may cause people to lose speech and become mute supports Maope's sister's claim that his brother never spoke again following that fateful day when he came home frightened and fainted. This incidence also resonates with recent scholarship that places witchcraft within the realm of people's belief systems. This scholarship argues that for Africans witchcraft is real and it is an expression of fear and a pervasive sense of insecurity.⁶⁹³

The fear of witchcraft therefore re-produced anxieties and insecurities about deteriorating living conditions as the bodies and labor that produced the cattle without legs were being eroded by witchcraft. Such material insecurity in turn necessitated the purifying of cash of its corrosive power. Because its meaning is subjectively determined, in the 1960s cash became a witch. The expression: *chelede ke moloji*, cash is a witch, became common parlance in discourses of the new witchcraft of greed.⁶⁹⁴ But by calling money a witch, the Babirwa did not see it as inherently evil. Rather, its reconceptualization as a witch served the purpose of banishing its polluting and anti-social qualities to the world of witchcraft, while rendering possible its good qualities: to that liminal space on the border between human settlements and the uninhabited wilderness in which pre-1960s forms of witchcraft existed.

⁶⁹² See for example, James Dworkin, G.G. Abkarian and Donnell Johns, "Apraxia of Speech: The Effectiveness of a Treatment regime", *Journal of Speech and hearing Disorder*, vol. 53 (1988), pp. 280-294. For more specialist information on speech loss, see American Speech-language-Hearing Association online. <http://www.asha.org/public/speech/disorders/apraxia-causes.htm>. Accessed October 28, 2012.

⁶⁹³ Adam Ashforth, *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy*; Isak Niehaus, *Witchcraft, Power and Politics*; Anita Jacobson-Widding, "*CHAPUNGU*": *The Bird that Never Drops a Feather* (Uppsala University: Uppsala Studies in Cultural Anthropology, 2000).

⁶⁹⁴ Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema and headmen of arbitration, Onketetse Serumola, Bobonong, February 9, 2011; *ngaka* Moraka Mohwasa, Mabolwe, July 10, 2011.

To counter the power of this “witching cash”, the Babirwa also sought to integrate it into their social practices and belief systems.⁶⁹⁵ As contributors to Parry and Bloch’s edited volume on the morality of money have demonstrated, indigenous societies were not subject to money’s whims, but they creatively incorporated it into their cultural milieu.⁶⁹⁶ The durability of existing traditions of *go thaa lesaka*, or doctoring cattle, became central to protecting young men from this corrosive power of cash. This produced a new form of witchcraft: that of protection, which was socially sanctioned. By doctoring the bodies of young men, the witchcraft of protection provided a safety net for poor households against the erosion of their source of “cattle without legs.” The doctoring of young men thus purified money and protected it from re-pollution, leading to some semblance of spiritual and material security to the poor.

On the whole, the tradition of witchcraft was reconstituted to negotiate the growing inequalities in the 1960s. Witchcraft became a way of knowing and contesting local and colonial resource allocation. The *matholwane* were associated with the *bakhum* as the *bakhumanegi* sought to explain their worsening state of poverty. As Adam Ashforth teaches us, witchcraft cannot be a metaphor when people are literally afraid of witches. “Denying the possibility of witchcraft is akin to denying the existence of God,” he argues. “It is easier to do when life is good.”⁶⁹⁷ Ashforth thus draws our attention to the possibility of the rationality of Africans’ strong belief in witchcraft as people use it to comprehend and gain a sense of control over an increasingly unsettled world. His notion

⁶⁹⁵ Interview with *ngaka* Moraka Mohwasa, Mabolwe, July 10, 2011; *ngaka* Sephetso, Tsetsebjwe, August 1, 2011; Kgosi Mmirwa Malema, Bobonong, February 9, 2011; *ngaka* Moraka Mohwasa, Mabolwe, July 10, 2011.

⁶⁹⁶ J. Parry and M. Bloch (eds.), *Money and the Morality of Exchange* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

⁶⁹⁷ Adam Ashforth, *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy*, p. 123

of “spiritual insecurity” becomes linked to other forms of insecurity such as disease and growing socio-economic inequalities.

For the Babirwa, who had experiences of losing cattle to the 1896/97 rinderpest pandemic and the famine that ensued thereafter, the ecological collapse of the 1960s, together with disease and growing inequalities, created a pervasive sense of insecurity and fear.⁶⁹⁸ These were explained through witchcraft discourses. The less wealthy began to use accusations of witchcraft as a mode of expressing their anxieties and fears of the growing disproportionate accumulation of wealth. They accused the wealthy of not just destroying the moral fiber of society but, as Per Zachrisson says of the Babirwa in western Zimbabwe, “literally sucking the blood and strength out of, not only family members, but out of the community itself.”⁶⁹⁹

According to Jacobson-Widding, Africans perceive witchcraft as vampirism because of its role in the erosion of community prosperity and economic empowerment of a few individuals.⁷⁰⁰ “Who would have the audacity to steal cattle protected by evil medicine? How could such cattle die of hunger and thirst when they are fed and watered by *matholwane*?”⁷⁰¹ asks *ngaka ya dikgomo*, ethno-veterinary medicine specialist, Mohwasa Moraka rhetorically. Moraka accuses wealthy cattle owners, who he believes cohabit with witchcraft-practicing *dingaka* to build large herds, of milking the community of its labor force. Moraka’s concerns resonate with my lived experience of rumor and gossip and the fear that witchcraft instills on people. For instance, when I grew

⁶⁹⁸ For the ecological collapse of the 1960s, see “Report to the Government of the Bechuanaland Protectorate on the Beef, Cattle and Meat Industry”, by Glen Rex Purnell and W.S. Clayton (October 1963)

⁶⁹⁹ Per Zachrisson, *Hunting for Development*, p. 155.

⁷⁰⁰ Anita Jacobson-Widding, *Chapungu: The Bird that Never Drops a Feather. Male and Female Identities in an African Society* (Uppsala Studies in Cultural Anthropology, Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsalensis, 2000), p. 301

⁷⁰¹ Personal communication, *ngaka* Moraka Mohwasa, July 10, 2011.

up in the village of Mogapi in the 1980s, I heard pervasive rumors, dating back to the 1960s when a certain wealthy man, Serumola (now deceased), was purported to have owned an army of the *matholwane*, who not only herded his cattle but stole from other farmers to replenish his herds.

Despite such accusations, everybody in Bobirwa lost cattle to droughts and disease. It is always difficult to ascertain – as people are also discrete and/or secretive about their holdings – the amount of losses among large cattle holders while for the small holders, any changes to the numbers they hold becomes conspicuous once some cattle are missing. Accusations leveled against the wealthy, however, have profound significance in terms of how witchcraft is understood and articulated [never mind in terms of retribution: the wealthy usually also have more power and would be quick to punish/sanction such accusations?]. These accusations reveal the centrality of rumor and gossip as modes of articulation in a society where inequalities had assumed unusually high levels; a society where cash bestowed power upon those who had access to it in large amounts to manipulate the social system for their own individual benefit.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the Babirwa's creative adaptations to a declining pastoral livelihood. Between 1930 and the end of colonial rule an increasingly privatized colonial beef industry combined with high rates of labor migration, foot and mouth disease and droughts to dispossess the Babirwa communal farmers of their cattle herds. The highly commercialized cattle industry and labor migration monetized the colonial economy. The

Babirwa, however, tapped onto their experiences of mobility to reappropriate colonial migrant labor, with which they negotiated colonial domination.⁷⁰²

As colonial development policy, the market-oriented cattle industry and ecological problems threatened to dispossess Babirwa, circulatory migrant labor became the primary reproducer of social differentiation. Young men, who did not have cattle of their own, were preponderant in the colonial circulatory migrant labor system. These temporary retreats from the pastoral economy became a vehicle to herd reconstruction as earnings were used to replenish existing herds or build new herds [and build new relationships counter to inherited generational barriers, across new geographies, and in defiance of old gender/marriage norms]. In fact, according to Isaac Schapera, migrant labor widely became regarded as initiation into manhood in a society where cattle ownership was synonymous with being a man.⁷⁰³ That is, ownership of cattle was the yardstick used to determine whether or not one had graduated into a man.

The chapter also examined a changing cultural landscape as cash became an important reproducer of social differentiation and social networks. The shift in the Babirwa's cultural practices reflected their adaptability to social and environmental change. Such socio-environmental changes were to continue to influence their life ways after colonial rule where they contested new unfavourable forms of state social engineering imbedded in the post-colonial grazing land policies and justice systems.

⁷⁰² Scholarship on African pastoralist peoples points to the importance of areal mobility to ethnic identity production. See for example, Elliot Fratkin, "Maa-Speakers of the Northern Desert: Recent Developments in Ariaal and Rendille Identity", in Thomas Spear and Richard Waller (eds.), *Being Maasai: Ethnicity and Identity in East Africa* (London: James Currey, 1993), pp. 273-289.

⁷⁰³ Isaac Schapera, *Migrant Labour and Tribal Life: A Study of Conditions in the Bechuanaland Protectorate* (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 116.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Tragedy of the Commoners: Post-Colonial Land Policy, Ecological Collapse and the Decline of the Babirwa's Material Pastoralist Fabric, 1970s to the Present.

Introduction

Writing at the end of the 1960s, a novelist who lived in the Bangwato capital of Serowe, Bessie Head, tells a tale of a harsh climate that brings tragedy to a small village in Botswana. Her novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, is a story of a former colonial backwater, newly independent Botswana, struggling to strike a balance in a fragile intersection between modernist development and the rural poor. The book begins with the story of a boy who dies of malnutrition alone at the cattle post in a community ravaged by a terrible drought that exterminates all the cattle. The only male in a female-headed household, this boy lives alone at the cattle post where he falls sick and fails to relocate to the village with the rest of the other herders. Only weeks later does the boy's widowed mother discover his dry white skeleton inside the small cattle post hut. While these tragic events unfold in the open range, the village chief enjoys prosperity at his fenced farm. His cattle have the privilege of lush vegetation and access to borehole water. To Gilbert Balfour, an English agricultural expert, and the epitome of modernized western farming in Head's novel, such losses could have been avoided had cattle herders discarded their traditional wasteful pastoral pursuits based on cattle hoarding with little regard for range vulnerability.⁷⁰⁴

Head's book is a novelistic representation of Botswana's declining indigenous pastoralist fabric amid natural disasters and government policies that promoted the

⁷⁰⁴ Bessie Head, *When Rain Clouds Gather* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1968).

privatization of range resources. The concept, pastoralist fabric, is used here to connote a socio-economic, cultural and ideological way of life centring on the herding of cattle. These material and social worlds, shaped by cattle, were disrupted by modernist policies that drew from the commons property theories of the time. The commons property theories blamed environmental vulnerability to drought on overstocking in communal grazing areas and proposed a strictly privatized system of grazing land tenure.⁷⁰⁵ The result of the privatization of the commonage, however, was the concentration of herds in a few hands. Thus, the herd ownership inequalities of the 1960s remained a fixture of the pastoral economy in post-colonial Botswana. Decades of manoeuvrings hastened in the first decade of independence, culminated in the ascendance of cattle owning elites to political power and the entrenchment and worsening of inequalities.⁷⁰⁶

As I have previously demonstrated, herd ownership inequality antedated the post-colonial era. It was, however, exacerbated after independence. The post-colonial Botswana state itself was an extension of the pre-colonial nineteenth century Bangwato State, which developed under a cattle-wealthy political elite, and there has been striking continuity in cattle ownership inequalities from the nineteenth century to post-independence Botswana.⁷⁰⁷ The Kings of the pre-colonial Bangwato state monopolized all productive resources, including cattle, land, water and herding labor until *kgosi* Khama rescinded control of all royal cattle held under the *kgamelo* system in the late

⁷⁰⁵ Garrett Hardin, "The Tragedy of the Commons", *Science* 13, Vol. 162 no. 3859 (December 1968), pp. 1243-1248. For Botswana, see Lionel Cliffe and Richard Moorson, "Rural Class Formation and Ecological Collapse in Botswana", *Review of African Political Economy*, no. 15/16, The Roots of Famine (1979), pp. 35-52.

⁷⁰⁶ Louis Picard, "Rural Development in Botswana: Administrative Structures and Public Policy", *Journal of Developing Areas*, vol. 13 (1979), p. 283.

⁷⁰⁷ Kenneth Good, "The State and Extreme Poverty in Botswana: The San Destitutes", *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 37, no. 2 (1999), p. 190.

nineteenth century, thus creating a cattle-owning middle class called the *Batlhanka* (see chapter 3).⁷⁰⁸

This privatized herd ownership was to be appropriated and reconstituted by colonial capitalist accumulation schemes, which, unfortunately, were expensive and therefore designed to promote elite interests.⁷⁰⁹ At the end of colonial rule in 1966, these cattle-owning elites, or the wealthy commercial cattle farmers, formed the new government. The Botswana Democratic Party (BDP), which has ruled since independence, was formed by this group of cattle elites, with the first president, Seretse Khama, owning around 30,000 head of cattle at the time.⁷¹⁰ Over the years, this political elite class of cattle barons reproduced as BDP and top government positions were handed to cattle wealthy individuals and educated elites respectively.⁷¹¹

As a result, post-colonial development policy focused on designing land policies and cattle marketing structures that served the commercial interests of this “coalition of the educated and cattle owning elites.”⁷¹² In particular, the privatization of common resources bestowed land rights on a few elites and therefore played an important role in entrenching inequalities.⁷¹³ Several income distribution studies have also demonstrated

⁷⁰⁸ Neil Parsons, “The Economic History of Khama’s Country in Botswana, 1844-1930”, in Robin Palmer and Neil Parsons (eds.), *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), p. 117.

⁷⁰⁹ Diana Wylie, *A Little God: The Twilight of Patriarchy in a Southern African Kingdom* (Johannesburg: University of Witwatersrand Press, 1990), p. 72. For deeper insights about the development of an elite colonial cattle industry, see Pauline E. Peters, *Dividing the Commons: Politics, Policy, and Culture in Botswana* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1994).

⁷¹⁰ Kenneth Good, “The State and Extreme Poverty in Botswana”, p. 189.

⁷¹¹ Neil Parsons, W. Henderson and Thomas Tlou, *Seretse Khama, 1921-1980* (Gaborone: Macmillan, 1995), p. 204.

⁷¹² Louis Picard, “Rural Development in Botswana: Administrative Structures and Public Policy”, *Journal of Developing Areas*, vol. 13 (1979), p. 283.

⁷¹³ Pauline E. Peters, *Dividing the Commons*.

sharpening herd ownership inequalities well into the 1990s.⁷¹⁴ Consequently, like the water development policy of the period 1930 to 1960s, independent Botswana's grazing land policy became part of a historical process through which pastoral resources were reallocated, wealth created or destroyed, and in which some elite interests were promoted at the expense of communal farmers, or the small local cattle holders who raised cattle in the open communally controlled rangelands.⁷¹⁵

This chapter explores the impact of post-colonial land policy on the Babirwa's pastoral livelihoods. It gives the reader a better understanding of the subtleties behind the weakening of the Babirwa's pastoralist fabric. The Chapter begins from the premise that the decline of the Babirwa's pastoralism did not start at independence. Neither did the post-colonial state halt nor slow down that decline. Rather, the new commons property-inspired grazing land policies of the post-colonial era increased vulnerability to droughts, disease and theft. The commons property and land degradation theories (described below) were mainly concerned with saving natural resources from man's exploitation without regard to the plight of local communities who lived on and off such resources.⁷¹⁶ As a result, post-colonial Botswana's land policies, directly influenced by these theories,

⁷¹⁴ Among others, see Michael Hubbard, *Agricultural Exports and Economic Growth: A Study of the Botswana Beef Industry* (London: Keagan and Paul, 1986), p. 197; Richard White, *Livestock Development and Pastoral Production on Communal Rangeland in Botswana* (Gaborone: Botswana Society, 1993).

⁷¹⁵ Pauline E. Peters, "Struggles Over Water, Struggles Over Meaning: Cattle, Water and the State in Botswana," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, vol. 54, no. 3 (1984), pp. 29-49.

⁷¹⁶ Garrett Hardin, "The Tragedy of the Commons", pp. 1243-1248. For Botswana, see Lionel Cliffe and Richard Moorson, "Rural Class Formation" pp. 35-52; L.C. Buffington and C.H. Herbel, "Vegetational Changes on a Semi-desert Grassland Range from 1858 to 1963", *Ecological Monographs*, vol. 35 (1965), pp. 139-164; H.J. van Rensberg, "Range Ecology in Botswana." FAO technical Document no. 2. UNDP/SF/359, Bot 1 (Rome, 1971).

deprived small famers of their dry land grazing areas and exposed their cattle to the whims of nature, particularly droughts and disease.⁷¹⁷

Recurrent droughts and diseases in turn combined with epidemics of cattle thefts to accelerate this process of decline. This was particularly so because the post-colonial economic development strategy and administrative machinery closely followed the colonial blueprint. The privatization of the common grazing land – a process that started in the 1930s – and the cordoning off of diseased areas were considered the most effective ways of promoting cattle farming. This process of enclosure and privatization, as environmental historian, Emmanuel Kreike, demonstrates, reflected an environment created not “by people, but for people.”⁷¹⁸ In Botswana, such imposed environments served the interests of a cattle wealthy political elite and therefore excluded communal farmers. Amid these dispossessions, however, the Babirwa constructed images, words and historical processes, particularly wage labor migration, and new practices, such as people’s courts and the use of donkeys, to strategically cope with their losses.

