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# Water as a Weapon: The History of Water Supply Development in Nkayi District, Zimbabwe

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## SUMMARY

This paper argues that much historical and political analysis of Zimbabwe neglects a crucial resource: water. Using data from Nkayi district, evidence is presented to show how access to water rather than land has been the critical factor in its settlement and development. Water supplies were provided by the state during the first half of the century to support economic and fiscal policies and to render forced resettlement possible. During the years of struggle preceding and including the Liberation War, control over water was used as a weapon, and this remained a significant issue in the post-Independence period. Examples are offered of people's resistance to such control through non-cooperation in water development activities and the evolution of a culture of minimal water use strongly associated with concepts of solidarity and survival. Finally the implications of this historic legacy for current development initiatives are discussed.

## INTRODUCTION: WATER, THE ABSENT ELEMENT

Much that has been written about the history of Zimbabwe focuses on control over land for settlement, agriculture and grazing. Ranger proposes the development of peasant political consciousness largely in response to land issues (Ranger 1985) and it is commonly held that mobilisation of people in support of the guerrilla war was based on calls to regain lands lost to the whites. The dominance of land as the defining issue in Zimbabwean politics continues in contemporary commentaries on the post independence state and the problems facing Zimbabwe today.

Whilst land is no doubt a critical issue both in historic and contemporary Zimbabwe, I suggest that there is a major element missing in the construction of Zimbabwean history in this way, that is the issue of access to and control over water. Iliffe has characterised Zimbabwe as the 'Sahel of the South', a country struck by periodic and seasonal droughts and with huge regional variations in

water resource endowments (Iliffe 1990: 13). As availability of water is the determining factor in the possibility of land utilisation it seems remarkable that control over water resources is notably absent from many analyses and where mentioned at all it is only done so in passing, usually in relation to 'health' or 'infrastructure' issues (for an example see Stoneman and Cliffe 1989).

Those writers who do consider in detail the significance of water tend to concentrate on rainfall, surface water sources and wetlands (Wilson 1988, Lan 1985, Moyo 1991), and yet a large and growing proportion of the rural population are dependent on man made and protected water sources in the form of wells and boreholes, particularly in the West and South of the country. This is significant because of the possibility for control, rationing and exclusion afforded by handpump technology (pumps can be disconnected, sites fenced, entry barred). The use of such 'protected' sources is not a purely post-independence phenomena, records exist to show the development of such facilities from the early years of the twentieth century and many boreholes sunk at this time are still in use (Cleaver 1990).

Pauline Peters makes similar points in her study of borehole development in Botswana; and suggests that attempts to control water resources have been an integral part of the struggles for political power and control over land. She suggests that water has nevertheless been a neglected element in studies of Botswana:

while the emphasis on rain and water in Tswana thought, symbol and ritual parallels that of cattle, the centrality of control over waterpoints to the political organisation of Tswana chiefdoms has been generally neglected by historians and anthropologists.... Early travellers remarked that the most common source of conflict between groups was over grazing pastures, but when one realises that these pastures were in fact defined by the presence of water sources, one can restate the conflicts as being over water. (Peters 1984: 31)

What explanations can be found for the neglect of such a critical resource? Much historical and political analysis has been based on the situation and events in the North and East of Zimbabwe. Such areas, which largely fall into the more favoured agro-ecological zones, are suitable for rainfed agriculture and water supply only becomes of major concern there in periods of drought. However, Auret notes that 33% of Zimbabwe's population live in the three provinces that predominantly fall into Natural Regions 3 and 4; these being Matabeleland North, Matabeleland South and Masvingo. In these regions, which receive less than 650mm of rain a year, livestock are a more reliable form of agricultural production than crops, surface water is scarce and many people are entirely dependent on groundwater pumped through boreholes (Auret 1990: 121-2). Few studies have dealt specifically with conditions in Matabeleland where availability of water is and always has been critical. Those who have nevertheless

maintained a narrow focus on the distribution of land as the key issues (Alexander 1991).

Another reason for the neglect of water may be found in the focus in the literature on 'the peasantry' and 'peasantisation' in Zimbabwe which has inevitably lead to an emphasis on agricultural production rather than wider livelihood concerns. And yet securing adequate supplies of water for survival is a daily concern of millions of rural Zimbabweans, in particular of women.

This paper is a small attempt to rectify this imbalance. Using data obtained during my study of water resource management in Nkayi district, Matabeleland North, I argue that water has been a critical factor in the historic development of the district. I suggest that the provision of water supplies was used by the state in support of economic and fiscal policies and to render resettlement policies possible. Drawing on oral as well as written evidence I illustrate how during the years of political struggle preceding and including the liberation war, control over water was used as a weapon, and how it remained a significant issue in the post Independence period. Examples are offered of people's resistance to such control through non-cooperation in water development activities, and the evolution of a culture of minimal water use strongly associated with concepts of solidarity and survival. Finally I will speculate on some of the implications of these issues for current development activities.

