The Fight for Control of African Women's Mobility in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1900-1939
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Source: Signs, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Spring, 1992), pp. 586-608
Published by: The University of Chicago Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174624
Accessed: 28-07-2015 18:40 UTC

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The Fight for Control of African Women's Mobility in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1900–1939

Teresa A. Barnes

As in the rest of southern Africa, physical mobility was a crucial issue in the relationship between the colonial rulers and the ruled in colonial Zimbabwe (or southern Rhodesia, as it was named by British settlers). Denying certain groups of people access to certain spaces was a cornerstone of policy. Thus some places could be ideologized as "white," as spaces that African people could enter only temporarily and at certain times. Within these spaces, African people were lured or herded, supervised and regulated, depending on the labor needs of the economy. Spaces in which they were allowed some internal mobility were designated as "native kraals," "reserves," or "locations" and were perceived as primitive, practically foreign territory. Physical and ideological barriers were erected between these two sets of spaces to ensure that it was only on the state's terms that the races—and the sexes—would meet.

The colonial political economy was obsessed with the mobility of indigenous people. It was concerned, first, to restrict movement from "native" spaces to "white" spaces and, second, to keep track of people as they did move around the colony. Cumbersome pass laws of the type for

All file references are to correspondence held in the National Archives of Zimbabwe in Harare. I would like to thank John Pape, Jane Parpart, Tsuneo Yoshikune, and the anonymous Signs readers for their comments on earlier drafts of this article.

1 These terms refer to African rural households, rural communities, and segregated urban residential areas. Southern Rhodesia was colonized in the 1890s by British and South African capitalists of the British South Africa Company; it was given to white settlers for self-rule after 1923. By 1930, the majority of the most fertile regions had been alienated to settler farmers; African families were confined to dry and infertile Native Reserves. Until the 1940s the Southern Rhodesian economy mainly consisted of small, relatively unprofitable ventures in mining and agriculture; there was little or no industry (see Ian Phimister, An Economic and Social History of Zimbabwe, 1890–1948 [London: Longman, 1988]). This article is mainly concerned with the relationships between African people and the colonial state; the terms "men" and "women" therefore refer, unless otherwise noted, to African people.

[Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 1992, vol. 17, no. 3]
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which South Africa is so justifiably famous were the bureaucratic expression of this obsession. The first pass laws were applied to African men in Southern Rhodesia almost immediately after the establishment of the colonial order in 1890 and its first successful defense against African revolt in 1896–97. By the early 1930s, an African man was required to have an identification certificate that also served as a record of employment; he needed another pass to enter any town (by definition a white space), and once in a town, yet another pass to be outside the "location" between the hours of nine at night and six in the morning. African women, however, were not subject to these laws. The issue of mobility thus provides an excellent opportunity to study the gendered nature of colonial economic policies and of political relations inside African households.

Within the colonial order, men of working age were transformed into laborers who were not paid enough to support families; women of working age were transformed into laborers who supported families without pay. Many of the wives and daughters in early Southern Rhodesia dissented from the new economic subservience imposed upon them. Their dissent took the form of mobility. They were not unique in this effort; recent studies have shown that African women in the early years of the twentieth century exercised a newfound mobility all over southern and central Africa, provoking the development of various schemes to try to control them.


Elizabeth Schmidt's recent study of patriarchy and capitalism argues that the Southern Rhodesian state made a clear alliance with African patriarchy to control African women's mobility. I hold, rather, that Southern Rhodesian labor policies were not so straightforward and were fraught with contradiction. On one hand, the state did force working African men into the relative powerlessness of migrant labor while simultaneously buttressing those men's power over younger men and all women. At the same time, however, state policies punished and tacitly encouraged the women who traveled around the colony in search of rewarding avenues for their labor. The state said one thing but did another (partly because it was forced to do so). While it acknowledged men's claims over women, it regarded itself as women's higher master and reserved the power to override men's claims.

Because of such contradictions, this study will show, restricting the mobility of women had become an unworkable policy by the mid-1930s. Providing ideological and practical barriers to keep women in rural areas may have supported both the men who were becoming migrant workers and the system that forced them into it. But there were other spaces in the colonial political economy. Working men in the mines and towns, low-paid migrants though they were, still wanted cooked food, clean clothing, and sexual services; as Luise White has recently written, they wanted "the comforts of home." Colonialism did not transform the expectation that these comforts should be provided by women. Therefore, as I will discuss, mobile African women filled these voids by moving to and fro across the barriers of the supposedly all-white and all-male towns of Southern Rhodesia.

Immorality and mobility, 1890–1920

Two major factors combined to temper the impoverishment of rural African families in the first thirty years of colonial rule in Southern Rhodesia. First, in many parts of the new colony, an African peasantry...
that grew cash crops for sale to the settlers emerged from the ecological and wartime disasters of the turn of the century. The second factor was the recruitment of foreign workers for the new enterprises of Cecil Rhodes’s British South Africa Company when direct forced labor was stopped locally by the British government. The importance of women’s labor in this period is indicated by the passage of successive pieces of legislation by the colonial state that attempted to restructure African family relationships. These were labor laws that tried to entice African men into the labor force partly by reassuring them that the women at home remained under their control. The legislation also aimed to structure the cheap reproduction of the African labor force. As Martin Chacock states in his work on colonial Zambia and Malawi, it is clear that the intervention of the state in these matters involved the manipulation, if not the manufacture, of “tradition” in a swiftly changing social and economic environment. The most important of these laws made African women into permanent legal minors, codified polygamy and the system of bridewealth payments known as lobola, and initiated a system of registration of non-Christian marriages.

In tandem with the state’s legislative efforts to regulate women’s labor came new ideological constructions of African women. At the turn of the century, white settlers believed that African women should be rescued from what they perceived as heavy socioeconomic bonds imposed by African men. As the colonial order spread, however, the blame for a rising incidence of problems such as venereal disease and prostitution became wholly assigned to a “natural immorality” of African women. A typical formulation of this perspective was that the African woman had become “defiant and obstinate . . . often a slave to gross passion, deaf to all reason.” Women who crossed the boundaries of respectable behav-

10 Schmidt, “Negotiated Spaces and Contested Terrain,” 623; Assistant Native Commissioner (hereafter NC) Wankie to CNC, May 7, 1914, N3/17/2. For a study of these issues as they pertain to women in South Africa, see Katherine Eales, “Popular Repre-
ior (which, of course, was in the process of being defined) increasingly ran the risk of being labeled "immoral" and diseased—evil vessels of contamination.  