The concept, “tragedy of the commoners”, is used here to describe the losses incurred by the underclass of underprivileged communal farmers whom state grazing land policy drove into lands of marginal quality to promote the commercial interests of the cattle holding political elites. These cattle holding elites were both Babirwa and foreigners from other ethnicities, primarily the Bangwato who to date still have rights of ownership of land in Bobirwa.⁷¹⁹ The dispossessed communal farmers also included

⁷¹⁷ Kenneth Good, “The State and Extreme Poverty in Botswana”, pp. 185-205; Pauline Peters, *Dividing the Commons*; Richard Moorson, “Rural Class Formation” pp. 35-52.

⁷¹⁸ Emmanuel Kreike, *Re-creating Eden: Land Use, Environment, and Society in Southern Angola and Northern Namibia* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004), p. 1.

⁷¹⁹ Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema and headmen of arbitration, Onketetse Serumola and Adam Masilo, Bobonong, February 9, 2011.

people from diverse ethnicities who had relocated their cattle to Bobirwa following the land boards' designation of all land in the country into open access spaces.⁷²⁰ Such open access situations further contracted the commonage, leading to destruction of range resources. The “tragedy of the commoners” reflects the sharpening of herd ownership inequalities within Bobirwa, thus revealing an overlap between ethnicity and class. That is, some Babirwa became wealthy cattle owners and thus became part of the elite class of cattle barons while identifying ethnically as the Babirwa. This chapter illuminates the anxieties, fears and hopes of marginalized Babirwa farmers about the harsh realities of losing their cattle while showing their continued veneration of cattle as the *Bakgomong*, or “people of the cow.”

I begin the chapter by examining post-colonial Botswana's grazing land policy and its contribution to the decline of the Babirwa's material pastoralist fabric. The second part of the chapter explores the effects of recurring droughts and foot and mouth disease epidemics that accelerated the dispossession of the Babirwa of their herds between the late 1990s and the present. Lastly, the chapter examines the Babirwa's contestation of Botswana's justice systems amid rising levels of cattle thefts, which, I argue, are a direct result of the dispossessions caused by the partial privatization of communal grazing lands. Amid epidemics of cattle thefts from the beginning of the millennium, the Babirwa have criticized the country's justice system for failing to protect farmers and benefitting the cattle thieves. In the end, while discussing environmental constraints, this chapter is not an environmental determinism or declensionist narrative. The challenges presented by Bobirwa's semi-arid and diseased environment in reality, I argue, resulted in varied and creative responses.

⁷²⁰ Government of Botswana, *Tribal Land Act*, 1968. Cap. 32:02 of the Laws of Botswana.

“Pastoralists Without Pastures”: Land Policy, Dispossession and Inequalities in Herd Ownership

At independence, elite borehole ownership and the privatization of lands surrounding the boreholes continued in the country.⁷²¹ By 1986, permanent access to rangelands whereby some wealthy farmers laid personal claim over formerly communal areas, had risen significantly as boreholes opened up dry land areas and reduced dependence on rainfall.⁷²² Drilling was, however, expensive and risky, meaning that only wealthier herd owners had the financial wherewithal to invest in the boreholes.⁷²³ Just like in the 1930s-1960s, the grazing surrounding the boreholes belonged to the borehole owners, thus continuing the colonial process of privatizing formerly communal lands and pushing small herd owners into lands of marginal quality. Despite the discovery of minerals, beef exports also remained Botswana’s chief source of revenue until the 1980s when a prolonged and insidious drought decimated the country’s national herd.⁷²⁴ The government therefore saw it necessary to commercialize the cattle industry, through ranching, in order to make it competitive in the international market.⁷²⁵ This section critically examines the grazing enclosure policies in post-colonial Botswana. It is an

⁷²¹ Pauline E. Peters, *Dividing the Commons*.

⁷²² Jaap Arntzen, Happy Fidzani and Gubungano Tachela, “Communal Rangelands in Botswana: less Subsistence, more Commerce and fewer Beneficiaries”, in *Global Change and Subsistence Rangelands in Southern Africa: Impacts of Climatic Variability and Resource Access on Rural Livelihoods*. Report of a Workshop on Southern African Rangelands Today and Tomorrow: Social Institutions for an Ecologically Sustainable Future (Gaborone, June 10-14, 1996). Global Change and Terrestrial Ecosystem (GCTE) Working Document 20.

⁷²³ Pauline Peters, *Dividing the Commons*; Richard White, *Livestock Development and Pastoral Production on Communal Rangeland in Botswana* (Gaborone: Botswana Society, 1993).

⁷²⁴ John Holme and Mark Cohen, “Enhancing Equity in the Midst of Drought: The Botswana Approach”, *Journal of Social Development in Africa*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1988), p. 20.

⁷²⁵ Michael Hubbard, *Agricultural Exports and economic growth; A study of the Botswana Beef Industry*, (London, New York and Sidney: KPI Limited, 1986).

attempt to challenge ideas of the commons property regimes that were used by the post-colonial state to commercialize and control resources previously designated communal.⁷²⁶

Modernists' labelling of hoarding, or the accumulation of large numbers of cattle, as an environmental time bomb obscures the limiting effects of fencing on traditional range management practices.⁷²⁷ In post-colonial Bobirwa, the partial enclosure of communal grazing did not only cause land degradation. It also led to the loss of cattle by owners of small herds thus turning most of them into the *bakhumanegi*, a perilous social position occupied by people without cattle. This impoverishment was a result of the country's dramatic changes to land policy. In 1968, two years after independence, the Botswana Parliament passed its first piece of land legislation called the Tribal Land Act.⁷²⁸ This law transferred the right to allocate land from the chiefs to central government through the Land Board. As an official institution, the Land Board

⁷²⁶ My understanding of the commons property draws from Garrett Harding's theory of the "tragedy of the Commons," a 1970s dominant narrative, which professed that the commonage was an unsustainable resource because of its vulnerability to overexploitation. When applied to African pastoral practices, this theory assumed that farmers who shared common grazing lands consciously maximised their holdings at the expense of the range because they had no obligation to protect it. As a result Hardin's hypothesis recommended that natural resources should either be privatized or controlled by a central government authority to ensure sustainable use. Garrett Hardin, "The Tragedy of the Commons", pp. 1243-1248. Africanist scholarship has challenged such simplistic renditions of the problems of the African commonage management. Pauline Peters and Jack Parson have respectively, and rightly, attributed post-independence Botswana's herd ownership inequalities and range destruction to the partial privatization of common pastures. Pauline Peters, *Dividing the Commons*; Jack Parson, "Cattle Class and the State in Rural Botswana", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2 (1981), pp. 236-255. The commons property theory's scientific calculations of fixed carrying capacity, or the number of animals a piece of land can sustain without causing structural degradation, have also been challenged elsewhere. According to Emmanuel Kreike, there is no botanical correlation between the environmental vulnerability of common property regimes and overstocking. Rather, Kreike argues, fencing, be it for ranching or disease control, leads to the contraction of the commonage and therefore causes degradation. Emmanuel Kreike, "De-Globalisation and Deforestation in Colonial Africa: Closed Markets, the Cattle Complex, and Environmental Change in North-Central Namibia, 1890-1990", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 35, no. 1 (2009), pp. 81-91.

⁷²⁷ See for example, Lionel Cliffe and Richard Moorson, "Rural Class Formation", pp. 35-52; L.C. Buffington and C.H. Herbel, "Vegetational Changes on a Semi-desert", pp. 139-164.

⁷²⁸ Government of Botswana, *Tribal Land Act*, 1968. Cap. 32:02 of the Laws of Botswana.

disregarded prior considerations for individual ties to community lands in its operations. Ethnic claims to land became less important in such nationalized land allocations.

For the modern state, national identity is more important than individual ethnic subjectivities. In its disavowal of ethnic identity and pursuit of a homogenizing national policy, the Botswana government therefore deprived individual ethnic groups of the traditional legal claims to pieces of land by making land available to citizens anywhere in the country regardless of their ethnic affiliation. Traditional land allocation procedure, through the chiefs as the custodians of community land, which had withstood colonial rule in Botswana, was a legal and territorial expression of individual rights based upon kinship relations. The neutrality of Land Board allocation procedures made communal lands accessible to commercial farmers and undermined kin-based land rights thus leading to loss of communal dry land grazing as large cattle owners from afar attained exclusive rights to graze in Bobirwa.⁷²⁹

For all its intents and purposes, the Tribal Land Act destroyed the chiefs' potential to use control over land as an instrument of wider political influence and concentrated all the land policy-making powers in the hands of the ruling elites. This usurpation of chiefly power by state institutions brought a shift in land tenure, from communal to private. The ruling elites saw privatization of communal lands as the only viable option if Botswana's beef industry was to maintain its position as the major revenue earner for the country.⁷³⁰ These commercial interests of the cattle owning political elites were to shape subsequent grazing land policies.

⁷²⁹ Botshelo Mathuba, Report on the Review of the Tribal Land Act, Land Policies and Related Issues (Gaborone: Ministry of Local Government and Lands, Government Printer, 1989).

⁷³⁰ A government White Paper of 1972 outlined the role of the Tribal Land Act (1968) to Botswana's grazing policy. See Government of Botswana, Ministry of Finance and Development Planning, "Rural Development in Botswana", Government White Paper No. 1 (Gaborone, March 1972).

From 1970, Botswana's first official magazine, *Kutlwano*, became the government's mouthpiece for rural enterprise. Official rhetoric in this magazine centered on encouraging Batswana men to channel their energies to rural farming rather than migrating to urban areas where employment was not certain. President Seretse Khama's policy statements on agricultural production, in particular, valorized the socio-economic virtues of cattle farming and demonized male rural-urban migration for its purportedly deleterious effects on rural enterprise.⁷³¹ Casting aspersions on the ability of the emerging mining industry to provide gainful employment, Khama stressed in 1970: "Botswana must remain a nation of farmers.... [Our] hopes of general prosperity rest on the development of agriculture and animal husbandry."⁷³² Seretse Khama was building on his uncle, Tshekedi Khama's, 1930s rhetoric that mine labor migration was eroding the fabric of society and destroying cattle farming.⁷³³ This official rhetoric about a masculine cattle-producing nation gained support from BDP activists in the 1970s, some of who were to occupy top party and government positions. They wrote to *Kutlwano*, warning of the potentially damaging effects of urbanism on Tswana cultural values and extolling the virtues of masculine rural enterprise.⁷³⁴

This concerted male elitist rhetoric about the centrality and masculine gender of farming coalesced within official epistemologies about the beef industry – as the quintessential product of farming – and perceived benefits of privatization of the pastoral resource base to shape policy on grazing land. In 1973, a government White Paper

⁷³¹ Seretse Khama, *From the Frontline: Speeches of Seretse Khama* edited by Gwendolyn M. Carter and E. Philip Morgan, (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1980), pp. 322-324.

⁷³² Seretse Khama, "A Statement of Progress and Policy," *Kutlwano*, May 1970, p. 6.

⁷³³ Michael Crowder, "Tshekedi Khama's Opposition to the British Administration of the Bechuanaland Protectorate, 1926-1936", *Journal of African History*, vol. 26, no. 2 (1985), p. 204.

⁷³⁴ See for example, David Magang, *The Magic of Perseverance: The Autobiography of David Magang* (Cape Town: The Centre for Advances Studies of African Societies, 2008), 212-213, 352; Kebabonye Shylock Raborokgwe, "We Remain what we are, Modern or no," *Kutlwano*, October 1974, 31.

granted exclusive rights to individuals over the lands they wished to fence for ranching purposes throughout the country.⁷³⁵ Moreover, the White Paper did not stop individuals who owned fenced farms and therefore had exclusive rights to specific grazing lands, from grazing their cattle on the unfenced pieces of communal pastures.⁷³⁶

The underlying reasons for launching a land reform effort in Botswana were later spelled out in a Government White Paper published in 1975, which instituted a new grazing policy called the Tribal Grazing Policy (TGLP).⁷³⁷ With its primary objective being to build an internationally competitive beef industry, the TGLP criticized the existing grazing land tenure system for being “a free for all” in need of restructuring to give herd owners “complete control over the areas where they graze their animals” for sustainable land use.⁷³⁸ It also stipulated a reduction to manageable size of herds of animals raised on communal lands to bring stocking rates in line with the carrying capacity of the land in order for farmers to make real progress. The aims of this land policy were threefold: to stop overgrazing and degradation of the range; to promote greater equality of incomes in rural areas; and to allow growth and commercialization of the livestock industry on a sustained basis. In order to achieve the aims of conservation, production, and equality, the document suggested that the formerly communal grazing land in Botswana be divided into three zones: commercial, communal, and reserved. In the commercial areas, leasehold rights would be granted over blocks of rangeland,

⁷³⁵ Government of Botswana, National Policy for Rural Development: The Government’s Decisions on the Report on Rural Development by R. Chambers and D. Feldman (Gaborone: Government Printer, 1973). The Chambers and Feldman study had recommended massive commercialization of the cattle industry in order for the country to compete in the international beef market.

⁷³⁶ Louis Picard, “Bureaucrats, Cattle and Public Policy: Land Tenure Changes in Botswana”, *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 13, no. 3 (1980), p. 329.

⁷³⁷ Government of Botswana, Ministry of Finance and Development Planning, National Policy on Tribal Grazing Land, Government White Paper No. 2 (Gaborone: Government Printer, 1975).

⁷³⁸ National Policy on Tribal Grazing Land, Government White Paper No. 2 (1975), p. 5.

granting exclusive rights to individuals and groups to incentivize them to manage their grazing in appropriate modern farming ways; while in the communal areas, the basis of land tenure would remain the same as it was before, but stipulating that farmers should reduce the numbers of animals that grazed on a piece of land.⁷³⁹

In the Babirwa's indigenous herd management traditions, however, such individualized visions of land ownership and the accompanying scientific requirements of carrying capacity were not acceptable.⁷⁴⁰ For generations, since their adaption of cattle herding in the 1850s, the Babirwa had gained access to communal range resources through traditions of socially circumscribed usage and therefore managed grazing without having to reduce stocking rates. The kin-based control mechanism of *mahudiso*, or pastures, gave restricted access to both kin and non-kin to resources. The *batswakwa*, a word that literally translates into "those who come from far unknown places," or foreigners, had to make an application called *kopa mahudiso*, asking for pastures, in order to be accorded access to grazing. But such requests could be denied.⁷⁴¹ Those whose requests were denied seldom encroached onto another group's *mahudiso* for fear of transcendental retribution, which could cause them to incur huge losses. Grazing one's cattle without permission in the pastures of other herders was known as *ralala lesaka* or trespassing on a kraal.⁷⁴² All cattle that grazed on a certain area were bound to that piece of land through doctoring by powerful *dingaka tsa dikgomo*, ethno-veterinary medicine specialists, in a ritual called *thaa lesaka*, or fortifying the kraal. This doctoring ensured that the cattle would not leave their land, particularly through theft, going astray or falling

⁷³⁹ National Policy on Tribal Grazing Land, Government White Paper No. 2 (1975), pp. 6-7.

⁷⁴⁰ Interview with Gabatshabe Baipidi and Bathaloganyi Phuthego, Mogapi, December 25, 2011.

⁷⁴¹ Interview with Gabatshabe Baipidi and Bathaloganyi Phuthego, Mogapi, December 25, 2011.

⁷⁴² Interview with *ngaka* Sephekolo, Mahalapye, August 22, 2011; *ngaka* Sephetso, Tsetsebjwe, August 1, 2011; *ngaka* Moraka Mohwasa, Mabolwe, July 10, 2011.

prey to predators.⁷⁴³ As a result, it was believed that farmers whose cattle trespassed on land to which they had no relationship would be at risk of incurring losses the medicines used to doctor such areas could kill them or lead them to go astray. These control mechanisms were based on mobility and access to dispersed range resources. They were therefore sustainable forms of land use suitable for the highly adaptable indigenous breeds of cattle and a fragile ecology characterized by unpredictable precipitation and climate.

The Tswana breed is well adapted to semi-arid conditions and it can withstand long drought periods because of its ability to survive on less feed. This hardy animal also has the tenacity to walk long distances between grazing and drinking and it has low water requirements. Growing up herding cattle in an environment prone to long dry spells due to rain variability, I have knowledge of the ability of the Tswana breed to survive under extremely harsh conditions. According to my father, a former herder and now farmer, during the rainy season, when dispersed pools provided water all over the range, and cattle were at risk of going astray, Babirwa men practiced intensive herding; herders were required *go di tshwara ka megata* (to hold on to cattle's tails), which is a metaphor for "following the cattle closely" (explained in chapters 1 & 2). This herd management system has withstood the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial temporal spaces (see chapter 2).

Go di tshwara ka megata was, nonetheless not always a year-long process. During the dry season, the Babirwa practiced a less intensive herd management system in which the cattle would be released to look for grazing far afield only to come back after a

⁷⁴³ Interview with *ngaka* Sephekolo, Mahalapye, August 22, 2011; *ngaka* Sephetso, Tsetsebjwe, August 1, 2011; *ngaka* Moraka Mohwasa, Mabolwe, July 10, 2011.

couple of days for water. A ninety-year old man in Mogapi visualized this shifting herd management system in his testimony during my conversation with him:

Cattle have no incentive to go back to the kraal during rains. After all, they do not like being kraaled. In the morning, after milking, we would follow them out into the veld so that we could drive them back to the kraal in the evening. Spending the day at the pastures helped us to keep them together and identify those that calved. It was a lot of work. During droughts there was very little to do. Our cattle were watered after every three days. After watering them, we would simply drive them away and spend most of our time doing leisure activities, such as playing games, setting traps and hunting. But once the dry season became prolonged, wells dried up and pastures deteriorated, we would move with our cattle to find better grazing and water elsewhere.⁷⁴⁴

This testimony illuminates the intersection between social landscapes and environmental change. It reflects the complexity of a sendentary herd management system characterized by periods of mobility, depending on climate variability and the availability, or lack, of water and grazing.