The material used in this paper is based on research conducted in Nkayi District during 1992, and 1994. As the history of water supply development was not the focus of this research, the evidence presented here is patchy, particularly as archival records from the late 1950s onwards are difficult to obtain. I hope, however, that this paper will raise some questions and indicate possible areas for further research.

## NKAYI BACKGROUND

Nkayi District<sup>1</sup> is located in the province of Matabeleland North in the north western part of Zimbabwe. It is entirely situated in Natural Region 4, characterised under the national land classification system as having low rainfall (450-600mm per year), mean temperature of 20-25°C and seasonal droughts. Such areas are considered suitable only for the growing of drought resistant crops and semi-extensive livestock production. Due to the large amount of forest land unsuitable for cropping and grazing, severe land and water pressure is felt in the district. Water is scarce, the main rivers running dry for much of the year and a large proportion of the population (informal estimates suggest up to 90%) dependent on boreholes and hand-dug wells. Not all these produce water throughout the year and many of the small dams also dry up and are subject to silting.

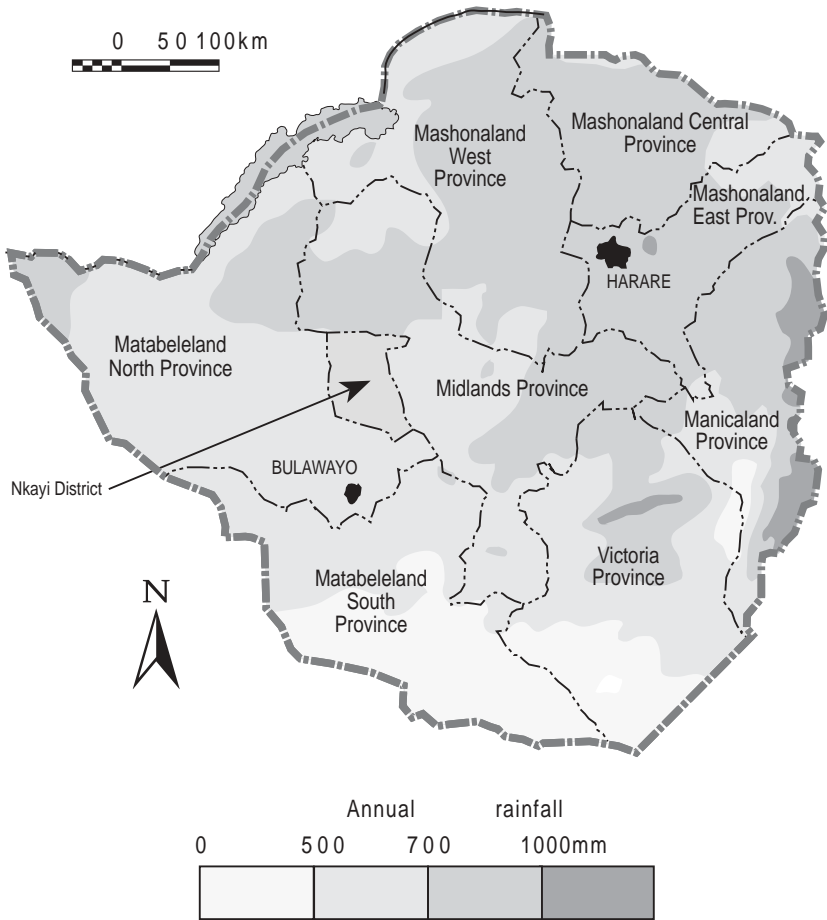


FIGURE 1. Location of Nkayi District in Zimbabwe  
Annual rainfall distribution after Nelson (1983)

### HISTORY OF WATER SUPPLY DEVELOPMENT

The area demarcated as Shangani Reserve in 1894 was at first sparsely inhabited, mostly by Tonga people. These were gradually replaced by the Ndebele people after the destruction of the Ndebele state in 1893 and the clearance of central Matabeleland in support of the British South Africa Company's white agricultural policy from the early twentieth century onwards. According to an incum-

bent of the London Missionary Society Station at neighbouring Inyati, one of the reasons for people's movement into the reserves was due to their 'intense yearning to live in some secluded place out of the reach of the prospectors and the police... The natives about here have been the greatest sufferers during and after the war' (Bowen Rees 1894 quoted in Clarke 1993).

At this stage settlement was primarily along the main rivers and reports of the LMS missionaries and the Native Commissioners, both based in Inyati some 60 miles away, repeatedly mention the remoteness and poor climate of the reserve and its dubious suitability for human settlement. Doubts about the reserve were also expressed when it was inspected under the auspices of the Native Reserves Commission in 1915 which offered the following description:

It consists of a series of high sandy ridges from three to fifteen miles broad, well covered with a good class of timber, and with narrow valleys usually holding water. This country merits some consideration, for the long ridges or 'gusu' are quite waterless, and offer but poor grazing. The soil itself is of fair quality, but until water is obtained, this 'gusu' country, though potentially of some value, can carry but a small population. (HMSO, 1917)

Despite this view it appears that the reserve was ultimately deemed suitable for settlement and a steady trickle of displaced people continued to move into it. The history of water supply development can be divided loosely into four periods.