Women's exercise of mobility in the early colonial years precipitated problems within African households. Some of these are reflected in the following testimony of a disgruntled husband in a divorce case heard in the government-run civil court in the north central district of Mtoko in 1912:

Soon after my marriage to Kurewha was registered, I proceeded to Salisbury with [her]. Whilst living in Salisbury Kurewha disappeared from home on several occasions. On one occasion, she disappeared from home and was about 14 days, until I found her at the Railway Station, attempting to board the train for Hartley. On another occasion she left me and was absent for a few days. I found her at the Transport Camp. On a third occasion she left me and I found her at Homan's residence. She was living with a native called Shilling. My wife hates me, and is constantly wandering about and attempting to run away. I feel that she will get away for good one day. I therefore decided to return her home to her father and apply for a divorce.

Kurewha defended herself against these charges by saying, "I only left home once without the knowledge of my husband, that was on the occasion I attempted to go to Hartley. My husband was always ill-treating me. I hate him and will not be his wife any longer. On the occasions I went and lived at Homan's and the Transport Camp I was staying with friends and relatives."  

Many disputes arose over women in this early period. In 1911 and 1912, for example, approximately 52 percent of the civil cases brought in the Mtoko court were claims for compensation by husbands against other men who had allegedly committed adultery with their wives. In the 1910–19 period, approximately 90 percent of the civil cases were domestic disputes involving women—adultery, divorce, return or payment of lobola, or seduction damages. This was similar to the situation in neighboring Northern Rhodesia.  


11 I am indebted to Lynette Jackson for the idea of the increasingly ideological colonial association of African women with the metaphor of disease (personal communication, June 21, 1991).

12 “Shambamuto vs. Kurewha and father, Case 44/1912” (Court of the NC Mtoko, Civil cases, 1910–22, S1004).

By the beginning of the First World War, African male elders in rural areas were starting to voice their complaints about new, unruly female behavior such as Kurewha's. In 1914 the chiefs and elders of the northeastern towns of Rusape and Umtali were reported by the local government representative as saying, “Our fathers have asked, we have asked, and you do not help us in the only thing that is vital to our tribe and our family.” They were pleading for restrictions on mobile women—girls who ran away from home to escape arranged marriages, and married women who, like Kurewha, were defining new lives for themselves in the mines and towns of the colony.14

In 1916 the state tried to answer the complaints of these and other African patriarchs with the Native Adultery Punishment Ordinance. Adultery in rural African communities was linked to economic conditions through the expanding migrant labor system. More foreign men were traveling through the colony as their proportion in the Southern Rhodesian work force rose. Like their indigenous counterparts, these migrant laborers wanted women to provide them with domestic and sexual services; to obtain them, these men were willing to make payments directly to an individual woman (rather than bridewealth payments to her male relatives). In a changing economic climate, this new competition for female labor seems often to have favored the foreigners, and some married women became migrant laborers in their own right, leaving rural areas and family control to earn money in mine compounds and towns.15

While colonial officials felt that the new adultery law would be “greatly appreciated” by the African men of the colony, they defended it most ardently on the grounds that it would admirably serve their own economic interests: “Many Natives are deterred from leaving their homes

14 Terence Ranger, “Women in the Politics of Makoni District, 1890–1980” (University of Manchester, 1981, typescript), 13; Diana Jenter, “Mothers and Prostitutes: The Reconstruction of Africa Gender Relationships in Southern Rhodesia, 1898–1923” (University of Zimbabwe, 1987, typescript), 10–13; Legislative Council of Southern Rhodesia Debates, 1916. Rural parents also complained about the loss of young men’s labor: “They [boys working for wages] are lost control of and they go where they like. . . . Parents complain bitterly to-day . . . because they could have done work for them at home” (H. S. Keigwin, oral evidence to the Native Labour Commission, 1921, A3/3/19/3, 2:391). There are few references in archival material to what African mothers thought about these issues. Ranger mentions one mother of Makoni district in the 1920s who tried to hang herself in protest when Catholic missionaries gave shelter to her runaway daughter (“Women in the Politics of Makoni District,” 9).

15 In contrast to similar legislation in Northern Rhodesia, this ordinance made adultery a criminal rather than civil offense (Farbary, “Sexuality and Power on the Zambian Copperbelt,” 119). The ordinance remained in force until 1960 (Ernest Mittlebeeler, African Custom and Western Law: The Development of Rhodesian Criminal Law for Africans [New York: Africana Publishing House, 1976], 124–25). Ranger points out that no attention was paid to the traditions of women in the framing of this or any other ordinance (“The Invention of Tradition in Central Africa” [n. 8 above], 258; see also Charles van Onselen, Chibaro [London: Pluto Press, 1976], 103).
to seek employment out of fear that their wives will misconduct themselves during the husband's absences. Others leave work before the time they would have in the ordinary course, owing to their domestic affairs requiring their personal attention due to the misconduct of the woman. Surely if for no other reason than a selfish motive, we should endeavor to remedy a state of affairs which is of vital importance to the whole of our commercial and economic fabric.”

The Southern Rhodesian government, however, did not launch an intensive attack on the mobility of African women in this era. Although women were included in Ordinance 16 of 1901 (providing for the registration and issuing of passes to all Africans in urban employment), its wording showed that the state had no objection to the presence of married women in towns; such women were assumed to be under the control of their husbands. Nearly three decades later a government legal officer revealed that employed women were not being punished for failing to secure contract of service passes, and that their preemployment medical examination (as provided for in Ordinance 15 of 1918) was rarely insisted on. A day-to-day practice thus developed that allowed the women who did pry themselves out of the rural areas a wider degree of freedom than either the letter or spirit of the law indicated.