Such mobility and herd dispersal in unpredictable ecologies has always been the cornerstone of open range farming in Bobirwa. It also serves as a useful corrective to simplistic renditions of synergies between overstocking and land degradation advanced by earlier environmental histories of Southern Africa.⁷⁴⁵ Babirwa resisted attempts at forcing them to reduce stocking on the commonage because the socio-economic and cultural benefits of their cattle were not strictly measured in environmental costs. As South African environmental historian, William Beinart, notes, for poor livestock herders in Africa, unrestricted access to the commonage was “vital for multiple uses such as

⁷⁴⁴ Interview with rraShashane Mogapi, December 27, 2010; Dikgang Montsosi, Bobonong, July 10, 2011.

⁷⁴⁵ For studies that blame environmental vulnerability on African pastoral practices, see Leroy Vail, “Ecology and History: The Example of Eastern Zambia”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 3 (1977), pp. 129-155.

draught, milk, meat as well as exchange.”⁷⁴⁶ Political Scientist, Richard White also characterizes the Tswana breed as a “general purpose animal.”⁷⁴⁷ The Babirwa cattle had multiple uses, ranging from material production such as for the production of milk and meat, pulling the plows to being insurance against disease and drought, and to the weaving of social networks through bridewealth exchanges and *mahisa*, loaning.⁷⁴⁸ Because of the multiple spheres of importance attached to cattle, there was a tendency to accumulate them even under unfavorable environmental conditions.

By promoting individualized land ownership, however, the government thought that the establishment of fenced ranches would relieve grazing pressure in the communal areas, thus enhancing herd productivity. At the same time, the government devised determined that fenced ranches would provide a more equitable distribution of land among rural people. Consequently, the TGLP, based on modernist assumptions of wasteful African pastoral practices, particularly hoarding, commoditized formerly common resources and pushed small herd owners into lands of marginal quality. The privatization drive was interpreted in the light of the 1970s, modernist narratives’ suggestions that behaving responding rationally to the market opportunities and employing western management practices would break the overstocking-degradation cycle since surplus would be sold.⁷⁴⁹

By the time of its implementation in 1977, however, the TGLP had undergone significant changes from the original as outlined in the 1975 White Paper. As the program evolved, it was found that there was not as much “empty” land onto which

⁷⁴⁶ William Beinart, “African History and Environmental History”, *African Affairs*, vol. 99 (2000), p. 280.

⁷⁴⁷ Richard White, *Livestock Development and Pastoral Production on Communal Rangeland in Botswana* (Gaborone: Botswana Society, 1993), p. 41.

⁷⁴⁸ Interview with Dikgang Montsosi, Bobonong, July 10, 2011; Mbat Mashaba, Molaladau, July 15, 2011.

⁷⁴⁹ See among others, Lionel Cliffe and Richard Moorson, “Rural Class Formation”, pp. 35-52.

large-scale cattle owners could move as was initially believed. The government then changed some of the basic tenets of the policy. The idea of stock limitations on commercial ranches, in particular, was dropped, and there were no more restrictions for leaseholders, other than constructing firebreaks around their property and managing the range “in accordance with the principles of good husbandry.”⁷⁵⁰

This exemption of commercial farmers from carrying capacity requirements, coupled with the unrestricted access they had to communal grazing, put a lot of pressure on common grazing lands. Commercial farmers had large numbers of cattle and most of them exotic heavy breeds such as the Brahman.⁷⁵¹ These needed more food intake than the drought-resistant Tswana breed, which was lighter and ate less. During years of good rains, which revitalized pastures in the commonage, commercial farmers would release these large numbers of heavy breeds on to the already contracted commonage while their enclosed pastures remained untouched. By the time the dry season approached, communal areas would already be under stress and therefore easily get degraded. Such disproportionate access to pastures disadvantaged communal farmers and exposed their animals to droughts. It led to significant and irreversible declines in the average numbers of cattle per household, progressively leading to skewed herd ownership in favor of ranch owners.⁷⁵²

⁷⁵⁰ National Policy on Tribal Grazing Land, Government White Paper No. 2 (1975), p. 7.

⁷⁵¹ Southern African environmental histories have been highly critical of the destructive overstocking practiced by commercial farmers in privately owned land. See for example, William Beinart, “Soil Erosion, Animals and Pasture Over the Longer Term: Environmental Destruction in Southern Africa”, in Melissa Leach and Robin Mearns (eds.), *The Lie of the Land: Challenging Received Wisdom on the African Environment* (Oxford: James Currey, 1996), pp. 54-72.

⁷⁵² Government of Botswana, *Selebi Phikwe District Livestock Censuses, 1986-1990* (Gaborone: Government Printer).

By 1979, half the rural population in the whole country owned no cattle and the wealthiest five per cent owned half the national herd.⁷⁵³ For the Selebi Phikwe Animal Production District, censuses taken between 1980 and 1990 showed overall dramatic declines of cattle populations in communal areas, with averages falling from eight per cent of the national herd in 1982 to four per cent by 1986.⁷⁵⁴ The same period saw high off-take rates of thirty nine per cent in private farms compared to four per cent in the communal areas.⁷⁵⁵ The decline in communal cattle keeping was further aggravated by the formulation of the National Policy on Agricultural Development (NPAD) in 1991.⁷⁵⁶ This policy was designed to offset the failures of the TGLP's primary objective of promoting improved range management and high productivity in beef production. Its formulation was therefore premised upon the alarmist narratives of the tragedy of the commons similar to those of the TGLP, which saw communal farming as an environmental time bomb. The NPAD's criticism of the communal system revealed government's intent to privatize all grazing:

The present uncontrolled management of communal grazing is not only unproductive but has led to unprecedented range degradation, [leading] to soil erosion. There is no way of either reversing the progressive range degradation together with soil erosion or improving productivity under the present system.⁷⁵⁷

For this new policy, the solution to land degradation lay in fencing what remained of the communal grazing areas and providing subsidies to commercial farmers in order to

⁷⁵³ Government of Botswana, *Central Statistics Office and Agricultural Statistics* (Gaborone: Government Printer, 1980).

⁷⁵⁴ Government of Botswana, *Botswana Agricultural Statistics, 1980-1986* (Gaborone: Government Printer); *Selebi Phikwe District Livestock Censuses, 1986-1990*.

⁷⁵⁵ *Botswana Agricultural Statistics, 1980-1986; Selebi Phikwe District Livestock Censuses, 1986-1990*.

⁷⁵⁶ Government of Botswana, Ministry of Agriculture, *The National Policy on Agricultural Development* (Gaborone: Government Printer, 1991).

⁷⁵⁷ Ministry of Agriculture, 1991, p. 10.

improve beef productivity. The new enclosure policy, I argue, led to further expropriation of land by the wealthy cattle holders, thus protecting the interests of the ruling elite to whom, implicitly, exclusion, control of land resources and opportunities to accumulate or increase wealth were more important as driving forces of policy than the stated issues of overstocking, overgrazing and the degradation of the commonage.⁷⁵⁸ This government of cattle holding elites thus drew on authoritative claims of environmental science to construct discourses of the irresponsible communal farmer and state's betterment to legitimate its administrative control of formerly community-controlled range resources. A commercial farmer in Bobirwa, and now Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Minerals Energy and Water Resources, recently demonized indigenous farming methods as wasteful and extolled the virtues of commercial enterprise. Talking at a recent district agricultural fair in Bobonong, he glorified government for "creating a conducive environment for ranching." He also told the fair: "Botswana's cattle farming depends on those people who have been allocated large scales of farmland to develop and manage into more productive lands."⁷⁵⁹

Combined with the TGLP's prescription of a five-mile distance between private boreholes, the NPAD further contracted the commonage and exposed communal farmers to the whims of nature. Since each borehole owner obtained exclusive rights over the land surrounding his borehole, the five-mile distance prescription effectively bestowed rights of ownership upon wealthy farmers over five miles of grazing land from their boreholes. The exclusion of poor farmers from borehole technology and the TGLP laws

⁷⁵⁸ Pauline Peters, *Dividing the Commons*

⁷⁵⁹ "Botswana Agriculture contributes 3% to GDP", *Botswana Daily News*, July 4, 2007.

governing groundwater development and land rights restricted mobility of herds in communal areas and therefore confined poor farmers to lands of marginal quality.

The reduction in mobility and the fixity of herds in small marginal lands was not necessarily a result of lack of space. Bobirwa is made up of diverse ecological zones, some suitable for raising livestock because of palatable grasses and water; others good for crop cultivation because of fertile soils; and the remainder unsuitable for neither of the two farming practices. Reduction of mobility and fixity of herds to small areas was therefore a result of the location of private farms and boreholes in areas formerly considered seasonal and common pastures. “This conversion of seasonal pastures into permanent grazing”, says Pauline Peters of the syndicated borehole drilling in the South-eastern Botswana, “eliminated seasonally vacant areas, thus disrupting herd movement.”⁷⁶⁰ Mahmood Mamdani also brings to our attention the damaging effects of controlled cattle movements on African pastoralist economies.⁷⁶¹ Such restrictions of mobility “pronounced a death sentence” on cattle in communal areas during droughts as farmers had lost access to seasonal grazing lands to which they could relocate their animals.⁷⁶²

Motsamai, a Mmirwa (one of the Babirwa) of Tsetsebjwe used to be a *mokhumi*, wealthy herd owner, in the 1970s who practised open range farming like the majority of his peers. This period had experienced good rains almost every year following the devastating droughts and famines of the 1960s.⁷⁶³ The good rains revitalised the range

⁷⁶⁰ Pauline Peters, *Dividing the Commons*, p. 111.

⁷⁶¹ Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (London: James Currey, 199), pp. 165-168.

⁷⁶² Interview with Gabatshabe Baipidi and Bathaloganyi Phuthego, Mogapi, December 25, 2010; Thaloganyo Goromente and Moreki Montsosi, Bobonong, March 13, 2011.

⁷⁶³ Lionel Cliffe and Richard Moorson, “Rural Class Formation”, p. 39

and therefore livestock populations picked up. As Richard White aptly notes, in Botswana, there is a synergistic relationship between rainfall and livestock populations.⁷⁶⁴ Bobirwa has ecological zones, which are endowed with vegetation of high nutritional value, including sweet palatable grasses that dominate the landscape in times of good rains.

Motsamai, who had accumulated his wealth through inheritance and by reinvesting his migrant wages in cattle, depended on the high quality of the range during these times of good rains to build more herds. His cattle had the freedom to move around the landscape, exploiting these zones of high productivity, thus allowing them to maximise food intake. At the same time, such freedom of movement ensured that this fragile environment was able to support growing populations of animals because any increase in the quality of pasture raised birth rates.⁷⁶⁵ Motsamai, however, lost his social position of a *mokhumi* in the 1980s with the implementation of the TGLP and its enclosure rules, which coincided with a long and insidious drought.

Now destitute, Motsamai lives on monthly food rations provided by the Department of Social Security. When I asked him what happened to his wealth, he responded with resignation: “*ke ne ke na le dikgomo mme ka go thoka phulo, tsa thothorega ke tala* (I had cattle but no pasture, and they all died of hunger).”⁷⁶⁶ According to the Babirwa, *khumo mathare ya thothorega*, or “wealth is like dry leaves that fall to the ground.” This analogy symbolizes the ability of cattle wealth, just like the leaves of trees, to regrow during the wet season, to replenish itself depending on the

⁷⁶⁴ Richard White, “Livestock Development and Pastoral Production, p. 6.

⁷⁶⁵ Richard White, “Livestock Development”, p. 10.

⁷⁶⁶ Interview with Motsamai, Tsetsebjwe, August 2, 2011. Some of my other interviewees also confirmed corroborated Motsamai’s story and confirmed that many households lost their cattle to shortage of dryland grazing. Interview with Joseph Galebotse and Kagiso Modibedi, Gobojango, June 4, 2011.

availability of water and grazing. But, while the Babirwa cattle “fell like dry leaves” during the 1980s-1990s drought, herd regeneration became ever more difficult because of a contracted and increasingly less productive commonage, a problem which the Department of Agriculture represented as the consequence of overstocking.⁷⁶⁷

Such irreversible losses shifted the meaning of *khumo mathare ya thothorega*. Historically it expressed the idea of disequilibrium, which range ecologists have rightly argued, was the cornerstone of Southern African range management systems whereby being wealthy and being poor were reversible social categories depending on climate and ecological variability.⁷⁶⁸ From the 1980s, the boundaries between the *bakhumi* (the wealthy) and the *bakhumanegi* (the poor) became rigid and permanent. *Khumo mathare ya thothorega* became an expression of the permanence of poverty. This was a transformation from the pre-existing social mobility where the boundaries between being poor and rich were fluid to a more rigid class hierarchy. This expression became a warning that in an uncertain environment of drought and disease, and skewed land policies, people can easily lose their pastoral investments and become poor overnight. Motsamai’s story of “riches to rags” is a typical example of how modernist policies have destroyed the Babirwa’s drought-coping strategies in a fragile ecology, and condemned their cattle to the whims of nature. Despite dramatic fluctuations of cattle populations since the end of the nineteenth century, the Babirwa had previously negotiated periodic ecological collapses through mobility as the principal drought-coping strategy and herd

⁷⁶⁷ Government of Botswana, *Selebi Phikwe District Livestock Censuses, 1986-1990* (Gaborone: Government Printer); Government of Botswana, *Botswana Agricultural Statistics, 1980-1986* (Gaborone: Government Printer).

⁷⁶⁸ See for example, Kreike, Emmanuel, “De-Globalisation and Deforestation in Colonial Africa: Closed Markets, the Cattle Complex, and Environmental Change in North-Central Namibia, 1890-1990”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 35, no. 1 (2009), pp. 81-98; Ben Cousins, “Livestock Production and Common Property Struggles in South Africa’s Agrarian Reform”, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 23, no. 2/3 (1996), pp. 166-208.

management technique. But post-colonial laws, which promoted the fencing off of the commonage, completely sedentarized herding and severely undercut the Babirwa's traditional response strategies to environmental shocks.⁷⁶⁹

Considering that most of the cattle owning elites were top BDP cadres and citizen government officials, post-colonial grazing land policy served the commercial interests of a political elite, who were not even based in the rural areas, contrary to Seretse Khama's vision of a rural masculine society at independence.⁷⁷⁰ By dispossessing communal farmers of their grazing lands and making their animals increasingly vulnerable to drought and disease in a nation where masculine identity was shaped by ownership of cattle, the TGLP turned many Babirwa men into the *bakhumanegi* and therefore feminized them while producing an elitist urban masculinity. The urbanization of Botswana's cattle elite thus reconstructed the rural areas as spaces of poverty where, in Babirwa nomenclature, *batho ba sule ba tsamaya* or "all were walking dead."⁷⁷¹

Expressions of "*re sule*", or "we are dead", profoundly resonated in most of my interviews whenever I raised questions about local peoples' feelings about massive losses to drought and disease: "I am only alive because I am talking to you now", says Gabatshabe Baipidi, "without cattle, I am a dead man."⁷⁷² To Dikgang Montsosi and Bathaloganyi Phuthego, "*mothoka kgomo ke mo kang a sule* (he who does not have cattle is as good as dead)."⁷⁷³ Such poignant examples of people's ability to walk while dead

⁷⁶⁹ MBK Darkoh and JE Mbaiwa, "Globalization and the Livestock Industry in Botswana", *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, vol. 23, no. 2 (2002), pp. 149-166.

⁷⁷⁰ Seretse Khama, *From the Frontline*, pp. 322-324; Seretse Khama, "A Statement of Progress", p. 6.

⁷⁷¹ Interview with Interview with Gabatshabe Baipidi, Mogapi, December 25, 2010; Mbat Mashaba, Molaladau, July 15, 2011.

⁷⁷² Interview with Gabatshabe Baipidi and Bathaloganyi Phuthego, Mogapi, December 25, 2010.

⁷⁷³ Interview with Bathaloganyi Phuthego, Mogapi, December 25, 2010; Dikgang Montsosi, Bobonong, July 10, 2011; Thaloganyo Goromente, Bobonong March 13, 2011; Kgosi Mirwa Malema, Bobonong, February 9, 2011.

are expressions of the threat of “social death” whereby state policy destroys the social fabric and spares human bodies.⁷⁷⁴ With the death of cattle eroding forms of sustenance, the impoverished households became, as the expression, *re sule*, indicates, haunted by the specter of physical death. But the Babirwa countered responded to the threat “social death” by entering *angst*: that collective state of mind where people maintain hope in a seemingly hopeless situation. That is, while the Babirwa were aware of their perilous position as far as herd ownership was concerned, they also had hope that they could recover their past prosperity because, as a Sebirwa idiom goes, *ga gona kgomo ya boroko*, or “sleep does not produce cattle.”⁷⁷⁵

As a result, many of the men migrated to the urban areas to look for wage employment, disregarding Seretse Khama’s 1970s rhetoric about rural prosperity and masculinity.⁷⁷⁶ Once again imagining migrant labor as a strategy for herd recovery, many Babirwa men and women reinvented the colonial migrant labor strategy by migrating internally to the emerging urban areas, particularly the copper mining town of Selebi Phikwe, about seventy miles west of Bobirwa. The 1981 and 1991 population census statistics for Bobirwa revealed that on average every household had two and three males respectively living in towns across the country.⁷⁷⁷

⁷⁷⁴ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982). See also Veena Das, “Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain,” in Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock (eds.), *Social Suffering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 78.

⁷⁷⁵ Interview with Bathaloganyi Phuthego, Mogapi, December 25, 2010; Dikgang Montsosi, Bobonong, July 10, 2011; Thaloganyo Goromente, Bobonong March 13, 2011.

⁷⁷⁶ Seretse Khama, “A Statement of Progress and Policy,” *Kutlwano*, May 1970, p. 6.

⁷⁷⁷ Republic of Botswana, *1991 Population and Housing Census: □Administrative/Technical Report and National Statistical Tables*. (Gaborone: □Central Statistics Office, 1991), pp. 107-110; Republic of Botswana, *1981 Population and Housing Census: □Administrative/Technical Report and National Statistical Tables*. (Gaborone: Central Statistics Office), p. 21. Oral sources are also suggestive of high migrations of Babirwa men and women who went to look for jobs in the urban areas. I have experienced these migrations as many of my relatives who migrated to Selebi Phikwe in the 1980s have since settled permanently there.

Like in colonial times, urban wage employment became a route to manhood. Money earned became central to most social, cultural and material needs. The “cattle without legs” that were invented in the 1930s-1960s (see chapter 4) became ever more influential in creating social networks and in the reproduction of wealth and power. But the fact most males had moved into urban spaces buttressed the urbanization of masculinity as the new migrants, despite reinvesting in cattle, spent the better part of the year at work and therefore graduated into absentee urban farmers. This social transformation undermined rural masculinity. Most of who remained in rural settings were impoverished men, such as Motsamai, who were therefore less masculine according to the Babirwa’s pastoralist ethos.

Droughts, Disease, and Poverty

According to a collaborative study by the Food Studies Group of the University of Oxford and the Botswana Government, between 1978 and the early 1990s post-colonial Botswana experienced one of the longest spells of periodic rain failure, coinciding with major social, economic and cultural transformations.⁷⁷⁸ Inadequate and ill-timed rainfall combined with high temperatures to undercut crop cultivation, undermine pasture regeneration and maintenance, and inhibit the recharge of ground water supplies. The result was a prolonged and insidious drought that almost wiped out all the cattle, particularly in eastern Botswana.⁷⁷⁹ The loss of cattle and drastically reduced crop yields produced conditions for successive famines, causing government to embark on a massive

⁷⁷⁸ The Food Studies Group, University of Oxford, Report on the Evaluation of the Drought Relief and Recovery Programme, 1982-1990 (Gaborone: Government Printer, 1990), p. 1.

⁷⁷⁹ “Alec Campbell, “The 1960s Drought in Botswana”, in Madalon T. Hintchey (eds.), *Proceedings of the Symposium on Drought in Botswana* (Gaborone: The Botswana Society and Clark University Press, 1979), pp. 98-109.

drought relief program, called *namola leuba*, literally meaning “that which rescues people from drought.”⁷⁸⁰

Being a labor-based relief program, *namola leuba* further accelerated the monetization of Botswana’s rural economies and thus contributed to the decline of cattle farming. As one of the driest places in the country, Bobirwa became the central focus of *namola leuba*.⁷⁸¹ According to a study conducted in 1992 by a former colonial geologist who spent thirteen years working for a mineral prospecting company in the Bangwato Reserve, Bobirwa is located at low altitude in a major river valley with an annual rainfall of about 350 mm.⁷⁸² This low amount of rainfall is also characteristic of the Kgalagadi District, in the Kalahari Desert to the west of the country. The low amount of rainfall therefore makes Bobirwa one of the driest places in eastern Botswana (see map 4).⁷⁸³

The area is also characterized by temporal and spatial climatic variation, making availability of water and pastures uneven. Rainfall varies considerably, not only between years, but also from amounts and places. These unpredictable climatic conditions often have adverse, and sometimes disastrous, consequences for grass growth and water sources, thus leading to emaciation of livestock. Despite free access to communal resources, farmers often incurred losses to natural misfortunes even in pre-colonial times. Nevertheless, successive droughts were typically separated by a return of rainy periods, even though brief at times, which helped to regenerate pasture and replenish herds in time for the next period of stress.

⁷⁸⁰ The Food Studies Group, University of Oxford, Report on the Evaluation of the Drought Relief.

⁷⁸¹ The Food Studies Group, University of Oxford, Report on the Evaluation of the Drought Relief.

⁷⁸² Graham MacLeod, “Environmental Change at Bobonong in the Central District, Eastern Botswana”, *Botswana Notes and Records*, vol. 24 (1992), p. 96.

⁷⁸³ John Reader, *Africa: A Biography of the Continent* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1997), p. 306.

By the second half of the 1970s, however, the TGLP had transformed Babirwa's pastoral property regimes, thus intensifying the effects of drought. Communal grazing lands had undergone partial privatization and the entire land tenure system converted to open access situations as the land boards' allocation procedures gave every citizen the right to use land anywhere in the country without regard for ethnic identity. The new land policies emphasized the national identity of Botswana citizens as opposed to individual ethnic identities. Ethnicity could no longer be used to prevent someone from settling in a specific geographic area and using resources there. This made it difficult for the Babirwa to deny the *batswakwa* (lit. people who come from afar), or foreigners, access to their lands anymore. Consequently, the transformation of the Babirwa communal rangelands into open access grazing and their partial privatization reduced the amount of grazing available and severely undercut livestock mobility.

The fencing component of TGLP and NPAD also stifled transhumance, or periodic mobility, and accelerated land degradation. Herding cattle back to the *masimo*, cultivation fields, following the rains and after harvesting had been top priorities for crop production and for the survival of cattle in the dry season for generations. Enclosures, however, cut off herds from the *masimo*. This deprived the cattle of the *magola*, winter forage produced by crop residue. The boundary fences between the grazing lands and the *masimo* also deprived the fields of manure from cattle dung. Effectively, such rigid boundaries between cattle raising and crop production – most importantly due to the fencing component and narrowing definitions agricultural work that came with modernization – undermined the pre-colonial integrated crop-livestock farming, which previously enabled pastoralism and cultivation to complement each other and thus ensure

the security of household subsistence. Many Babirwa households that depended on cattle as draught animals for cultivation faced the prospect of subsistence crises even in times of good rains because the cattle were cut off from the fields by the fences.

Accompanying drought were frequent foot and mouth (FMD) epidemics, a disease the Babirwa named *mamenze*, or mouth sores, because of its tendency to cause lesions on the mouths of cattle. The memories of people dying of venereal syphilis caused the Babirwa to dread FMD for, as *ngaka ya dikgomo* Moraka Mohwasa said, “*mamenze* of the cattle are as incurable as the *mamenze* that affected people in the past.”⁷⁸⁴ Bovine epidemics have always been a feature of Bobirwa’s veterinary landscape. A number of animal pandemics in Southern Africa have tended to move from north to south since the late nineteenth century, with most of them entering Botswana through its northeasterly border with Zimbabwe.⁷⁸⁵ Bobirwa occupies much of the eastern border with Zimbabwe and has therefore always been susceptible to frequent outbreaks of epidemics of animal diseases.

It was through the eastern border with Zimbabwe that FMD first entered Botswana in the 1930s, when it brought the country’s cattle industry to a standstill as South Africa imposed embargoes on Botswana’s cattle exports.⁷⁸⁶ By the 1950s, veterinary cordon fences were erected throughout the country to address its growing threat.⁷⁸⁷ As FMD outbreaks became more frequent in an increasingly dry country from the 1980s, cattle succumbed easily to disease because their immune systems were already

⁷⁸⁴ Interview with Moraka Mohwasa, Mabolwe, July 10, 2011.

⁷⁸⁵ See for example, Gary Marquardt, “Water, Wood and Wild Animal Populations: Seeing the Spread of Rinderpest through the Physical Environment in Bechuanaland, 1896”, *South African Historical Journal*, vol. 53 (2005), pp. 73-98.

⁷⁸⁶ Steven Ettinger, “South Africa’s Weight Restrictions on Cattle Exports from Bechuanaland, 1924-1941”, *Botswana Notes and Records*, vol. 4 (1972), pp. 21-30.

⁷⁸⁷ J. Falconer, “A History of Botswana Veterinary Services, 1905-1966”, *Botswana Notes and Records*, vol. 3 (1971), pp. 74-78.

compromised by irregular water and food intake.⁷⁸⁸ To protect an industry that was becoming derelict, the government imposed stricter veterinary controls by increasing border security and building more veterinary cordon fences to stop any movement of cattle during outbreaks (see Map 5).

But such stricter veterinary controls have done very little to stop FMD infections. The cordon fence has had far reaching implications for open range farming in Bobirwa as it has completely enclosed the whole of Bobirwa and caused restrictions on livestock movements (see map 5). Such restrictions have deprived the Babirwa of the space and flexibility they had always used to negotiate stresses through mobility. Mobility has always been the underlying strategy in the utilization of this fragile pastoral ecology as it enabled efficient use of dispersed rangeland resources and offered farmers an escape route from environmental stresses. The complete enclosure of Bobirwa, aggravated by the imposition of veterinary cordon fences, thus undermined the communal land ownership tenure system of the pre-colonial times, which previously enabled the Babirwa farmers to exploit temporal and spatial resources.⁷⁸⁹ The Babirwa had, through such utilization of dispersed resources, previously circumvented epidemics by moving their cattle out of the locus of disease.

While these veterinary controls ensured that diseases were not propagated to unaffected areas, in Bobirwa where the commonage had become small, the localized outbreaks and the contagion spread quickly within such crowded spaces. In essence, the

⁷⁸⁸ Botswana has increasingly become drier in recent years. See for example, J.B. Gewald, "El Negro, El Nino: Witchcraft and the Absence of Rain in Botswana", *African Affairs*, vol. 100, no. 401 (2001), pp. 555-580; N. Batisani and B. Yamal, "Rainfall Variability and Trends in Semi-arid Botswana: Implications for Climate Change Adaptation Policy", *Applied Geography*, vol. 30, no. 4 (2010), pp. 483-489.

⁷⁸⁹ Interview with Basupi, Dau-e-meja-leebana cattle posts, December 15, 2010; Odirile Baakile and Diakanyo Molebatsi, Tsetsebjwe, July 1, 2011.

veterinary cordon fence produced an image of the Babirwa cattle as a source of disease and an obstacle to the advancement of the beef industry. As farmer Mooketsi Maunatlala of Thune Cattle Posts metaphorically says of the cordon fence in Bobirwa, “*tereta e ya lwala*” (this fence is diseased).⁷⁹⁰ Thus, to the Babirwa, the fence was erected to wipe out their cattle with disease. To most of them, FMD only occurs within the confines of the fence.⁷⁹¹ By constraining the movement of cattle, the cordon fence has further condemned the Babirwa to the whims of nature and therefore pathologized cattle raising in their area.

The death of many cattle due to starvation and FMD epidemics has produced a different tragedy to that professed by alarmist theories of the “tragedy of the commons” and land degradation. For the Babirwa, the fencing off of communal areas and the transformation of their pastures into open access took away important sources of livelihoods and therefore produced the “tragedy of the commoners” and not of the commons. This new tragedy has been expressed in words and in actions. At the height of the drought, when cattle were dying in large numbers, many men lost their manliness.⁷⁹² They flocked back into the village, abandoning their *moraka*, cattle post, a symbol of masculine identity, thus confirming Bessie Head’s novelistic representation of a dying pastoralist fabric.⁷⁹³ Men like Motsamai of Tsetsebjwe, whose story I tell above, were reduced to boys.

⁷⁹⁰ Interview with Mooketsi Maunatlala, Bobonong, February 6, 2011.

⁷⁹¹ Interview with Mooketsi Maunatlala, Bobonong, February 6, 2011; Basupi, Dau-e-meja-leebana cattle posts, December 15, 2010; Odirile Baakile and Diakanyo Molebatsi, Tsetsebjwe, July 1, 2011.

⁷⁹² Official records show that on average, depending on the wealth they held, households lost between ten and fifty head of cattle between 1985 and 1990. *Botswana Agricultural Statistics, 1980-1986; Selebi Phikwe District Livestock Censuses, 1986-1990.*

⁷⁹³ Bessie Head, *When Rain Clouds Gather* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1968).

According to the Babirwa pastoral traditions, men who owned no cattle or the *bakhumanegi* were categorized together with boys as *bashimana*, or those whose manhood was still undeveloped or the weaklings. From the 1980s, such men became known as the *pharameseseng* (lit. he who succumbs to dresses), “or a weakling.”⁷⁹⁴ This expression was a metaphorical ridicule of men by women, who saw impoverished men through the lens of helpless and starving cattle. The prefix, *phara-* is derived from the verb, *pharama*, which literally translates into “collapse.” This verb is applicable to cattle dying of hunger during a drought period when people will refer to their cattle with a sense of resignation as *di a pharama*, or they are collapsing. The suffix, *-meseseng*, comes from *mesese* or dresses thus representing men as weaklings who have lost control of the family and self-esteem to women.

Men, who until the 1980s, used the cattle post as a masculine space and contributed their agricultural share of labor by cultivating fields with cattle, now spent all their time at home around women. With very little knowledge of food production outside cattle keeping, they depended on women for their subsistence needs. Most of them worked alongside women in the *namola leuba* scheme. Many of these impoverished men, however, deplored doing *namola leuba* work because, as former colonial tax collector, Baagi Ngwako, explained, any job that could not replenish herds deprived men of their *bonna*, masculinity, and reduced them to *baana* (women, children and poor men).⁷⁹⁵

The government designed the *namola leuba* program to improve rural income generation, offset food shortages and prevent famines. It was first and foremost a food

⁷⁹⁴ Interview with Diakanyo Molebatsi, Tsetsebjwe, July 1, 2011; Moloko Makgoba, Sefhophe, December 25, 2010; Mbat Mashaba, Molaladau, July 15, 2011.

⁷⁹⁵ Interview with Baagi Ngwako, Bobonong, June 12, 2011. This testimony was confirmed by Dikgang Montsosi and James Sekoba, Bobonong, July 10, 2011.

handout designed to temporarily relieve the rural poor of hunger during a drought. Men and women were employed on village development projects, earning nominal wages to help households secure food. The fact that this drought relief program had little monetary remuneration, and had no focus on long term economic empowerment, caused men to despise it. In particular, men who were dispossessed of their pastoral wealth feared that *namola leuba* would construct them as government dependents and thus transforming them into *baana*, or “children”, a lowly social status historically occupied by women, children and men who owned no cattle. The men’s imaginings of *namola leuba* as a demasculinizing, impoverishing and feminizing phenomenon found expression in the label: *pharameseseng*.

An equally large number of women, however, empathized with their menfolk, sharing with them the pain of losing herds. To *mosadimogolo* (old woman) Mbat Mashaba, the sight of men, who were previously wealthy, working alongside women was depressing because it symbolized the end of an era of extensive cattle herding. “*Dikgomo di ne di thothoregile*”, or “cattle had dropped like dry leaves of trees [or were finished] leaving men poor and helpless”⁷⁹⁶, she concluded. With men increasingly becoming dependents of women, in terms of household subsistence, the social hierarchy was inverted, and at least for the 1980s, the old adage, *ga di nke di etelelwa ke manamagadi pele, di ka wela ka lemena*, became obsolete. Literally, this saying translates into: “herds led by females will fall into an endless pit”, meaning that they will undergo irreversible decline in numbers.

Historically, the idea of possessing cattle and the social power and material things that cattle could provide were the domain and concern of men. A man’s possession of

⁷⁹⁶ Interview with Mbat Mashaba, Molaladau, July 15, 2011.

large herds was associated with success, privilege and power. As a result, when applied to social relations, the expression, *ga di nke di etelelwa ke manamagadi pele, di ka wela ka lemena*, effectively undermined women's leadership qualities. By representing women as poor leaders this expression enabled men to justify their control over important decisions pertaining to the management of family property, thus making sure that women would be deprived access to ownership and control of cattle.

Nevertheless, with the men having lost their instruments of power, the Babirwa women became leaders in their own right. Some of them appropriated *namola leuba* work as a space of social and economic power, taking up leadership positions as supervisors in the drought relief works and earning better wages. The monetary gains also transformed such women into household leaders, making important decisions, most of which would have been deferred to men under normal circumstances.⁷⁹⁷ The worsening poverty levels and the loss of economic power and masculine identities, combined with the dread of falling into the perilous social category of being *pharameseseng*, or "he who succumbs to dresses", drove many former herd boys and wealthy men into wage work.⁷⁹⁸

At this time, Botswana was undergoing massive urbanization. Previous analyses of urbanization in Botswana show that in the 1960s only about 1.0% of Botswana's population lived in urban centers.⁷⁹⁹ But after independence the rate of urbanization accelerated, primarily due to rural-urban migration. The proportion of the urban population increased from 9.3% in 1971 to 17.7% in 1991, with the average annual urban

⁷⁹⁷ Interview with former *namola leuba* project supervisors, Kebonang Masilo and Maemo Mosedame, Molaladau, July 16, 2011.

⁷⁹⁸ Interview with Kebonang Masilo and Maemo Mosedame, Molaladau, July 16, 2011.