The magnitude of women's exercise of mobility in this period is difficult to judge. On one hand, the 1916 adultery law—specifically aimed at keeping married women in their villages under their husbands' control—provides indirect evidence that a noticeable number of rural women were seeking other markets for their domestic labor. On the other hand, the numbers of mobile women were still relatively small by the end of the third decade of colonial rule, as indicated by the controversy about a 1918 proposal to require women to carry passes in order to travel. The government was asked by an association of white farmers in the central Mazoe area to consider issuing these passes, “thus assisting the police in controlling crime.” Government officials replied that they did not favor


17 Ordinance 16 of 1901, “An Ordinance to Provide for the Registration of certain Native Servants and the Issue of Passes to Natives Within Townships,” H2/9/2. This may have been a gesture allowing foreign laboring men to bring their wives from surrounding territories. This ordinance sets the precedent of the state treating married urban women differently than unmarried women. Women who were married by “Christian rites” tended to be associated with mission education and were thus potentially of a higher class than their uneducated sisters. This may have been a factor in a preferential response from the state enjoyed by educated women married to members of an emerging elite in Southern Rhodesia's towns (see Tsuneo Yoshikune, “Black Migrants in a White City: Colonial Salisbury, 1890–1925” [Ph.D. diss., University of Zimbabwe, 1991], chap. 3).

18 Secretary, Law Department letter to Staff Officer, British South Africa Police (hereafter BSAP), September 5, 1928, S138/37.
such a measure; significantly, one responded, “It is quite within the bounds of possibility that the natives themselves may in future ask that the movement of women be restricted but I am not aware of any reasons which would justify a measure of this sort at the present time.” But times were changing; white settler groups thought they had reason for concern even if the officials of the Native Department decided to ignore them. The Missionary Women’s Conference of 1917 warned of a “tide of immorality sweeping over the country as never before.” And the following year, the missionary John White commented on the accelerating movement of African women into towns. “Lately,” he said, “an increasing number of Native girls have been coming to town,” many of whom, he added ominously, “are driven into the worst form of temptation.”

Because there are few documents that chronicle the numbers and intentions of the African women who came into the colony’s towns in this period, the words of the protagonists from a 1918 domestic dispute in Salisbury, the capital city, are all the more significant. In that year, Walter Chipwaya, a messenger of the Native Department, was sued for divorce by his wife, Mary. She seems to have been a determined soul, finding domestic work and accommodation for herself and her young son in town after Mr. Chipwaya deserted them. In a letter to him she indicated, however, that these were steps reluctantly taken: “O heart of mine dont be hard on me I am only a woman and we woman we are only strong when thers a man to lead us. . . . When and if you throw me away I must needs to go to the dogs,” she wrote. Her new urban employment was not at all to the liking of Mr. Chipwaya, for whom the town was the place “in which all abomination and distruction lies.” The evidence suggests that Mrs. Chipwaya’s decision to take the urban option in her economic distress was indicative of a growing trend.

Women’s mobility in the 1920s

The 1920s, described as the era of the “political triumph of white agriculture,” radically altered the socioeconomic position of the South-

19 Quoted in CNC circular letter to SONs, March 8, 1918; SON Bulawayo to CNC, March 12, 1918, N3/17/5.
22 Palmer (n. 7 above), 239.
ern Rhodesian African peasantry. The tendency of African men to engage in migrant labor was catalyzed by low prices for their maize and cattle matched with continuing tax obligations and postwar inflation. African women, for their part, came to play increasingly important and varied roles in Southern Rhodesia’s economic life, as illustrated by a 1924 statement from a rural official. Women’s resulting new, assertive attitudes were firmly linked in his mind with what he viewed as their immorality: “The native women of the present generation are, as a matter of fact, asserting their rights under our law to quite an extraordinary extent. They claim ownership of cattle and goods purchased with money they have earned which has been given to them, the right to select their husbands, and applications for divorce are far more common amongst women than men. The standard of morality amongst native women is exceedingly low and if the bonds of custom are relaxed still further, it would only lead to more infidelity on their part.”

As the state increased the pace of land alienation and favored settler over African producers in the 1920s, staying afloat must have been a difficult process for African families. But there was one traditional source of wealth that fathers and lineage heads could count on: bridewealth payments from the marriages of their daughters. By the early 1930s, rural officials were remarking that fathers and guardians had come to regard these payments—once only a symbolic exchange of gifts between families—as a fair means of accumulating cash to pay taxes and meet other financial obligations. This change represented the commodification of a woman’s value to her family. Her residence in a town, with its potential for engaging in “all abomination and destruction,” was likely to lower the bridewealth her male relatives could demand from potential suitors; town residence also would restrict their control over the marriage process. Therefore, up to the mid-1920s fathers seem most often to have decided that a daughter’s labor, her potential bridewealth, and the maintenance of “tradition” were more valuable than the earnings of yet another urban migrant. Thus the Chief Native Commissioner observed in 1927 that “among what might be termed the ‘back-veld’ Natives the custom of lobola will continue to be a deterrent to Native girls seeking employment.”

23 Arrighi (n. 7 above), 206.
24 NC Selukwe letter to CNC, April 23, 1924, S138/50.
25 Assistant NC Goromonzi to CNC, February 10, 1932, S138/47. A considerable amount of intergenerational tension between men on this issue is indicated by the mid-1930s. In 1934, 58 percent of the petty civil cases in the Goromonzi district had been brought by sons-in-law alleging the failure of their fathers-in-law to refund bridewealth payments after the desertion of their wives (annual report of the NC Salisbury, 1934, 10, S1563).
26 CNC letter to Secretary to the Premier (Native Affairs), February 21, 1927, S482/117/40.
The evidence suggests that women themselves saw the issue differently. Doubtlessly spurred by adverse economic circumstances, African women traveled around the colony in increasing numbers in the 1920s. Reports about African women on the move came from many levels of colonial society. Conditions to the north of the colony were bad enough to send a “steady and increasing influx” of women into Southern Rhodesia; in 1921 an official reported that there were five hundred such transients in his district.27 Missionaries and government officials alike reported that there was a “steadily increasing flow of women, married and single, from the kraals to the towns and mine compounds.”28 A Native Department conference of 1927 observed that “natives in the reserves and other places [have] pointed out the freedom with which women can proceed, for instance, from Marandellas to the Salisbury location or Salisbury town; they live here for a week or a month or longer, and there is no check on their movements, and nobody questions what they are doing in town. . . . What are these people doing here? They cannot be selling their grain or chickens.”29 Although Kirsten England argues that women residents in the towns were unlikely to have earned a living solely by selling produce or prepared foodstuffs, there is evidence to suggest that periodic sales of various produce in urban areas were important in the incomes of women of nearby rural areas.30 An informant born in the Salisbury area around 1905 has recalled her mother saying that in her youth, girls used to walk to Salisbury from a nearby mission station to sell charcoal.31 In the same area, improvements in breeding chickens and cultivating tomatoes for urban markets were noted in 1921.32 The observation from the 1927 conference cited above indicates that the sight of rural women hawking produce in Salisbury was fairly common; and in 1930 “young girls from . . . nearby kraals wandering around the town selling their goods” were again a matter of complaint in Salisbury.33