⁷⁹⁹ T.D. Gwebu, "Internal Migration and Regional Development in Botswana" in *Internal Migration and Regional Development in Africa*, Regional Institute for Population Studies Monograph Series, No. 2 (Legon, Ghana: RIPS, 1981).

population growth rate also growing from 10.1% in the period 1964-71, to 11.8% in 1971-81 and 13.8% in 1981-1991.⁸⁰⁰ Part of this dramatic growth in urbanism was a result of the rise of mining towns, whose population increased from 40,264 in 1981 to 62,015 in 1991.⁸⁰¹ Many sought employment in the now prospering towns, particularly the nearby copper mining town of Selebi Phikwe. Just like during the labor migrations of the colonial period, mine work once more replaced cattle herding and *boswa* (inheritance) as initiation into manhood and the route to building herds for young men respectively.⁸⁰² Consequently, cash retained its symbolic value as *dikgomo tse di senang maoto*, or “cattle without legs.” In the absence of cattle, cash continued to grow symbolically as *magadi*, or bridewealth, and a reproducer of wealth and power.

The new migrations did not, however, exclude women. In fact, women from Botswana were already in the habit of migrating to the mining towns of South Africa as early as the 1930s.⁸⁰³ Now most of them migrated internally. In 2000 the South African Migration Project conducted a survey that showed that more than one-fifth of the 50.2% of females living in Botswana’s urban areas between 1981 and 1991 were rural-urban migrants compared with 9.2% of males.⁸⁰⁴ Predominant in these female migrations were women who were in danger of social exclusion, such as widows and the *mahetwa* (lit. the passed by), women who had passed marriageable age. Added to these socially excluded

⁸⁰⁰ E.K. Campbell, “Population Distribution and Urbanization” in Republic of Botswana, *1991 Population and Housing Census Dissemination Seminar*, p. 65; Republic of Botswana, *1991 Population and Housing Census*, p. 107.

⁸⁰¹ Republic of Botswana, *1981 Population and Housing Census*, p. 21; Republic of Botswana, *1991 Population and Housing Census*, p. 208.

⁸⁰² Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema and headmen of arbitration, Onketetse Serumola and Adam Masilo, Bobonong, February 9, 2011; Odirile Baakile, Tsetsebjwe, July 1, 2011.

⁸⁰³ Camilla Cockerton, “Slipping Through their Fingers: Women’s Migration and Tswana Patriarchy”, *Botswana Notes and Records*, vol. 34 (2002), pp. 37-53; Camilla Cockerton, “Less a Barrier, More a Line: The Migration of Bechuanaland Women to South Africa, 1850-1930”, *Journal of Historical Geography*, vol. 3 (1996), pp. 291-307.

⁸⁰⁴ John Oucho, Eugene Campbell and Elizabeth Mukamaambo, “Botswana: Migration Perspectives and Prospects”, in *Southern African Migration Project* (2000), p. 10.

women were young educated women who were looking for urban jobs.⁸⁰⁵

The intersection between urbanization and poverty broke down social mechanisms of control as men and women became independent town dwellers, where they could engage freely in socially unsanctioned relationships beyond the gaze of the village elders. This led to changing sexual morality, with people having multiple and concurrent relationships. The mining town of Orapa, for instance, attained a masculinized identity, being popularly labeled a “bulls’ camp”, because of the perceived disproportionately high numbers of men. This demographic imbalance may have led to women having multiple sexual partners for financial gain through a new form of gift-giving called *go becha*, in which miners were (in)famously known to give large sums of money to women to impress them. As historian, John Iliffe notes, “Botswana’s late twentieth-century sexual order originated as an adaptation to education and labour migration.”⁸⁰⁶ The increasingly unrestricted sexual relationships contributed to the spread of HIV and AIDS in both the rural and urban settings as migrants made temporary retreats between these spaces.⁸⁰⁷

Botswana’s migration dynamics are similar to those of other countries in the region where rural-urban migrations are circulatory. This trend has historical salience. Specifically, it has roots in the colonial contract labor migration that put great emphasis on temporary urban residence for the African.⁸⁰⁸ This political economy of restricting

⁸⁰⁵ John Oucho, Eugene Campbell and Elizabeth Mukamaambo, “Botswana: Migration Perspectives”, p. 10.

⁸⁰⁶ John Iliffe, *The African AIDS Pandemic: A History* (Oxford: James Currey, 2006), p. 41.

⁸⁰⁷ John Iliffe, *The African AIDS Pandemic*, p. 40.

⁸⁰⁸ These contractual restrictions ensured that all Africans had as their permanent abodes, the rural areas, only entering the white dominated South African industrial spaces as laborers. See among others, J. Ferguson, “Mobile Workers, Modernist Narratives: a Critique of the Historiography of Transition on the Zambian Copperbelt”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 16, no. 3 (1990), pp. 385-412; Wazha G.

people to the countryside was to be re-appropriated and reconstituted by the post-colonial government, with the first president, Seretse Khama, demonizing permanent urban residence and extolling the virtues of rural enterprise.⁸⁰⁹ To date, Botswana's rural-urban migration remains largely spatio-temporal. There is a continuing duality of households, in which the rural dwelling is the quintessential retirement home, although the two abodes are mutually supportive. A recent study of the demographics of rural linkages of urban dwellers has revealed that very few Botswana are permanently domiciled in the urban areas and that many of them maintain strong ties with their rural homes.⁸¹⁰

Like during in the 1930s-1960s, when returning migrant laborers from South Africa spread the tuberculosis contagion in rural areas (see chapter 4), the post-independence circulatory migrations became a major contributor to AIDS transmission in rural Botswana. Botswana began to feel the full impact of HIV/AIDS from the end of the late 1980s amid the devastating drought, described above, and "great mobility, extreme income inequality, little female opportunity and high levels of sexually transmitted diseases."⁸¹¹ These conditions, together with lack of information and prevailing cultural explanations of disease, accelerated the spread of HIV and AIDS.

Many *dingaka* professed their ability to heal the sick, explaining AIDS in cultural terms as *boswagadi*, an affliction men contracted by having sexual relationships with "uncleansed" widowed women.⁸¹² As the following paragraph will argue, such an

Morapedi, "Migrant Labour and the Peasantry in the Bechuanaland Protectorate, 1930-1965", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 25, no. 2 (June 1999) pp. 197-214.

⁸⁰⁹ Seretse Khama, "A Statement of Progress and Policy," *Kutlwano*, May 1970, p. 6.

⁸¹⁰ Gwen Lesetedi, "Rural-urban Linkages as an Urban Survival Strategy Among Urban Dwellers in Botswana: The Case of Broadhurst Residents", *Journal of Political Ecology*, vol. 10, no. 1 (2003), pp. 37-45.

⁸¹¹ John Iliffe, *The African AIDS Pandemic*, pp. 42-43.

⁸¹² Interview with *ngaka* Sekonopo, Mahalapye, August 22, 2011; *ngaka* Moraka Mohwasa, Mabolwe, July 10, 2011.

explanation was understandable given the demographics of the pandemic in the whole country and the symptoms its victims displayed. HIV/AIDS was preponderant among the most productive population in terms of work and sexual activity.⁸¹³ Its incidence was high in people aged between the ages eighteen to forty-nine, the majority of whom were females.⁸¹⁴ But official records show that AIDS mortality was higher among men due to their reluctance to utilize testing facilities and anti-retroviral therapy.⁸¹⁵ Many of them hid behind the cloak of the *boswagadi* explanation. AIDS symptoms themselves, particularly profuse coughing, loss of weight and swelling of limbs, resonated with the *boswagadi* explanation. Also, in Bobirwa, the *baswagadi*, or widowed women are conspicuously visible. They are identified by an exclusively female black attire of long dress and headscarf, which they wear for the entire mourning period lasting up to a year.

This visibility of widowed women also produced impressions of the genderedness of AIDS related deaths. For the local peoples, it appeared as if women were not dying. This image of the disproportionate gender demographics of AIDS mortality produced witchcraft explanations of the deaths. As Sean Redding argues, Southern African women are believed to possess occult powers and, in colonial South Africa, “widows and other women in the rural areas often bore the blame for deaths, social disruption, problems with livestock, and other familial disasters.”⁸¹⁶ Male family members, who lost brothers to the pandemic, explained death with the idiom of witchcraft belief and in most cases accusing

⁸¹³ A 2003 study in the densely populated mining town of Selebi-Phikwe showed an overall HIV/AIDS prevalence of 52.2%, the highest in the country. See, National AIDS Co-ordinating Agency, *Botswana 2003 Second Generation HIV/AIDS Surveillance* (NACA, 2003).

⁸¹⁴ National AIDS Co-ordinating Agency, *Botswana 2003 Second Generation HIV/AIDS Surveillance* (NACA, 2003).

⁸¹⁵ Government of Botswana, Central Statistics Office (CSO) 2008 statistics brief, *Botswana AIDS Impact Survey – preliminary results* (Gaborone: Ministry of Health, 2008).

⁸¹⁶ Sean Redding, *Sorcery and Sovereignty: Taxation, Power, and Rebellion in South Africa, 1880-1963* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006), pp. 168-170.

wives of bewitching their husbands. It was common to hear men murmuring during a funeral: “*o mmolaile*, she killed him.”⁸¹⁷ Such gendered expressions of witchcraft belief were primarily a result of the disruptions that migrant labor brought to gender roles as the wives of men who worked in urban areas became custodians of the families’ pastoral investments in the absence of their husbands. This shift in herd management and responsibility violated the historical position of men as the decision makers in herd management and disposal. As widows took complete control of what remained of the household pastoral investments, men felt increasingly threatened because ownership of cattle translated into social and material power.

The fact that AIDS patients had the tendency to cough profusely and were given Tuberculosis treatment also produced a pervasive sense of spiritual and material insecurity as people linked the deaths of young men and women to the witchcraft fears of the colonial period.⁸¹⁸ As a result, ideas of contagion and infection coexisted with interpretations of individual deaths, which were often attributed to pre-existing hostilities, envy and greed between families and neighbors. In chapter four, I show how in the 1960s spiritual and material insecurities arising from the genuine fear of witchcraft caused the Babirwa to seek occult explanations of inequalities in herd ownership during a time when Tuberculosis was claiming many lives.

Similarly, the incidence of the AIDS pandemic in Bobirwa (like in other parts of the country) was very uneven, with some homesteads incapacitated and others nearby

⁸¹⁷ Interview with Mbat Mashaba, Molaladau, July 15, 2011; Ketholegile Phuthego, Mogapi, December 25, 2011.

⁸¹⁸ Interview with *ngaka* Sekonopo, Mahalapye, August 22, 2011; *ngaka* Moraka Mohwasa, Mabolwe, July 10, 2011.

unaffected.⁸¹⁹ In most cases, the affected households were largely poor and the unaffected successful. Poverty, as former South African president, Thabo Mbeki, once warned, was responsible for the high AIDS related mortality rates in Southern African populations.⁸²⁰ For the Babirwa, poverty had both material and transcendental explanations. The sons of the Babirwa had a duty to work for their parents. Prior to the 1930s, they worked primarily as herders. But with the increase in wage work, sons brought money into the family and with it, food and material possessions. As a result the death of many young men and women deprived the Babirwa of the necessary social capital and material possessions.

The tendency of AIDS to affect disproportionately productive members of the community thus makes it an impoverishing disease. The long incubation period of many years when the victim contracts different kinds of infections and diseases had far reaching implications on people's pastoral investments. Cattle were sold to pay for transportation, food and medical expenses as families moved the sick across the country to the different medical practices. More cattle would be sold to pay for funeral expenses once the victim succumbed to the disease. These AIDS-induced disposals of cattle combined with drought, foot and mouth disease and theft to dispossess the Babirwa of their herds.

⁸¹⁹ Interview with Mbat Mashaba, Molaladau, July 15, 2011; Ketholegile Phuthego, Mogapi, December 25, 2011; Interview with *ngaka* Sekonopo, Mahalapye, August 22, 2011; *ngaka* Moraka Mohwasa, Mabolwe, July 10, 2011.

⁸²⁰ Mbeki's ideas on the intersection between AIDS and poverty were labeled denialist by apologist scholars of western biomedicine. See for example, Mandisa Mbali, AIDS Discourses and the South African State: Government Denialism and Post-apartheid AIDS Policy-making", *Transformation*, vol. 54 (2004), pp. 104-122.

“Wiping Off the Brand”: Popular Justice, Theft and Local Contestations of Institutionalized Law

In 2008, the Botswana Parliament debated a motion that sought to have cases of stock theft heard only in the customary courts. The motion came in the wake of complaints from rural communities across the country that the thefts of cattle had escalated because common law courts’ decisions were disproportionately benefitting the thieves. In tabling the motion, Member of Parliament, Pono Moatlhodi, argued that in the traditional Tswana justice systems, cases of cattle thefts were settled by the community at the *kgotla* because cattle were communal property because of the network of relationships they reproduced.⁸²¹ But the motion never passed because of constitutional and human rights concerns.⁸²² In Botswana’s dual legal system, where common law and customary law work in tandem, the customary courts and the magistrate courts can both handle livestock theft cases. However, the customary courts, the offices of which are the chiefs’ courts, or *kgotla*, do not allow the employment of legal representation and do not charge any form of legal fees.⁸²³ As a result, many accused persons who can afford legal fees often exercise their constitutional and legal right to have their cases heard by a magistrate.⁸²⁴

This flexibility has tended to disadvantage the Botswana’s non-literate communal farmers, who may not only not understand English, but are also unable to meet the financial aspect of the common law courts. On the other hand, however, Parliament dismissed localized ideas of justice and legal rights for purportedly being liable to conflict with international human rights norms and undermining the legitimacy of existing dispute justice systems in the country. For instance, forcing people to have their

⁸²¹ “Restricting livestock cases to *kgotla* is unconstitutional”, *Daily News*, March 17, 2008.

⁸²² “Cattle interests and human rights clash”, *Sunday Standard*, November 11, 2008; “Restricting livestock cases to *kgotla* is unconstitutional”, *Daily News*, March 17, 2008.

⁸²³ Botswana Constitution, section 10 (1), Customary Law Act of 1969, Section 32.

⁸²⁴ Botswana Constitution, section 10 (1), Customary Law Act of 1969, Section 37 (1).

cases heard in a court where they have no right to legal representation, the Minister of Justice, Defense and Security argued, was not only unconstitutional, but would also conflict with the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights to which Botswana is a signatory.⁸²⁵

Nonetheless, Moatlhodi's motion placed the crime of cattle theft within the realm of the cultures of Batswana communities. It confirmed an important observation made by social theorists that cattle in African society are "more than an adjunct of the family... bound not to an individual as stock valued at so much per head, but to the group."⁸²⁶ This communality of cattle and the crime of stealing them fall within the broader context of creative forms of power. It brings to our attention the local people's re-appropriation of their cultural repertoire to invent new, unofficial sources of power, with which to contest the institutionalized power of the state.⁸²⁷ It also unsettles the rigid duality of modernity/tradition, which is imbedded in the discourses of law in post-colonial Botswana. Writing about legal duality in South Africa, John and Jean Comaroff have eruditely demonstrated that despite the state's portrayal of itself as a legitimate authority to unite citizens and guarantee their "collective well-being", "universal liberal modernist law" is contested through cultural practices, which have diminished state monopoly over criminal justice.⁸²⁸ While this organized contestation of state power is not prevalent in

⁸²⁵ "Restricting livestock cases to kgotla is unconstitutional", *Daily News*, March 17, 2008.

⁸²⁶ R.M.G. Mtetwa, 'Myth or Reality: The 'Cattle Complex' in South East Africa, with Special Reference to Rhodesia, *Zambezia*, vol. vi, no. I (1978), p. 25

⁸²⁷ David L. Schoenbrun, *A Green Place, A Good Place: Agrarian Change, Gender and Social Identity in the Great Lakes Region to the 15th Century* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998); Feierman Steven, *Peasant Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); Mandala, Elias, *Work and Control in a Peasant Economy: A History of the Lower Tchiri Valley in Malawi, 1859-1960* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).

⁸²⁸ John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, "Criminal Justice, Cultural Justice: The Limits of Liberalism and the Pragmatics of Difference in the New South Africa", *American Ethnologist*, vol. 31, no. 2 (2004), pp. 188-204.

Botswana, the Babirwa have invented a culturally-specific form of alternative justice that primarily subverts official justice.

With the escalation of cattle thefts, the Babirwa perceived the existing official justice system as a failure. They also linked this “failure” of the justice system to the state’s modernist policies that privatized grazing lands and increased their herds’ vulnerability to ecological shocks. As a result, they invented creative ways with which to contest the state’s universalizing application of criminal justice and law on cattle theft cases. By the end of the twentieth century, the partial enclosures, for ranching and for disease control, had drastically reduced available communal grazing and completely halted all forms of animal mobility, thus increasing livestock vulnerability to drought and disease.⁸²⁹ The period beginning 1995, in particular, saw increased frequency in longer dry spells and droughts, undermining the capacity of grazing and water sources to regenerate themselves.⁸³⁰ In response, the Babirwa enlarged their previous coping strategy of minimal herding whereby the cattle would be released into the veld and be seen again for watering after a couple of days. Previously, however, this strategy thrived on abundant herding labor, with the herders making sure to enter the grazing areas to search for missing cattle. With many men having migrated to the urban areas to look for

⁸²⁹ Jaap Arntzen, Happy Fidzani and Gubungano Tachela, “Communal Rangelands in Botswana: less Subsistence, more Commerce and fewer Beneficiaries”, in *Global Change and Subsistence Rangelands in Southern Africa: Impacts of Climatic Variability and Resource Access on Rural Livelihoods*. Report of a Workshop on Southern African Rangelands Today and Tomorrow: Social Institutions for an Ecologically Sustainable Future (Gaborone, June 10-14, 1996). Global Change and Terrestrial Ecosystem (GCTE) Working Document 20.