By the mid-1920s evidence began to surface that there were women for whom mobility was a matter of selling more than vegetables. Alarm over a perceived increase in prostitution by African women evinced an-

27 Acting NC Shamva to NC Mazoe, March 3, 1921, N3/22/7. Perhaps something like the flow of male migrants southward to seek areas of higher wages, as described by van Onselen (n. 15 above), also operated regionally for women (227–36).
28 Quoted in England (n. 17 above), 38; NC Hartley to CNC, February 28, 1924, S138/50. On rural women’s economic roles, see Schmidt, “Farmers, Hunters and Gold-Washers” (n. 2 above), 57–67.
29 Salisbury conference of SONs and NCs, 1927, 53, S235/493.
30 England, 44.
31 Mrs. Maggie Masamba, interviewed at Epworth Mission by myself and Ms. Ever-joyce Win, April 20, 1989.
32 Annual report of the NC Goromonzi, 1921, N9/1/24.
33 Oral evidence of John Moeketsi to the Native Affairs Commission of Inquiry into the Salisbury Native Municipal Location, 1930, 25, S85.
other stage in the development of household struggles and thus in the migrant labor economy.

The annual reports of the native commissioner (NC) of the Goromonzi district from 1920 to 1925 expressed satisfaction with the workings of the 1916 adultery law. It "continued to have the desired effect," judged by the appreciation of "the individual male native whose women now... are not so tempted to run off." But in 1926 there was a hint of trouble brewing. Government officials recommended, inter alia, that amendments should be made in the marriage and adultery laws so as to make it a criminal offence for a man to "harbor" a woman for sexual purposes without the consent of her guardian. And in 1927 the issue of African women's mobility burst out into the open. The Mazoe farmers' proposal of 1918 appeared again in a conference motion recommending "that owing to the widespread state of immorality and prostitution amongst native women," mandatory traveling passes for women should be introduced. One official hoped that such a measure would "be a check on the present unrestricted movement of the loose native women." In the ensuing discussion, the NC Goromomni stated,

I have more trouble over this immoral state of affairs than almost any Native Commissioner in the country. The Mashonas in this district are prostitutes almost to the last woman, either professional or occasional. A large number, when they want money, go out and earn it at once. They are encouraged to do so by all their relatives as long as they always go home again... the great complaint we hear from natives is in regard to the women who get on trains and run away to other parts of the territory where we cannot get at them... What [the chiefs of the district] said was that they would like the women to be prevented from running clean away and getting on trains.

This suggests that the precise location of the trouble spot in the domestic struggle was shifting from the mere prevention of women's mobility to control of its proceeds.

Although filtered through the perspectives of the Native Department, in these comments we can discern the outlines of a mounting male concern not so much over women's earning cash, but over what they did with it. In response, official efforts to control women began to focus not simply on presenting barriers to their independent exercise of mobility...
but also on getting them to return home once they had left. In 1930 the chief native commissioner (CNC) reported that measures had been recently instituted to discourage women and girls from entering towns,\textsuperscript{37} probably referring to an increased use of Section 51 of the Native Affairs Act, under which an urban woman committed an offense if she refused to return to her rural area when ordered to do so by a rural chief or a Native Department official. The words of an African government employee describe what happened when one woman in the town of Umtali refused to go home as ordered and was prosecuted under this act in 1933: 

"On 1st December 1933 I was present at the native commissioner's office when accused was taken before the Acting Native Commissioner, Mr. Coley, who ordered her to return to her kraal and not to return to the town of Umtali or commonage. . . . [He] provided an escort of four men to take her to her Chief Mutasa and from there to take her back to her guardian's kraal. On leaving the Office . . . the accused picked up stones and threw them at the escorts saying at the same time that she refused to return to her kraal." The accused, "Anna alias Flora," was sentenced to a fine of thirty shillings or one month's imprisonment with hard labor.\textsuperscript{38}

A decade later, the dichotomy between the movements of "respectable" women—presumably those who exercised their cash-earning powers to the satisfaction of their guardians—and the immoral throng was still being strongly articulated. According to the liberal missionary A. S. Cripps, commenting on the passage of the 1936 Native Registration Act, "It is true that many complaints have been made at meetings of some of our Bantu Societies about non-control of women but it would seem that these were not aimed [at those] who come into town for buying and selling but at women and girls who come and stay and make their homes in the locations without proper husbands and that the demand for control was for the control of them."\textsuperscript{39} Thus, not all groups of mobile women were acting against the wishes of their guardians; and by the end of the decade ending in 1936 there were women who were supplementing rural finances to such an extent that a threatened disruption in their trading activities brought out even the voices of the rural patriarchy in defense of their mobility.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{37} Annual report of the CNC, 1930, S138/1.
\textsuperscript{38} "The King vs. Anna alias Flora, Indigenous Native Female Unemployed, December 4, 1933" (Court of the NC Umtali, Criminal Cases, 1931–34, S2258). The 1927 Native Affairs Act gave NCs the same powers to punish disobedient women that school headmasters had over unruly pupils (Ranger, "Women in the Politics of Makoni District" [n. 14 above], 17).
\textsuperscript{39} Arthur Shearly Cripps to Governor of Southern Rhodesia, December 10, 1936, S1542/A1/20, vol. 1.
\textsuperscript{40} The motives of male guardians who allowed women to go to towns are difficult to discern from official correspondence. The 1910–11 Native Affairs Committee report
In the course of the 1920s it also became clear that housing was another crucial variable in urban female class formation in Southern Rhodesia. In the urban “locations,” a shortage of accommodation and women’s small economic means often forced single women to lodge with male workers, either singly or in a group. This gave rise to a form of domestic labor sales known in the vernacular as *mapoto*, a term that may be translated as “cooking pot marriage.” *Mapoto* marriage was a gender relationship free of the ties (and obligations) of formal marriage, in which bridewealth was not paid to the woman’s relatives. Once she moved in with a man and started to work for him (i.e., cooking food in pots) she was his “wife.” The historical parameters of this form of selling domestic services in the towns of Southern Rhodesia have not yet been studied, but it seems to be more closely analogous to the informal “mine marriages” on the Copperbelt than to any of the forms of prostitution so precisely delineated in White’s studies of colonial Nairobi.

A comparison between Salisbury and Bulawayo (the colony’s main industrial city in this period) is instructive on other methods of organizing the sales of domestic labor around the state’s restrictive housing policies. For example, there was a group of female property owners in the Bulawayo location in the years up to 1930 who built and owned their own houses. Although some may have rented rooms to prostitutes, they were said to be respectable women, and their access to housing precipitated the development of a nascent female petty bourgeoisie. In Salisbury alleged that husbands were sharing the proceeds of their wives’ urban prostitution. In a government debate on the 1916 adultery ordinance, it was similarly alleged that fathers were sending daughters out to prostitute themselves and bring money back to pay family taxes; government officials continued to make this allegation (1910–11 Native Affairs Committee Report, sec. 14; Southern Rhodesia Legislative Council Debates, 1914–19, May 3, 1916; Minister of Native Affairs, Southern Rhodesia Legislative Council Debates, 1936, vol. 1, col. 588).


buri there is no trace of any such class of female residents, but there is evidence that some women were allowed to register for rented accommodation in their own names through the 1930s. One such woman was Emma MaGumede, an entrepreneur of legendary proportions who in the early 1930s mixed the work of a madam with brewing beer and later ran one of the few grocery stores in the location. She was able to rent two houses in her own name and was said to be one of the first people in the location to own a car. It does appear that even without secure access to accommodation, therefore, some Salisbury women were able to manipulate housing restrictions to their advantage. Thus, in 1930, three male residents of the location complained,

We now find that the women without husband [sic] and who earn their money by immoral ways are the controlling influence. She chooses her man for the time being, only a boy with money, and sends him along to register the house in his name, and—as long as he pleases her—he remains the registered occupier of the house. This has been going on for some time. . . . The men are controlled by the women. They hang around the Beer Hall and entice the young men to their huts. A woman takes a house and it is registered in the name of her man. She stays with him for a while and then takes another man with a house.

The period up to the late 1920s may very well also have been the good old days as far as African prostitution in Salisbury was concerned. The 1916 adultery ordinance only applied to married women, and there was no other legislation until the 1927 Native Affairs Act that could be used to deal with prostitutes. In addition, the municipality generally turned a blind eye to African prostitution in and around town. When specific complaints were made, town officials notified the police. In 1929 a white municipal employee alleged that town officials did not even support an increase in antiveneral disease measures and that they were of the opinion that “prostitutes at the Location were a necessity, as a safeguard for the white women.”

In 1928 the native commissioner in Salisbury commented on the need for additional accommodation for employed Africans in town, noting

44 Interviews with Mrs. Joanna Scott Mwelase, May 31, 1989; Mr. L. Gutsa, November 5, 1988; Mr. L. C. Vambe, February 17, 1989; Mrs. M. Chagaresango, February 21, 1989; Mrs. B. Charlie, February 21, 1989 (conducted by myself and Everjoyce Win).
45 Oral evidence of John Moeketsi, Simon and Barton to Native Affairs Commission of Inquiry into the Salisbury Native Municipal Location, 1930, 22, 63, S85.
46 See Town Ranger reports, 1923–29; Medical Officer of Health reports, 1924–29, LG51/1; LG51/1/7.
47 Miss M. Waters, Organizing Instructress, Department of Native Education, memo to Director of Native Education, May 11, 1929, S246/532.
that "there are so many prostitutes [in the municipal location] that all the respectable natives refuse to live and bring their families up there."48 Brisk sales of domestic labor, indeed! Also in 1928, the colony's medical director expressed the contradictions of the settler state policy on prostitution. On one hand, he saw prostitution as a necessary evil when there were so many urban men living apart from their families. On the other hand, venereal infection from contact with Africans was one of the great phobias of the white population, and the state therefore had to be seen to be doing something to protect the white public health. Neatly balancing these opposites, he laid the blame for venereal disease on a superhuman creature he called "the travelling native prostitute": "So far, in the course of our [antivenereal disease] campaign, we have elicited some interesting facts, one of these being the great difficulty which exists in contending with the travelling native prostitute who wanders around the country, changing her name, in some cases, at every town. These people are difficult to trace and control but we are doing our best and getting them by degree. . . . I can assure you that we have our machinery for getting hold of these women, and prosecuting them for conveying infection."49 Here, women's exercise of mobility, sexuality, and cash-earning ability were being clearly articulated as a crime against the state. Women were struggling to allocate their labor as they saw fit. The 1920s were the decade in which the battle lines of such urban struggles were definitively drawn.

"To meet the insistent requests of the native community":50 African women and the 1936 Native Registration Act

Reports from the early 1930s indicate that capitalism had thoroughly penetrated Southern Rhodesian African households. For example, traditional methods of producing domestic items were almost nonexistent in the Goromonzi district, and by 1931 even rural women's methods of food preparation had been largely transformed as they sold their grain and bought it back ground.51 This degree of dependence on the cash economy was unfortunate given the difficulties that were to beset rural

48 Annual report of the NC Salisbury, 1928, 3, S235/506.
49 Under Section 19 of the Public Health Act of 1924, it was possible to notify government authorities that a person was knowingly conveying a venereal infection, but there is no record that anyone was so prosecuted ("Report on meeting of prevalence of Venereal Disease in Southern Rhodesia," 7–12, S1173/220).
50 CNC Carbutt, Native Affairs Conference, 1933, 76, S1564.
51 Annual report of the NC Goromonzi, 1931, S235/509. Women's increasing purchase of fashionable clothing was also a frequent matter of comment; the other side of the coin was shown by the 1932 observation that so-called Kaffir truck merchants—those catering in the segregated economy to African customers—were among the wealthiest settlers in the colony (NC Fort Usher letter to SON Bulawayo, November 13, 1934, S1542/S12; Native Affairs Department Annual [NADA], [1932], 10:57).
households in the early 1930s. The passage of the Land Apportionment Act in 1930 institutionalized territorial segregation and further restricted the acreage of the reserves; in 1931 came the quadruple threat of drought, outbreaks of serious cattle disease, the implementation of the racially discriminatory Maize Control Act, and the full effects of the Great Depression.