⁸³⁰ A recent survey rated Bobirwa agro-pastoralists’ vulnerability to presently recurring droughts as the second highest in the country. See K. Mogotsi, M.M. Nyangito and D.M. Nyariki, “Vulnerability of Rural Agropastoral Households to Drought in Semi-arid Botswana”, *Livestock Research for Rural Development*, vol. 24, no. 10 (2012), unpaginated. See also May Mrema, “An Economic Analysis of the Utilisation of Donkeys in Botswana: The Past and the Future”, in P. Starkey and D. Fielding (eds.), *Donkeys, People and Development*. A Resource Book of the Animal Traction Network for Eastern and Southern Africa (Wageningen, Netherlands: ACP-EU Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation, 2000), p. 162.

wage work, tending the cattle was left to old men, who no longer had the strength to walk long distances searching for cattle, and women and children, who had little to no herding experience. As a result, other than dying of hunger and thirst, many cattle became vulnerable to theft.⁸³¹

The escalating thefts have dominated private newspapers since 2005, with officials calling Bobirwa the hub of cattle thefts in the country.⁸³² The same newspapers also carry the voices of the Babirwa farmers complaining about a justice system that has failed to protect them from theft.⁸³³ Their complaints are expressed in a conspiracy theory: “the law eats with the thieves”, which represents cattle theft as state-sanctioned banditry.⁸³⁴ The Babirwa see an intricate link between a failing justice system and government grazing land and veterinary policies. The images they create of the partial fencing of their communal lands, together with the inadequacy of the law to stop epidemics of thefts, are that of deliberate administrative machinery designed to divest them of their pastoral resources and circumscribe their ethnic identity, as the *Bakgomong*, to promote a Tswana national identity.⁸³⁵

The Babirwa’s imagery and interpretation of official law as a deliberate design to circumscribe their ethnicity is a representation of the dynamics and discourses of justice at the local level, articulating the expressed needs and perceptions of obscure

⁸³¹ Interview with Rashaso and Bathaloganyi Phuthego, Mogapi, December 25, 2010.

⁸³² Notable examples include: “Bobirwa leads in Rape and Stock Theft”, *Mmegi*, April 28, 2005; “Bobirwa District Tops in Stock Theft”, *Sunday Standard*, June 30, 2011; “Stock Theft on the Rise in Bobirwa”, *Mmegi*, June 8, 2012.

⁸³³ See among others, “Farmers Query Stock Theft Law”, *Mmegi*, September 18, 2008; “Justice System Helps to Raise Stock-theft”, *Mmegi*, June 4, 2010; “Photos Delay Stock Theft Case”, *Mmegi*, January 15, 2009.

⁸³⁴ Interview with Rashaso and Bathaloganyi Phuthego, Mogapi, December 25, 2010; Thaloganyi Goromente and Moreki Montsosi, Bobonong, March 13, 2011.

⁸³⁵ Interview with Dikgang Montsosi and James Sekoba, Bobonong, July 10, 2011; Gabatshabe Baipidi, Mogapi, December 25, 2010; Moraka Mohwasa, Mabolwe, July 10, 2011.

marginalized communities. Defining official law as “benefitting the thieves”, the Babirwa men invented *phimola-tshipi*, or “wiping out the brand”, a culturally specific legal imperative, which they used to contest state monopoly of criminal justice, with special reference to cattle theft cases.⁸³⁶ *Phimola-tshipi* is a kind of gendered group endeavor, whereby the thief is required by a council of men to return the stolen cattle and give the owner additional cattle as restitution. The cattle given as restitution are said to be “wiping out the thief’s brand from the stolen cattle.”⁸³⁷ *Phimola-tshipi*, oral sources indicate, has roots in a pre-colonial conflict resolution strategy called *phimola-dikeledi*, or “wiping out the tears.”⁸³⁸ Of uncertain origin, *phimola-dikeledi* may have arisen out of the need to regulate conflict and compensate people whose crops were damaged by livestock. In fact, the Sebirwa vernacular equivalent of the English term, “compensation”, is *phimola-dikeledi*, which entails restorative justice rather than retributive justice or punishment.

But *phimola-tshipi* is not in any way a romantic representation of the Babirwa’s rejection of social change and their attempt to restore a lost justice system. It is a new form of creative justice that, as Clifton Crais has suggested, “appropriates critical signs from various sites and contests the dominant order in order to become a space within which people imagine, communicate and enforce ideas and visions of society.”⁸³⁹

Phimola-tshipi is thus an important instrument which the Babirwa have used to challenge Botswana’s universalizing official juridical system. Broadly, it is one of the nuanced

⁸³⁶ Interview with Dikgang Montsosi and James Sekoba, Bobonong, July 10, 2011; Gabatshabe Baipidi, Mogapi, December 25, 2010; Moraka Mohwasa, Mabolwe, July 10, 2011.

⁸³⁷ Interview with headmen of arbitration, Onketetse Serumola and Adam Masilo, Bobonong, February 9, 2011; Rashaso and Bathaloganyi Phuthego, Mogapi, December 25, 2010; Thaloganyo Goromente and Moreki Montsosi, Bobonong, March 13, 2011.

⁸³⁸ Interview with Dikgang Montsosi and James Sekoba, Bobonong, July 10, 2011; Gabatshabe Baipidi, Mogapi, December 25, 2010; Moraka Mohwasa, Mabolwe, July 10, 2011.

⁸³⁹ Clifton Crais, “Of Men, Magic, and the Law: Popular Justice and the Political Imagination in South Africa”, *Journal of Social History*, vol. 32, no. 1 (1998), p. 49.

ways in which they have contested modernist epistemologies and policies that disregard local practical knowledges in the country. As a social site of negotiated settlements *phimola-tshipi* therefore falls within the broader context of people's courts. People's courts are unofficial judicial systems invented by local people who are discontented with the official juridical framework's disregard for conflict resolution in favor of punishment.⁸⁴⁰ The obscurity of such courts in Botswana's historiography results from scholars' focus on top down forms of justice justice defined by two state-controlled institutions, customary law and statutory law.⁸⁴¹ Such scholarly emphasis on official juridical systems has reified the tradition/modernity divide and therefore reinforced the state's equation of cultural and indigenous conceptions of law and justice with unreason and lack of progress.

It is this essentialist idea of the backwardness of community law that led to the state codifying and rigidifying customary law. The reduction of customary law to a written set of rules and sanctions has, in turn, undermined the essence and perceived fairness of customary justice by curtailing its constitutive features: flexible negotiation of laws and principles in the context of individual cases. While codifying customary law has kept it apace with Botswana's rapidly changing political and economic environment – by making sure that all communities followed standardized justice – it has also privileged certain classes of people and elites in the process of ascertaining the country's laws. It is

⁸⁴⁰ Clifton Crais, "Of Men, Magic, and the Law," pp. 49-72.

⁸⁴¹ Bojosi Otlhogile, "Criminal Justice and the Problems of a Dual Legal System in Botswana", *Criminal Law Forum*, vol. 4, no. 3 (1993), pp. 521-533; Bojosi Otlhogile, " A History of Botswana Through Case Law", *Pula: Botswana Journal of African Studies*, vol. 11, no. 1 (1997), pp. 82-95; Bankie Forster, "Introduction to the History of the Administration of the Justice System in Botswana", *Botswana Notes and Records*, vol. 13 (1981), pp. 89-100.

these elite versions of the law that is enshrined and perpetuated, diminishing the voices of the ordinary people.

A legacy of colonial and postcolonial government policies, the customary court system functions as a loosely governed unitary system, which incorporates legal principles and practices from both statutory and customary law. For this reason, the Babirwa imagine the boundaries between customary courts and the common law courts—and between customary and statutory law—as blurred, making customary law alien to their justice system. But their understanding of law as a socially mediated space of negotiated settlements was undermined by the codification of customary law as far back as the 1930s.⁸⁴² The imposition of rule-based systems of justice was part of the mandate of the colonial project to do away with timeless legal traditions, which in 1938, colonial anthropologist, Isaac Schapera, perceived as a discrete indigenous set of rules originating in the distant past and preserved within tribal communities.⁸⁴³ This primordial perception of a timeless legal tradition has been challenged by studies of African customary law in recent years. This body of scholarship argues that such systems were frequently produced by the interaction between colonial administrators and local chiefs and elders, in a process of inventing tradition that largely strengthened the control of elite men over classes of the underprivileged, such as subject communities, poor men, women and younger people.⁸⁴⁴

⁸⁴² *Native Tribunals Proclamation No. 75 of 1934.*

⁸⁴³ Isaac Schapera, *A Handbook of Tswana Law and Custom* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938).

⁸⁴⁴ S.E. Merry, "Law and Colonialism: Review Essay," *Law and Society Review*, vol. 25, no. 4 (1991), pp. 889–922; for a more recent revisionist view, see T. Spear, "Neo-Traditionalism and the Limits of Invention in British Colonial Africa," *Journal of African History*, vol. 44, no. 1 (2003), pp. 3–27; Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, pp. 51–57.

Discourses of the “invention” of the law, however, serve only to reinforce the Babirwa’s apprehension towards an alien justice system that disregards their collective and individual interests. Botswana’s justice system is characterized by an amalgamation of principles and procedures rather than a clear distinction between separate legal spheres. As they have historically, the chiefs’ courts essentially function as the lower rungs of the overall judicial and appellate hierarchy, rather than as a separate system, and handle criminal as well as civil cases. Consequently, from the Babirwa’s perspective, not only is customary and statutory law part of a single juridical system. Rather, these two judicial systems homogenize society under the cultural rubric of Tswana tradition and universal state laws.

Customary law itself cannot be simply defined as a set of rules and sanctions. As eminent figures in Bobirwa note, traditional Babirwa litigation is contingent upon people’s views, relationships, place, space and the circumstances surrounding the case.⁸⁴⁵ Customary law from the perspective of the Babirwa communities is an evolving and contextually defined process, involving flexibility, negotiation, and reinterpretation of a dynamic body of knowledge to reflect what is considered reasonable under the circumstances.⁸⁴⁶ Due to historical influences, in Botswana it is often conducted with reference to rules, but the application of such rules is inherently contestable. The court processes in which such contestation occurs are critical mechanisms to ensure that customary law and outcomes keep pace with local context and social change. By inventing *phimola-tshipi*, the Babirwa were expressing their preference for just such

⁸⁴⁵ Interview with former Bobirwa Member of Parliament, James Marutona; *Kgosi* Mmirwa Malema, February 9, 2011; *Kgosi* Kethhalefile Gabanamotse, Tsetsebjwe, July 2, 2011.

⁸⁴⁶ Wazha G. Morapedi, “Demise or Resilience?: Customary Law and Chieftaincy in Twenty-first Century Botswana”, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, vol. 28, no. 2 (2010), p. 218; Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, pp. 110-112.

negotiated, flexible settlements that take into account the particular social contexts of disputes, rather than any rigid application of written laws.

The standard means of combating the problem of livestock theft in Botswana is by concentrated police activity. Expectations from the state are that the police must apprehend the culprits and bring them to court for trial. Such a measure is of course necessary to preserve public security. But as a policy, it is not sufficient in itself to provide meaningful deterrence to the thieves and eradicate theft. In particular, the police, representing the official executors of a justice system conceived by the local communities to be benefitting the thieves, operate under severe handicaps of lack of appreciation and cooperation in Bobirwa.

During my research, Babirwa heavily criticized the police and the courts at all levels for what they viewed as increasing prevalence of thefts, bribery, favoritism, and excessive delays, which significantly disadvantage the poor. Such criticisms (both perceived and real) are particularly directed at the government courts and they are expressed in words as *molao o ja le magodu*, or “the law eats with the thieves.”⁸⁴⁷ The lengthy proceedings required by due process are interpreted as deliberate corruption and blamed for escalating theft.⁸⁴⁸ The police have also acknowledged the contribution of the justice system to the escalation of livestock theft.⁸⁴⁹ Additional obstacles to justice include police incompetence, weak enforcement capacity, and a perceived erosion of the power of elders, and chiefs.

⁸⁴⁷ Interview with Gabatshabe Baipidi and Bathaloganyi Phuthego, Mogapi, December 25, 2010; Thaloganyo Goromente, Bobonong, March 13, 2011; Mbat Mashaba, Molaladau, July 15, 2011.

⁸⁴⁸ “Farmers Query Stock Theft Law”, *Mmegi*, September 18, 2008.

⁸⁴⁹ “Justice system helps to raise stock-theft,” *Mmegi*, June 4, 2010.

Testimonies of incompetent common law courts and corrupt lawyers resonated across the social spectrum during my field research. Women, men and community leaders argued that when such cases are referred to Magistrates' Courts, they “take too long and exhibits such as meat, livestock and hides are destroyed during the process.”⁸⁵⁰ They also claimed that attorneys do not only delay cases and advise their clients to kill livestock to destroy evidence, but also use complicated legal jargon to win cases for the thieves through technicalities.⁸⁵¹ The image of the corrupt lawyer is reinforced by the structure of the country’s common law court system, which does not allow the Babirwa’s jural practice of permitting litigants to cross-examine each other. This transforms litigants into appellants in a case in which they have immediate material interest. Despite both litigants being rendered passive by the power of the attorney, the Babirwa farmers feel that their silencing advantages the thieves. The Sebirwa word for lawyer, *mmueledi*, or “one who speaks for others”, speaks to the reproduction of silences in the courts of law.

Old men also raised concerns that magistrates are not familiar with livestock colors and their earmarks. This, they argued, makes it easy for criminals to escape being found guilty through misinterpretations.⁸⁵² Court proceedings in the common law courts are strictly conducted in English, and where the cases involve non-English speaking litigants, such proceedings are punctuated by translations between English and Setswana. Most of the Babirwa’s cattle colors, for example *phihadu*, and all their earmarks, such as *sekei*, however, do not have equivalent terms in English. The cattle colors are also

⁸⁵⁰ Personal communication, William Mogale (Chairman of Bobonong Village Development Committee), Bobonong, July 10, 2011; Diakanyo Molebatsi and Kgosi Kethalefile Gabanamotse, Tsetsebjwe, August 2, 2011.

⁸⁵¹ “Judge Acquits Three Appellants Convicted of Stock Theft”, *Sunday Standard*, October 18, 2009.

⁸⁵² Personal communication, Makgosa Makgosa, Molaladau, July 8, 2011; Gabatshabe Baipidi, Mogapi, December 25, 2010.

contingent upon the gender of the animal, making it very difficult to translate them into English. For instance, a black and white male animal is referred to as *nala* while its female counterpart is *naana*. Due to this linguistic barrier, the magistrates' failure to understand cattle colors and earmarks in the vernacular is not imagined. It is a reality. Given that both languages (Setswana and English) are not indigenous to the Babirwa, despite Setswana having a lot of similarities with Sebirwa, translations make the Magistrates' Courts scary to rural people as interpreters' distortion of information can change the complexion of the case. Another real fear of the common law courts is caused by the fact that many farmers cannot afford the services of attorneys since they have been left impoverished by thieves, drought and disease.

It is from these expressed perceptions and harsh realities of the state institutionalized justice system that the Babirwa have, in actual practice, made complex pragmatic calculations to identify a forum most likely to help them retrieve their stolen cattle. Their cattle culture strongly favors restorative and consensual dispute resolution. A village elder in Molaladau described the structure and proceedings of *phimola-tshipi* hearings as follows:

Anyone whose cattle have been stolen and they are able to identify the thief will approach village elders, witnesses and relatives from both sides to help in the conflict resolution and where possible reach a negotiated settlement. We all gather at the complainant's place, together with the accused, to hear both sides of the story. We sit in a semi-circle facing the accused, who sits at the entrance of the circle, facing us. Once we are all present an elder will present the case and the accused will respond either by denying the charge or accepting it. In case he denies the charge, the complainant and the people present will interrogate him and he will also have a chance to cross-examine the plaintiff.⁸⁵³

⁸⁵³ Personal communication, Barati Malema, Molaladau, July 16, 2011.

With all the participants sitting in a semi-circle and the accused facing them, the spatial organization of *phimola-tshipi* proceedings mimes customary court sessions at the *kgotla*. This arrangement reveals the Babirwa's imaginings of the *kgotla* as the traditional quintessential conflict resolution institution where negotiated settlements are the primary objective.

According to South African social historian, Clifton Crais, the power of people's courts rests on using violence and fear as a deterrent to crime.⁸⁵⁴ This narrative of violent people's courts has no resonance with the Babirwa's culturally specific legal forums. Their *phimola-tshipi* is a powerful, non-violent constitutive space of juridical imagination, which derives popular legitimacy from the idea of the communality of cattle. It reveals the creative thrust of an obscure marginalized community to challenge political conceptions of the "trickle-down" theory of the law, or the assumption that the content of the law originates with the powerful, political elites and flows down to the powerless ordinary people.