By the 1930s a few urban women were earning money in formal employment: at the time of the 1936 census, approximately 6 percent of the African women in Salisbury were formal wage workers. They were spurred to seek urban employment by economic problems, but social motives had begun to operate as well. As one well-educated worker said in 1932, “I had a certain amount of training as a nurse but was unable to get work as a hospital nurse. I am quite satisfied to work as a domestic servant. The conditions under which I work are quite all right. I think other girls would like to work in town. If we work in European houses we learn how to improve our own homes.”

Women’s mobility and the distribution of its proceeds became even more important to African families in the difficult times of the 1930s. Allegations of increasing levels of prostitution abounded; typical was the comment of one official that “the wholesale manner in which the women are throwing aside all their old habits of decency and flocking to the industrial areas is perfectly appalling.” Other officials alleged that rural families had begun to rely on the proceeds of urban prostitution: “You get the question of women entering town from the reserves. . . . [Men] send their daughters into town, and this time of year the towns are full of women. The women at tax time are sent in to get the tax. They get a blanket for mother and a coat for father and father says, ‘Thank you very much,’ but there are no enquiries as to what she had been doing in the last few weeks. I put that to the meeting of the Native Association and it was received with laughter. They knew it was true.” Similarly, Miss Caroline Renhas, born in 1919, recalled that in her girlhood, when her unmarried sister Porina, who lived in Salisbury, returned to the rural areas to visit their parents, no questions were asked as to how she had

52 Figures calculated from Native Location Superintendent’s report, Salisbury Mayor’s Minutes, 1934; and Report of the Director of Census, 1936, 100; Southern Rhodesia Census Reports, 1901–36.
53 Oral evidence of “Amelia” to Commission of Inquiry into Native Female Domestic Service, 594. The teachers and nurses who were to become prominent figures of urban society in the 1950s and 1960s were still being trained or getting their first jobs in this period; domestic workers were the urban female elite until the 1950s (see Lawrence Vambe, From Rhodesia to Zimbabwe [London: Heinemann, 1976], 190–91).
55 NC Salisbury, Native Affairs Advisory Conference, 1931, 102, S235/486.
earned the money to pay for the little bundle of presents which she invariably brought along.56

An escalation in the struggles between African men and women in the 1930s is evinced by the inclusion of several sections relating to women in the 1936 Native Registration Act. Although scholarly attention has been given to aspects of this wide-ranging piece of legislation, its first main objective, “To safeguard Native Society, especially its womankind,” has so far been ignored.57 The act included specific provisions meant to satisfy persistent male demands for effective restrictions on women’s mobility. As such it represented the further institutionalization of women as the hostages of men, as Mbilinyi has observed for colonial Tanzania.58 Thus the chief native commissioner stated in correspondence on the proposed act in 1933, “We are endeavoring to assist the kraal natives to control their women.”59

There were more than a few contradictory elements in this alliance between African men and the colonial state.60 First, as Terence Ranger states in his work on the Makoni district in the eastern region of Manicaland, by the late 1930s peasants were well aware that their interests and those of the state were in many ways incompatible; yet male peasants simultaneously supported an alliance with the state against African women.61 Second, as previously noted, struggles over the proceeds of

56 Miss Caroline Renhas interview, February 27, 1989.
58 Mbilinyi (n. 4 above), 25.
59 CNC Carbutt, Native Affairs Conference, 1933, S1564.
60 Calls for passes for women came from many quarters. These included rural “native boards,” the Rhodesia Agricultural Union, and white employers in the town of Gwelo (England [n. 17 above], 53; Ranger, “Women in the Politics of Makoni District” [n. 14 above], 13; correspondence in S1542/N2, S482/224/39, and S482/365/39). All this commotion contradicts Schmidt’s idea that the social and economic importance of women’s work in African families was diminishing in the 1930s as the rural dependence on wages grew. To the contrary, such evidence suggests that in difficult economic times women’s work was of primary economic and social importance (Schmidt, “Ideology, Economics, and the Role of Shona Women in Southern Rhodesia, 1850–1939,” chap. 2).
61 Research is desperately needed into the class and age profiles of the rural patriarchs who play such a large role in this article. Unfortunately, at this point I can only reiterate that there were a number of vocal African men who demanded greater control over women. In the meantime it may be noted that Ranger quotes the NC Inyanga in 1911: “The young women are breaking up and breaking through all native custom. . . . The present conduct of the missionaries [in sheltering runaway women] falls very heavily
women’s mobility had perhaps become more important than the simple restriction of mobility itself. Thus, for example, the chiefs of the Goromoni district wanted the state to allow only married women brandishing marriage certificates into towns. Presumably they would be under the more direct exercise of what was euphemistically termed “tutelage” than their unmarried sisters. But restricting women’s freedom of movement could logically be expected to also restrict the earnings that could be shared with or appropriated by relatives. A third contradiction involved in the legislation was the state’s position on prostitution. The government continued to define the urban activities of unattached women as immoral and continued to style itself as guiding Africans forward “on the tedious journey from barbarism to civilization.” But the state could not turn all its weapons on African prostitutes. First, the settlers thought that black men needed constant access to black prostitutes to ward off the “black peril”—sexual relations between black men and white women, one of the settlers’ great cultural phobias. Second, officials worried that a vigorous campaign to eradicate prostitution might cause “grave discontent” in urban communities. Third, as White has observed for colonial Nairobi, prostitution was not the most inefficient way to provide minimal domestic services to urban men. Last, trapped in its own logic, the state would have no grounds to refuse a woman a pass even if she was traveling to town to engage in prostitution if she could prove that she had her guar- dian’s permission to leave home.63

62 Schmidt, “Farmers, Hunters and Gold-Washers” (n. 4 above), 71.

63 To government officials, the latter problem conjured up images of the state apparatus rendered legally defenseless against armies of parentally sanctioned prostitutes (annual report of the CNC, 1930, S138/1; John Pape, “Black and White: The Perils of Sex in Colonial Zimbabwe,” Journal of Southern African Studies, vol. 16, no. 4 [1990]; White, The Comforts of Home [n. 4 above], 140). While white women were denied ac-
Another difficulty that the state must have had to contend with was the continuing determination of urban women to act in their own interest. Conflict over women's access to municipal beer halls in the urban locations provides an example of this determination. Beer halls were one of the few spaces where urban women had easy access both to men—presumably for the purposes of friendship and to offer sexual services—and to recreation. In 1922, women were prohibited from entering the beer hall in the Salisbury location after 5 P.M. In protest, they initiated a boycott of the facility and "for a time" male customers joined in.64 In 1930 another incident was reported: "A form of adulterated hop beer is made by the natives in the Location. The Location Superintendent for a short while forbade the making of this beer; immediately the women boycotted the Beer Hall and the men fell into line. The boycott lasted for two days, I believe, when the Location Superintendent cancelled his instructions."65 In 1932, the annual Conference of Christian Natives requested that the Salisbury authorities provide "separate accommodation at the [beer] Halls for women, apart from men." The chief native commissioner cautioned Salisbury officials that such a measure would lead to a fall of revenue from the beer hall; the municipality therefore declined to restrict the women's access. In the 1940s, however, the state did attempt to separate female from male drinkers in the beer halls but simply concluded that "the separation of the sexes has [not] had the beneficial effects which . . . had been hoped for."66 The overt and covert struggles over women's access to beer halls suggest several things: women's willingness to confront the authorities over important economic issues using a variety of tactics; the continuing willingness of some African men to request intervention from the state against women's mobility; and lastly, the state's ambivalence in that intervention.

In 1936 the state, trying to come to grips with the complexities of urban gender relations, compromised on a pass and registration law for Africans that sought to legislate only a diluted "purity" in the towns. Married women, who were assumed to be under the full control of their husbands and therefore did not require any further restriction, were

64 Yoshikune, "Black Migrants in a White City" (n. 17 above), 106.
65 Oral evidence of John Moeketsi to the Native Affairs Commission of Inquiry into the Salisbury Native Municipal Location, 1930, 22, S85.
66 Honorable Secretary of the Southern Rhodesia Missionary Conference to Salisbury Town Clerk, July 8, 1932; CNC to Salisbury Town Clerk, September 13, 1932; Town Clerk to Southern Rhodesia Missionary Conference, September 21, 1932; Location Superintendent to Medical Officer of Health, July 22, 1942—all in Salisbury Municipality file 12/7/21, jacket 1.
allowed to stay in urban areas without any sort of pass. The act did try to restrict some women, however: single women, like unemployed men, needed a “town pass” to enter a town. Section 8 of the legislation was clearly aimed at them:

Section 8. An officer who is authorized to issue visiting passes may refuse to issue the pass if on satisfactory evidence he has reason to believe that the applicant—

(a) is a person of loose or immoral character, or of idle or vagrant habits, having no lawful purpose to perform within the township;

(b) is seeking to visit the township for an unlawful purpose or for the purpose of sexual immorality;

(c) is a minor according to native law and is seeking to visit the township for the purpose of evading parental authority.67

However, both the letter and spirit of this segregationist law turned out to be unworkable in the economy of the mid-1930s, and the state’s actions belied the tough language of the act. In relation to urban women, the state tried to come to grips with only two segments of the urban female population—girls recently arrived from rural areas and the mapoto women of the locations. For example, a detective of the Bulawayo police reported in 1935 that “when raids take place obvious confirmed prostitutes are left alone. Only young [single] girls are interrogated and are taken before the [Native Commissioner] who interrogates them individually and decides which ones shall be ordered out of town.”68

The state also began to elaborate its definitions of urban women. There were wives (women under the control of husbands) and prostitutes

67 Statute Law of Southern Rhodesia (Salisbury: Government Printer, 1939), 2:77. The act compromised between demands for restrictions on women and the problems of issuing passes to them wholesale. In 1927, the CNC had pointed out that if an “immoral” woman had her guardian’s consent to earn money, the state would have to give her a pass; compulsory passes were therefore, “impractical.” The BSAP Commissioner agreed in 1935 that enforcement would run into, “many difficulties” (S235/493, S2; BSAP Commissioner letter to CNC, July 19, 1935, S235/383 [see also n. 64 above]). This anticipation of difficulties may have come in part from observation of resistance to passes for women on the Rand in the 1920s and 1930s (see Katherine Eales, “Patriarchs, Passes and Privilege: Johannesburg’s African Middle Classes and the Question of Night Passes for African Women, 1920–1931,” in Holding Their Ground: Class, Localty and Culture in 19th and 20th Century South Africa, ed. Phil Bonner et al. (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1989)). For Southern Rhodesian reactions, see Barnes, “To Raise a Hornet’s Nest” (n. 2 above). For allegations of police misbehavior and rape charges, see S235/486, 102; BSAP Commissioner letter to CNC, July 19, 1935, S235/383; BSAP Commissioner, Circular Instruction no. 26/37, S1542/A1/20, vol. 2.