Criticizing official law and expressing the Babirwa's ability to fashion culturally specific judicial systems, a communal farmer in Mabolwe, a place known for its notoriety in cattle thefts, said to me: "listening to educated people talking in court is the least of my interests. I want my cattle returned."⁸⁵⁵ Thus, by not taking theft cases to court and resolving them through *phimola-tshipi*, the Babirwa are challenging a legal system where they feel that they have moved from a position of relative power in community courts, which allowed face-to-face disputing, to a powerless role of supplicant where litigation is mediated by an attorney. "If I am going to court to sit there and not even understand what

⁸⁵⁴ Clifton Crais, "Of Men, Magic, and the Law", pp. 57-59.

⁸⁵⁵ Interview with Moagi Mosedame, Mabolwe, July 20, 2011.

is being said”, says Odirile Baakile of Tsetsebjwe, “it is better I stay home and wait for the verdict.”⁸⁵⁶ Baakile’s is a statement of intent that carries undertones of a community discontented with top-down forms of justice. It expresses the Babirwa’s resolve to challenge and subvert a state-imposed legal system that renders them anonymous, silences their voices and renders them increasingly absent from and invisible in court proceedings.

Phimola-tshipi thus reveals an unusual angle of vision onto the discursive place of social practice in the country’s justice system. It also illuminates nuanced ways through which cultural practice is discussed and law constructed and enforced from the perspective of obscure rural communities. Falling within the broader context of localized ideas and practices of negotiated law and justice, and its emphasis on restoration rather than punishment, it helps the Babirwa to resolve conflict in a relatively amicable manner. Subsequently, it has sustained a sense of being Babirwa in a community, which has increasingly become diverse because of present modernist policies that have turned their grazing lands into open access situations. In Gabatshabe Baipidi’s and Bathaloganyi Phuthego’s metaphorical testimony, “*mo Bbobirwa re baana ba motho*, in Bobirwa we are children of one parent or siblings.”⁸⁵⁷ This expression is a poignant example of a sense of the Babirwa’s recognition that their ethnicity is built on diversity and peaceful co-existence with foreigners living among them. But this sense of “we-ness” is often overridden when the social relations between parties encourage an adversarial, retributive approach. In such cases recourse is taken to police or government courts.⁸⁵⁸ The

⁸⁵⁶ Interview with Odirile Baakile, Tsetsebjwe, August 1, 2011.

⁸⁵⁷ Interview with Gabatshabe Baipidi and Bathaloganyi Phuthego, Mogapi, December 25, 2010.

⁸⁵⁸ Interview with Gabatshabe Baipidi, Mogapi, December 25, 2010; *kgosi* Mmirwa Malema, Bobonong, February 9, 2011; Moreki Montsosi, Bobonong, March 13, 2011.

inclination to involve the police reflects the strong demand for protection, as the *phimola tshipi* forums have no power to forcefully induce the return of stolen cattle or the payment of restitution from uncooperative accused persons.

In light of the socially varied aims of community law, its flexibility is a positive element that increases opportunities for justice, accountability, and constructive change. Whereas government courts impose more rigid statutory penalties, *phimola-tshipi* operates as an alternative forum in which to negotiate positive outcomes of compensation. But *phimola-tshipi* does not in any way constitute a rigid divide between rule-based and negotiated justice. As existing legal studies have shown, rules—whether statutory or customary laws—are subject to negotiation in themselves; they do not “determine the outcome of disputes in a straightforward fashion.”⁸⁵⁹ The social relations of litigants and their individual goals, together with the priorities of the mediators or judges, shape how and which rules are upheld in negotiating the outcomes of cases.⁸⁶⁰

Despite the Babirwa inventing *phimola-tshipi* as a form of creative power to challenge official law, the state has increasingly presented itself as the plaintiff in livestock cases and thus relegating the owners of stolen cattle to a position of victimhood. The police are instructed to take culprits to the official courts of law. Those who get convicted of livestock theft are in turn jailed for a minimum of five years.⁸⁶¹ But imprisonment has failed to deter cattle thieves. Many Babirwa households have been divested of their herds in recent years, transforming them into the *bakhumanegi*, the poor,

⁸⁵⁹ John L. Comaroff and S. Roberts, *Rules and Processes: The Cultural Logic of Dispute in an African Context* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 14.

⁸⁶⁰ John L. Comaroff and S. Roberts, *Rules and Processes*.

⁸⁶¹ Stock Theft Act no. 21 of 1996, Cap 09:01.

as cattle thefts have reached the highest levels ever.⁸⁶² The Babirwa blame these unrelenting rates of cattle thefts on the entire justice system, including the prison system. In fact, the Babirwa conceive of the prison as *sekolo sa bogodu*, or “school of theft.” They argue that the shrewdest of the cattle thieves are former prisoners. Some of these former prisoners, they argue, often get convicted for similar crimes.⁸⁶³

This imagining of the prison as a space where thieving skills are perfected has produced a sense of material insecurity among the Babirwa. They fear that imprisonment deprives them of an important form of social capital in young men, who historically have always been the primary producers of a household’s pastoral estate as herders. When many households lost their herds to droughts and disease from the 1980s, the majority of these former herders migrated to seek wage work in urban areas. An equally large number of them, however, remained in their villages and carved themselves a niche in cattle thieving.⁸⁶⁴ As a result, resolving theft cases through local unofficial courts reflects kin struggles and generational tensions over cattle. Imprisonment is, however, dreaded because it siphons away social capital and deprives the Babirwa of their primary productive force. Seeing the prison from the vantage point of a “school of theft” thus confirms the argument that *phimola-tshipi* was both a socially mediated forum of conflict resolution and a clandestine method of subverting official law.

⁸⁶² At a recent anti-stock theft workshop in Molaladau, the Officer Commanding No. 10 District (under which Bobirwa falls) and former Bobirwa Member of Parliament, James Maruatona, expressed concern at the rate at which the Babirwa have lost their cattle to theft. “Stock-theft on the rise in Bobirwa, *Mmegi online*, June 8, 2012. Accessed January 24, 2013

⁸⁶³ Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema and headmen of arbitration, Onketetse Serumola and Adam Masilo, Bobonong, February 5, 2011.

⁸⁶⁴ Interview with Kgosi Mmirwa Malema and headmen of arbitration, Onketetse Serumola and Adam Masilo, Bobonong, February 5, 2011.

Conclusion

Indigenous practical knowledge is adaptable to ecological and social change. For this reason, state interventions that ignore such knowledge and interests of communities are bound to fail. As James Scott cautions:

So many of the twentieth century's political tragedies have flown the banner of progress, emancipation and reform. These schemes have failed their intended beneficiaries because the progenitors of such plans regarded themselves as far smarter and farseeing than they really were and, at the same time, regarded their subjects as far more stupid and incompetent than they *really* were.⁸⁶⁵

Indeed Botswana's post-colonial state policy on the cattle industry has failed its "intended beneficiaries", the rural communities. These policies were part of a larger administrative machinery designed to construct a standardized Tswana ethnicity and citizenship. The Tribal Grazing Land Policy and other livestock production policies that followed it, together with official justice, fall within the broader context of development paradigms imposed on rural communities with the view to constructing a homogenized national identity.

This chapter has argued that the failures of such designs are irreversible because of the unpredictability of Bobirwa's natural environments and the Babirwa's reconfiguration of historical processes and cattle herding and legal traditions, which they used to contest state policy. I have used cattle herding as a prism to understand post-colonial Botswana state's failed attempt to circumscribe ethnic diversity and homogenize society through the imposition of standardizing mechanisms on rural communities.

⁸⁶⁵ James Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, p. 343.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion – *Ee Kgomo!*: Linguistic Continuity, Resilience and Adaptability

The ethnic label, “Babirwa”, historically connoted disparate groups of sheep and goat-herders, agriculturalists and hunters who, by the first half of the nineteenth century, were scattered all over the Shashe-Limpopo confluence, a frontier space that transcended eastern Botswana, western Zimbabwe and the northern Transvaal in South Africa.⁸⁶⁶ They were initially the Bapirwa, or “people of black sheep.”⁸⁶⁷ Occupying an area endowed with palatable grasses for grazing, but cursed with high climate variability, recurring droughts and extensive belts of tsetse flies, these related but politically autonomous groups owned no cattle before the second half of the nineteenth century. From the 1850s forward, however, commercialized hunting caused wildlife populations to decline and tsetse fly belts to retreat to less inhabitable areas of the Limpopo leaving the Babirwa lands relatively free of vector-borne diseases, particularly sleeping sickness.⁸⁶⁸

The retreat of the tsetse fly belts opened up the Shashe-Limpopo watershed to extensive cattle farming and therefore attracted the cattle wealthy Bangwato state to the area. By the 1860s, some Babirwa groups, specifically those of Makhura, had entered

⁸⁶⁶ Per Zachrisson, *Hunting for Development: People, Land and Wildlife in Southern Zimbabwe* (Goteborg University: Department of Social Anthropology, 2004), pp. 23-40; E.O.J. Westpal, “Notes on the Babirwa”, *Botswana Notes and Records*, vol. 7 (1975), pp. 191-194.

⁸⁶⁷ The linguistic transition from “Bapirwa” to “Babirwa” was a result of European’s failure to pronounce the word, Bapirwa properly, unconsciously substituting “birwa” for “pirwa.”

⁸⁶⁸ Gordon Cumming, *Five Year’s of a Hunter’s Life in the Far Interior of South Africa* (London: John Murray, 1851); Frederick Elton, “Journal of an exploration of the Limpopo River”, *Journal of the Royal Geographic Society*, vol. 42 (1873), pp. 1-48.

into a relationship of patronage with the Bangwato as the Bangwato royalty loaned them cattle through the *kgamelo* system.⁸⁶⁹ Gift giving, as I have argued in this dissertation, is a process of subordination and dominance as the recipient often loses autonomy because of indebtedness to the gift giver. Although the herding of the Bangwato cattle helped them to build herds of their own and produce a cattle herding ethnic identity, the reception of these cattle gifts gradually incorporated these groups into the Bangwato state as a subject peoples – a socio-political location they still occupy to date. But their capacity to develop intellectual capital, which they used to develop an autonomous bovine ideology from that of the Bangwato, shaped their ethnic identity as the *Bakgomong*, people of the cow.

The Babirwa's identity shift from the *Banareng*, people of the buffalo to the *Bakgomong* enabled them to transform the formally unmediated tsetse-infested Shashe-Limpopo confluence into a cattle-raising environment and, eventually, become prosperous herd owners. At the end of the nineteenth century, however, colonialism and sustained ecological shocks, particularly the rinderpest pandemic, temporarily dispossessed the Babirwa of their pastoral investments. The effects of these social and ecological transformations were particularly severe for Malema's Babirwa who occupied the Tuli Block area, on the northern banks of the Limpopo River. These groups had never received cattle gifts directly from the Bangwato and, were, by the beginning of the twentieth century, consequently autonomous of any external hegemonic influence.

⁸⁶⁹ Neil Parsons, "Settlement in East-central Botswana, circa 1800-1920", in R. Renee Hitchcock and Mary R. Smith (eds.), *Proceedings on the Symposium on Settlement in Botswana: The Historical Development of a Human Landscape, 4th-8th August 1980* (Gaborone: Botswana Society, 1982)", p. 119.

Following huge losses of cattle to the rinderpest pandemic at the end of the nineteenth century, and their eviction from the Tuli Block at the beginning of the twentieth century respectively, these hitherto disintegrated groups became part of a diverse population in the Bangwato Reserve where, together with other subjects groups, they became resettled into a universalizing but fluid geopolitical and social space today called Bobirwa. The idea of centralizing the Babirwa under the hegemonic authority of the Bangwato was part of the colonial government's larger administrative machinery designed to reorder the colonial subject into stable political units called tribes for purposes of control. The pre-existing pattern of shifting domicile, which the hitherto politically autonomous Babirwa groups used, hampered tax collection and other administrative controls. It would be easy to collect taxes and source labor from people domiciled in one centralized space with rigid geographic boundaries. The political unity and stability of a tribe, therefore, provided colonial authorities with easy access to exploit these formerly disintegrated polities.

This centralization was achieved through conflicting, yet intersecting hegemonic processes. The British evicted the Babirwa from their prime lands in the Tuli Block, not only as part of a policy of consolidating Africans into "tribes" for administrative purposes, but also to pave way for settler farming. For the Bangwato, whose chiefs were earning a commission for their role as colonial tax collectors, the Babirwa would increase the population of the Reserve and therefore raise earnings for the chiefly office. Most importantly, however, the Babirwa became an important source of labor for the Bangwato royal cattle in the region as most of them were re-loaned cattle while others became employed as herders. Despite subordinating the Babirwa to the whims of

Bangwato chiefly authority, this patron-client relationship helped some of the Babirwa to re-build their herds at a time when the colonial government was building a market-oriented cattle industry.

But the Babirwa's attempts at rebuilding their pastoralist prosperity to pre-colonial levels were challenged by emerging ecological and social processes that threatened to dispossess them of their herds again. In particular, the period beginning the 1930s saw the emergence of foot and mouth disease for the first time in the country, leading to the imposition of drastic veterinary controls, such as the cordon fence.⁸⁷⁰ While such measures were necessary to control the spread of cattle diseases, they also restricted animal movements and therefore undermined the Babirwa's pre-colonial strategic coping mechanism of relocating their cattle to circumvent disease. Recurrent and insidious droughts accompanied foot and mouth disease, making it even harder to build large herds. By the 1960s, environmental stresses had once again destroyed much of the Babirwa's cattle holdings and intensified existing herd ownership inequalities.⁸⁷¹

Social transformations, specifically migrant labor and a highly commercialized colonial beef industry added to these ecological shocks. Together, they sharpened herd ownership inequalities wherein wealth was increasingly measured in cash. As a reproducer of wealth and power, cash threatened to corrode the Babirwa's pastoralist fabric. However, instead of abandoning their pursuit as cattle herders, the Babirwa re-appropriated cash and incorporated it into their pastoralist traditions. They invented the token currency, "cattle without legs," make sense of the intersection between two value

⁸⁷⁰ J. Falconer, "A History of Botswana Veterinary Services, 1905-1966", *Botswana Notes and Records*, vol. 3 (1971), pp. 74-78.

⁸⁷¹ Alec Campbell, "The 1960s Drought in Botswana", in Madalon T. Hintchey (eds.), *Proceedings of the Symposium on Drought in Botswana* (Gaborone: The Botswana Society and Clark University Press, 1979), pp. 98-109; *Bechuanaland Protectorate Annual Reports*, 1960; 1961/63; 1964-66.

systems, cattle and cash. This imbuing of cash with symbolic meaning, equivalent of cattle, serves as a corrective to ethnographic narratives that have conceptualized money as the corrosive element against existing practices.⁸⁷²

By the end of colonial rule, the protracted decline of the Babirwa's material pastoral fabric accelerated because of modernist land policies, the prime objective of which was to homogenize cattle keeping under the market-oriented rubric of beef production. The top-down imposition of the expensive and elitist borehole technology, in particular, privatized water and grazing lands to promote beef production policies, a single definition of cattle raising that contrasted sharply with the Babirwa's more multivalent understanding of cattle and their uses and meanings.⁸⁷³ This transformation in property relations, from communality to the individualized ownership of pastoral resources in the hands of the very few, undermined the pre-existing myriad socio-political, economic and cultural objectives for which local communities reared cattle.

It was upon this colonial architecture of beef production that the post-colonial state was to design open access grazing land policies that dispossessed ethnic minorities of their prime lands and benefitted cattle owning political elites and top ranking government officials. The post-colonial government also drew a lot of insights from the modernization paradigms of the 1970s, experimenting with grazing controls in order to build a globally competitive beef industry. Drawing from the commons property and land degradation theories of that time, the post-colonial Botswana government implemented

⁸⁷² For Southern Africa, see James Ferguson, "The Bovine Mystique: Power, Property and Livestock in Rural Lesotho", *Man*, New Series, vol. 20, no. 4 (1985), pp. 647-674; Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, "How Beasts Lost Their Legs": Cattle in Tswana Economy and Society", in John Galatay and Pierre Bonte (eds.), *Herders, Warriors and Traders: Pastoralism in Africa* (Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford: Westview Press, 1991), pp. 33-61; Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, "Beasts, Banknotes and the Colour of Money in Colonial South Africa", *Archaeological Dialogues*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2006), pp. 107-132.

⁸⁷³ Pauline Peters, *Dividing the Commons*.

policies that eventually privatized much of the formerly communal rangelands with the view to modernize the cattle industry.

This modernization agenda reflected a shift in the racialized ethnic premises that undergirded the colonial project. Whereas colonial rule and its development ideology had depended on the creation, maintenance and exploitation of tribal distinctions to institute indirect rule, ethnic differences were now perceived as barriers to modernity and progress. Ironically, however, ethnic differences were both disavowed and reinforced by the new policies. In particular, the Tribal Grazing Land Policy (TGLP), which overcame cultural barriers by economic means, also framed state assumptions about what problems ethnic groups faced in terms of the development of their pastoralist areas. In spite of its claims to merely address technical problems, the TGLP was inherently implicated in state imperatives to order, control, and compel the progress of rural communities.

As these policies continued to reorder grazing land and society, they pushed many ethnic minorities into lands of marginal quality. For the Babirwa, who for many generations had already had to navigate a rough terrain of recurrent drought and disease, the contraction of the commons increased environmental vulnerability and made cattle losses to ecological shocks irreversible. But the Babirwa negotiated and contested state policy in numerous and nuanced ways. They contested them in words and in actions. As I explored and analyzed in chapters four and five, many former herders and cattle owners migrated to the urban areas to seek wage work while some of those who were unable, or chose not to migrate, became cattle thieves.