68 Detective Sergeant Fitzgerald, Bulawayo BSAP, staff memo “Immorality by young native females,” 1935, S1222.
(cannon fodder in the fight against “the black peril”) but, after 1936, there were also “concubines”—the mapoto women—who fell somewhere in between the worthy and the wicked. If the concubines would only follow the state’s urging to solemnize or register their relationships with men, legalistic concerns would be satisfied and the small armies of women in the towns could be maintained with a minimum of action.⁶⁹

In 1936 the CNC asked for estimates of the numbers of “concubines” in the Salisbury and Bulawayo locations, but cautioned his minions that “some of these women may be respectable from a Native point of view and no action which may cause unnecessary resentment should be taken in getting this information.” The reply from the Salisbury native commissioner contained the following breakdown of the eight hundred women residents of the location: 150 properly married wives, 150 so-called respectable single women, 50 “professional” prostitutes, and 450 concubines. In Bulawayo it was estimated that out of 1,225 women in the location, there were 300 prostitutes, 200 married women, and a whopping 725 concubines. If all these “concubines” were to marry, it would be necessary to take action only against “the professionals”—roughly a quarter of the women of the two locations.⁷⁰

The Native Registration Act did not come into force until January 1938, one year later than originally planned. Government correspondence from 1937 is full of instructions to officials that amounted to planning its virtual nonenforcement. Instructions to the colony’s police force stated that although the purpose of the act was to keep Africans “of bad character” out of towns, those entering on “legitimate business” were not to be interfered with. This in itself obviated the town pass ideal. Further, African policemen, whose official image had been severely tarnished by a number of allegations of rapes of African women, were also specifically instructed not to ask women for identification (marriage certificates or town passes) unless they were under the supervision of European police.⁷¹ Since African officers frequently operated without such supervision, African women were thus freed of some of the harassment which the act was meant to institutionalize.

In 1937 the chief medical official in Salisbury anticipated that the pending implementation of the act would adversely affect a large pro-

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⁶⁹ Salisbury municipal location superintendent to Medical Officer of Health, April 8, 1940, City of Salisbury Municipal File 12/7, jacket 11; Secretary for Native Affairs letter to Town Clerks, n.d., S482/535. The colonial state objected to mapoto women because they evaded parental control and were not properly married—not because they were providing cheap services to urban male workers. Even representatives of the metropolitan state defended “temporary marriage” in Southern Rhodesian towns (British House of Commons, extract from official report of May 17, 1938, S1542/A1/20, vol. 1).

⁷⁰ CNC to Town Clerk, Salisbury, September 5, 1936; NC Salisbury to CNC, September 9, 1936. S1542/S12.

⁷¹ See n. 68 above.
portion of the location women. He was mistaken.\textsuperscript{72} For reasons outlined above, it seems that the act hardly interfered with the location community but did at least temporarily reduce the number of new female migrants into the town. Thus the native commissioner in Salisbury reported in 1938 that there was a marked decrease in young single women coming into the location and that there had also been a decrease in complaints about runaway women from a neighboring rural district. As for the women already resident in the location, he solicitously observed, “There was at first some uneasiness felt by women folk in the location who anticipated that they would be unduly hampered when contemplating visits to the [“white” areas of] Town on their lawful and reasonable occasions. The difficulty has been overcome and native wives (and families) of location residents are protected from the inconvenience which they feared.”\textsuperscript{73}

In 1938 about eight hundred of the 6,200 people living in the location were women. In the first six months of that year, the location superintendent issued permits to some of these women: forty-six to stay in the location indefinitely, thirty-one to stay for more than ten days, and eighteen to stay for ten days or less. One hundred thirty-four permit applications were refused.\textsuperscript{74} The small number of applications (229) and of what might be called permanent residence permits (forty-six) for more than eight hundred women suggests that applying for a permit was an act that most women chose to ignore. This exemplifies the way in which, by the late 1930s, the fight to restrict women’s mobility was already developing new levels of complexity.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Many more aspects of the history of colonial Zimbabwe must be researched before we can develop a more accurate and nuanced understanding of the changing relationships between African people, metropolitan capital, and the colonial state and the ways in which these were refracted through the prisms of class formation and gender. Nonetheless,

\textsuperscript{72} Medical Officer of Health to Town Clerk, November 18, 1937, City of Salisbury Municipal File 12/7, jacket 6.

\textsuperscript{73} NC Salisbury to CNC, August 31, 1938, S1542/A1/20, vol. 2. This discussion of the “nonenforcement” of some colonial legislation is not meant to insinuate that African women led easy lives in Southern Rhodesian towns. Although the state did not use all of its resources to get at women, it certainly used some. Details about urban conditions during this period are beyond the scope of this article, but the literature shows just how awful they were (see Yoshikune, “Black Migrants in a White City” [n. 17 above]; Lawrence Yembe, \textit{From Rhodesia to Zimbabwe} [n. 54 above], and \textit{An Ill-Fated People} [London: Heinemann, 1977]; William Saidi, \textit{The Old Bricks Lives} [Gweru: Mambo Press, 1989]).

\textsuperscript{74} Salisbury native location superintendent, memo, August 27, 1938, S1542/A1/20, vol. 2.
it is clear that these relationships were characterized by significant struggles over the allocation of women's labor in both rural and urban areas. Once the colonial state began the restructuring of African society, the struggles between men and women developed to such proportions that the state itself, paradoxically, was called in to mediate. It intervened on two levels. The first was to pass legislation that sought to reinforce male control over women, unequivocally supporting the claims of fathers and husbands over wives and daughters. This legislation was complementary to the state's general segregationist stance. On another level, however, all-out attacks were not launched on the mobility of women because their daily performance in the urban and mining areas of the myriad tasks of domestic labor—cooking, cleaning, sewing, child rearing, supplementing male incomes, and providing sexual services—was vital for the reproduction of the migrant male labor force and for the development of the colonial capitalism that was predicated on that labor. This suggests a dialectical relationship between family labor and the rise of the colonial state: while the outcome of the struggle between men and women generally supported the development of capitalism by enabling the state to appropriate the fruits of family labor, that same domestic struggle increasingly occurred inside capitalist parameters.

Some women appear to have sought a level of economic independence for themselves in defiance of both the wishes of their male relatives and the laws of the state. In the Southern Rhodesian political economy, mobility was the key to this independence. Women explored and developed socioeconomic options; African men and the state wrestled to find ways to appropriate the fruits of women's migrant labor instead of merely restricting their mobility. Despite calls from many quarters, women were never burdened with identity documents, registration certificates and the like; their mobility was tacitly acknowledged to be crucial to their labor.

From the Salisbury women's beer hall boycotts of the 1920s to the rock-throwing of "Anna alias Flora" in 1933, from the relative freedom of mapoto liaisons to the organized accumulation represented by Emma MaGumede and by the Bulawayo property owners, ordinary women constantly wrung whatever gains they could from a range of meager opportunities. In so doing, they at least bequeathed a legacy of resourcefulness to their daughters.

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