As the theft of cattle reached epidemic proportions by the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Babirwa contested the justice system, which they conceptualized as state-sanctioned banditry. Poignant examples of the Babirwa's visions of a corrupt justice system appear in several newspaper reports. In an article carried by the *Mmegi* newspaper in 2008, for instance, one Takongwa accused foreign magistrates of "colluding with corrupt lawyers and using the English language to help thieves get away with crime."⁸⁷⁴ At issue were the Babirwa's cattle and livelihoods, as well as contested visions of poverty, prosperity and progress. The Babirwa contested the state's economic and political imperatives of justifying and consolidating the expansion of its control into numerous realms of their life. As a result, the implementation of land policies, disease control mechanisms, and the institutionalized law continue to be sites of deep contestation between the government and the Babirwa to date. This contestation is largely born out of the Babirwa's century-long experience of rebuilding herds. Thus, despite their cattle holdings continuing to dwindle in recent times, they still believe and hope that this process of decline will be reversed in the near future. Hence they continue to value and cherish the mantra, *ee kgomo!*

The Babirwa's idea of ethnic identity was, and still is, a cultural ideology that equates cattle with total wellbeing; cattle as the nurturers of both the spiritual, socio-cultural and the mundane worlds. Because of their dependence on cattle for their everyday livelihood, cattle imagery dominated their language in idioms, proverbs and speech. Cattle represent a concrete expression of the Babirwa wealth. They are central to such ceremonies and rituals as funerals, weddings, and ancestor worship. This dominant

⁸⁷⁴ "Farmers query stock theft law", *Mmegi*, September 18, 2008. For other local conceptions of a law that benefits the thieves, see for example, "Justice system helps to raise stock-theft", *Mmegi*, June 4, 2010.

role of cattle also has a material background in that the Babirwa depend on them for almost everything from birth to death. Cattle, for instance, are used for bridewealth exchanges, meat, milk, draft power, propitiation of ancestral spirits and burials. The Sebirwa words for cow and cattle, *kgomo* and *dikgomo*, literally dominates Babirwa language and interaction in their life. The Babirwa praise each other as *kgomo*, a symbolic gesture that has remained central to language idioms and speech since the second half of the 19th century. Hence the praise phrase, *ee kgomo*, yes cow, continues to shape social relations to date. This explains the adoption of the symbolic identity, “Bakgomong” or people of the cow.

The genesis of this dissertation was my experiential knowledge (as a native of Bobirwa) of the Babirwa’s creative adaptations to generations of environmental tragedies. As a result, this dissertation fittingly concludes with the mantra, *ee kgomo*, “yes cow,” an expression that has defined being Babirwa since the nineteenth century. The use of this phrase goes beyond greetings. It reflects the Babirwa’s resilience to years of ecological shocks, continually rebuilding their herds following huge losses since the end of the nineteenth century.

The deeper meaning and symbolism of this phrase are also reflected in the multiple roles it plays in the production of social capital. Firstly, young women who have just reached marriageable age are symbolically called *meroba* (heifers) expected to produce for their natal families *meroba* in the form of bridewealth. They are also expected to produce daughters who will be married off for cattle and sons whose labor will be transformed into herds. Secondly, the celebration of a wedding at the groom’s place is expressed as *gorosa* (bringing home), which in the Babirwa’s pastoralist parlance

refers to driving the cattle back for kraaling in the evening. Thirdly, and above all, the common word, amongst others, used to refer to bridewealth is *dikgomo*. These poignant examples speak to the indispensability of the phrase, *ee kgomo*, in the Babirwa's pastoralist identity.

Despite generations of fluctuations in cattle populations on account of ecological and social transformations, the Babirwa have maintained their identity as the *Bakgomong*, or "people of the cow", and the phrase, *ee kgomo*, continues to form an important part of this pastoralist ethnicity. The material and symbolic values of cattle remain central to the Babirwa's ways of life to date. For these reasons, the Babirwa's acknowledgement of one other with the expression, *ee kgomo*, remains as important to public life and social relations as it was during the second half of the nineteenth century. This kind of resilience does not in anyway suggest that the Babirwa have resisted change and have held tenaciously to timeless traditions. Rather, it is a rooted reflection of their adaptability to social and ecological change. This is the essence of the socio-environmental history, which I have presented in my dissertation, "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."

This dissertation deals with the question of the intricate relationship between social landscapes and environmental transformation in the production of ethnic identities. I weave together a complex socio-environmental history of the multiple arenas in which the Babirwa gave social meaning to their ethnic identity between the 1920s and the present. Specifically, I have used cattle herding as a lens to examine the differentiated ways through which the Babirwa have creatively adapted to an unstable environment of

climate variability, drought, and disease and struggled against modernist state policies that promoted a homogenizing Tswana national identity.

The dissertation is based on the lived and learned experiences of the Babirwa of eastern Botswana who have reshaped their identity following their adaptation of cattle herding from the Bangwato state of central Botswana from the 1850s.⁸⁷⁵ I have benefitted from the voices of the Babirwa men and women, herders, and ethno-veterinary medicine specialists to weave together this story of intellectual development, adaptability, and resilience across pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial temporal spaces. The dissertation also draws on the Babirwa's other modes of expression, such as rumor and gossip, folkloric texts, and proverbs in order to demonstrate that the histories of obscure rural border communities in Botswana are imbedded in the hidden social transcripts of their lives. Largely, linguistic change was central to the production of social identities, leading to the resilience of the Babirwa's ethnicity as they invented, loaned, and retained cattle-centric ideological concepts and assigned them new meanings to adapt to social and ecological changes.⁸⁷⁶

⁸⁷⁵ E.C. Tabler, *The Far Interior* (Cape Town: A.A. Balkema, 1955), pp. 26-31; Isaac Schapera, *Praise Poems of the Tswana Chiefs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 26.

⁸⁷⁶ David L. Schoenbrun, *A Green Place, A Good Place: Agrarian Change, Gender and Social Identity in the Great Lakes Region to the 15th Century* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998).

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MAPS

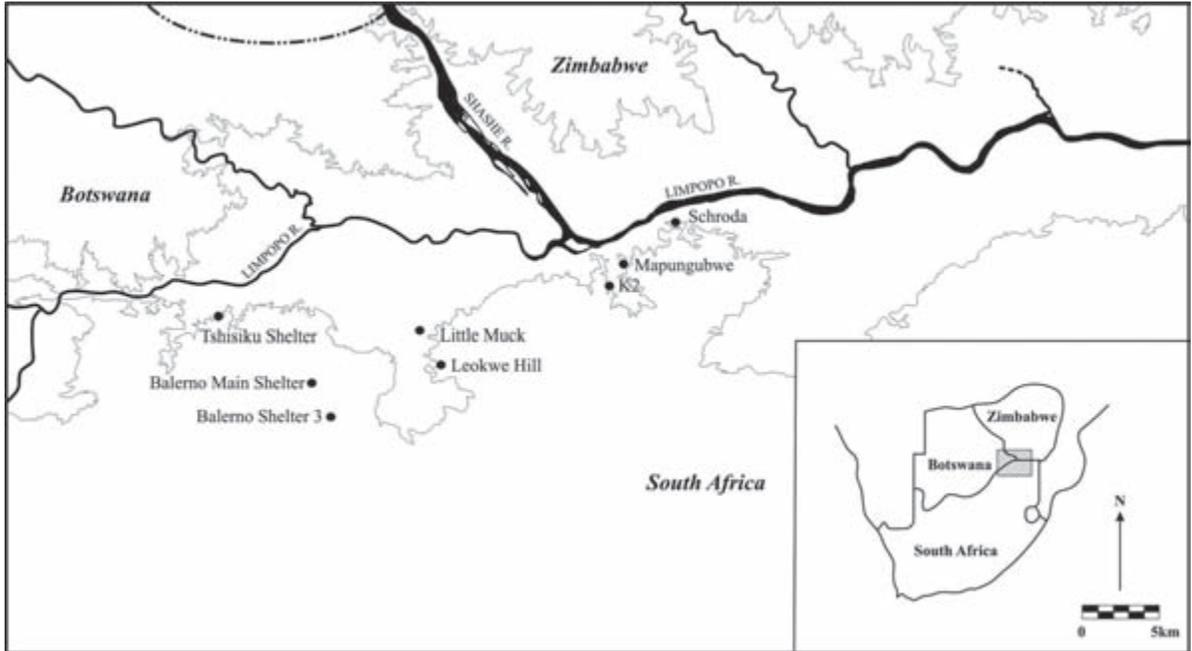
Map 1: Botswana Districts – Central District (formerly Bangwato Reserve) and Bobirwa (circled)



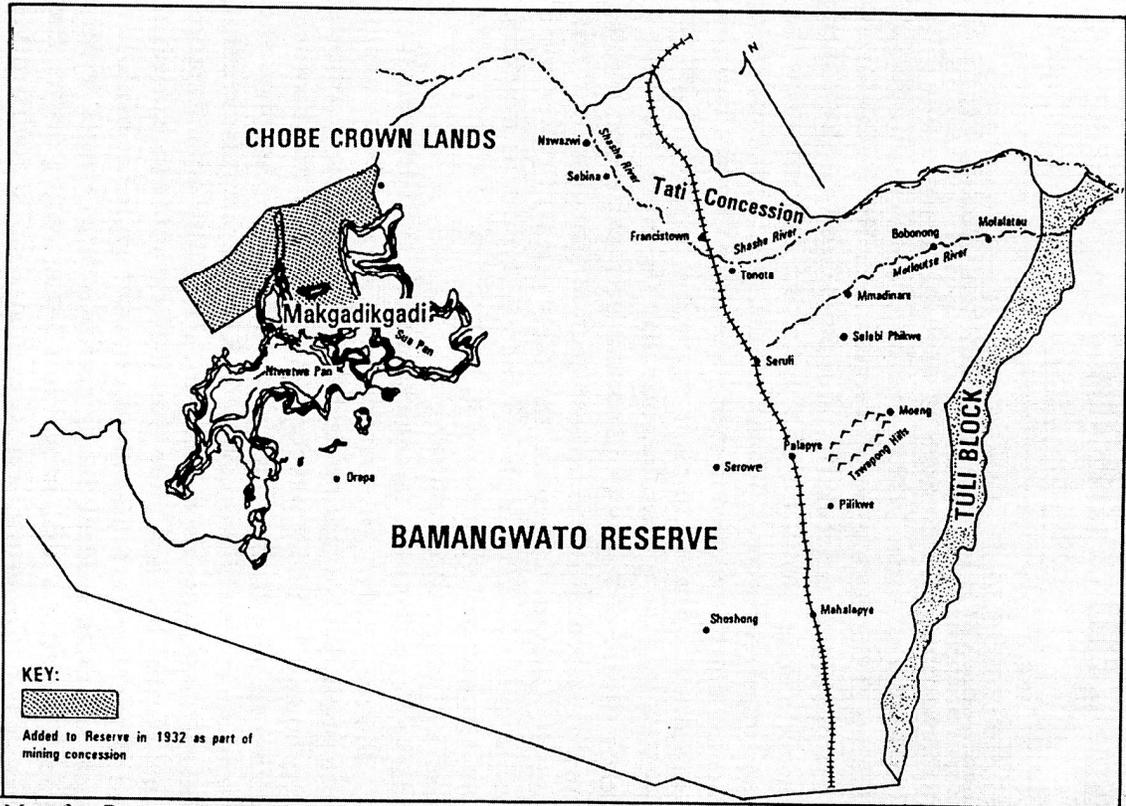
Map 2: The Shashe River and Limpopo River in eastern Botswana. Bobirwa is located in between the two rivers



Map 3: The Shashe-Limpopo Confluence

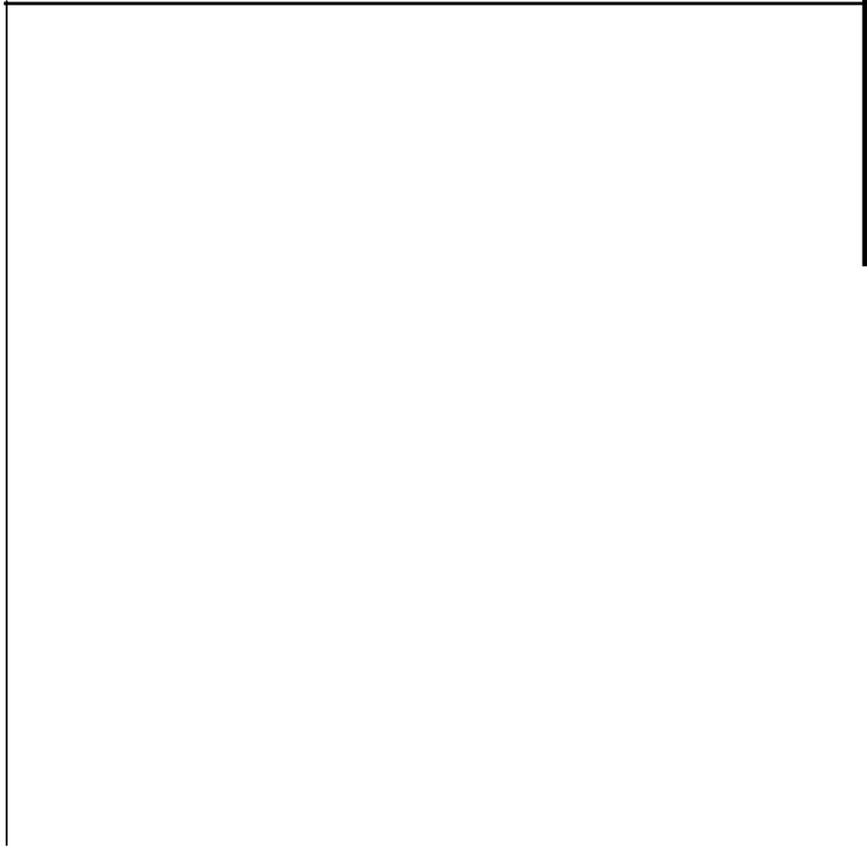


Map 4: The Tuli Block and the Bangwato Reserve



Map 3 Bamangwato Reserve

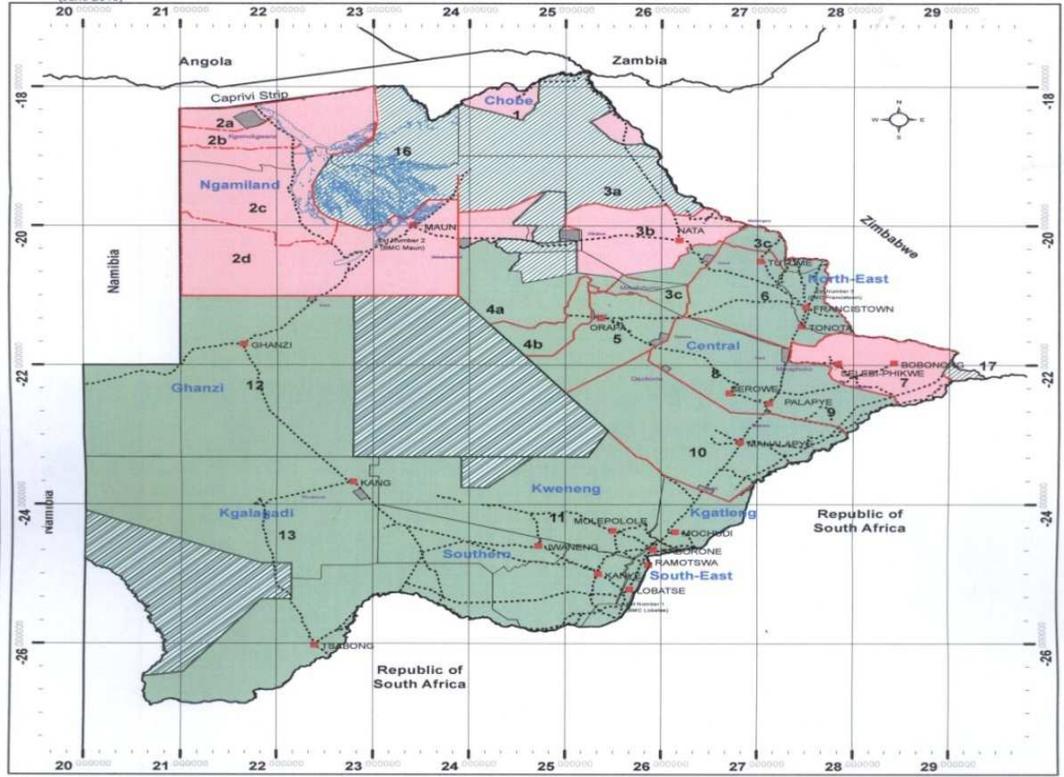
Map 5: Mean annual rainfall of Botswana, in mm



Map 6: Veterinary
Cordon Fences

Botswana Veterinary Disease Control zones (Draft)

Version 1 :2010
(June 2010)



Legend

- Africa national boundaries
- Veterinary disease control zones
- National Parks and Game Reserves
- Delta
- Roads
- Quarantine camps
- Fmd vaccination zone
- Fmd free zone
- Disease control fences
- Villages

Key to Disease Control Zones

| | |
|------------------------------------|--|
| (a) BMC abattoirs | Est Number 1,2 & 3 |
| (b) FMD vaccination zones | 1, 2 (a, b, c,d) 3b, & 7 |
| (c) FMD free zones | 3c,4a,4b,5,6,8,9,10, 11, 12, 13 |
| (d) National parks & Game reserves | 1 (part), 3a, 16 4a (part), 11 (part), 12 (part), 13 (part) & 17 |