#### *a. 1920s and 1930s*

During this period, there appear to have been a number of interrelated official motives for the provision of additional water supplies, these being to support resettlement of the African population from European farms in central Matabeleland, to strengthen the Rhodesian cattle industry, and to ensure that people were able to pay taxes through the raising and sale of cattle. (Concerns about conservation also seem to have informed policies for water supply development.)

By the 1920s the areas considered habitable along the main river banks of the reserve were becoming congested, and the Native Commissioners report the commencement of water boring operations to open up new land in 1927 and the installation of tanks for cattle dipping away from the river valleys to ease this situation. Once started, borehole drilling proceeded rapidly, and by 1930 thirty-two successful boreholes were in place, mostly fitted with windmill pumps and storage tanks (Annual Report for 1930, NC Bubi). During these early years, boreholes were commonly installed in association with dip tanks.

A writer in the annual journal of the Department of Native Affairs (NADA) suggested that judicious planning of water supplies and sensible use of grazing in the reserves would help them to 'produce large numbers of good slaughter

animals which will help Rhodesia as a whole to supply the quantity and quality of beef required to establish overseas markets' (Anderson 1926). Old people remember that Nkayi cattle were renowned for their quality and that they could get better prices from dealers who visited from Bulawayo than they could at official cattle sales, an issue which seems to have concerned the administrators.

However, the international cattle trade must have seemed very remote from the heart of Nkayi, and the Native Commissioners had a more immediate concern in keeping cattle alive; they saw them as a vital element in people's ability to pay taxes. The reports are littered with concerned references to cattle 'keeping their condition' through dry periods, and the prospects for revenue collection. In his report for 1931 the Native Commissioner expressed his view of the need to open up the cattle market – failing which he feared being unable to collect taxes in the coming year (Annual Report for 1931, NC Bubi). The issue was particularly critical in Nkayi where other income generating opportunities were scarce, there being no immediately adjacent white farming areas nor markets for goods produced and no large scale labour migrancy during this period.

The well-being of cattle and cash from their sale was also important for the further development and maintenance of water supplies. The Native Reserves Commission of 1915 had recommended a policy of cost recovery for water suggesting that it was the 'duty' of those using such supplies to provide both the bulk of the labour for their implementation and 'in the course of time a great portion of their cost'. It was suggested that new residents entering the reserves could be asked to pay a lump sum to meet the capital cost of water supplies and that an annual water tax could be levied to provide for maintenance (HMSO 1917: 28). There being no grain market in the district, the sale of cattle was one of the few means by which residents could have met such cash demands. However, in the mid 1920s Jennings refers to the difficulties this policy had faced nationally particularly in terms of the recovery of costs from resettled people, and suggests that the government had resigned itself to meeting initial capital costs 'but that maintenance and repairs were properly matters for the natives themselves' (Jennings c.1924: 7). This indeed seems to have been the policy adopted in Nkayi where the Sobkukos (kraalheads) were responsible for collecting money from the people if their borehole needed repairs. A technician would then be sent from Nkayi to carry out the repairs (Interviews with D Nyoni, P Nyoni, J Mantoni Aug-Dec 1992).

The water supply development programme was not greatly successful in attracting people to move into the district which was regarded at the time as unhealthy, dangerous (full of wild animals) and waterless. Moreover, the strong preference for river water and for residence close to the river meant few existing inhabitants of the district moved into the interior. Commenting on this the Native Commissioner wrote in 1932 'The boreholes provided away from the rivers do not appear to attract many, as artificial water supplies are not popular. The

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grazing in the Shangani Reserve, away from the Shangani River and the other rivulets can only be described as “very poor” (Annual Report for 1932, NC, Bubi).

*b. 1940s and 1950s*

The second period can be characterised as one in which water supplies became the determining factor in the success of large resettlement programmes. These decades saw the two waves of forced resettlement into the district from areas designated for European farming, the first being a small movement from neighbouring Bubi in 1947, the second a major resettlement of people from more distant Filabusi in 1952. Of the earlier resettlement the Native Commissioner wrote:

It is anticipated that some 3,000 to 5,000 natives from European land in adjoining districts will be moving into this district during the present year. This will call for an accelerated programme of development. Additional water supplies, dipping tanks and the centralisation of native affairs are badly needed.... (Annual Report for 1946, NC Shangani District)

A significant borehole drilling programme was undertaken, this often being the only infrastructure provided prior to moving people into the area. The current District Administrator, whose family were moved in to the district as part of the Filabusi resettlement gave this account of associated water development:

This was a major resettlement and was planned. This was when the largest number of boreholes were sunk. One borehole was provided for every ‘line’ consisting of up to twenty or thirty homes. The boreholes were put there before the people – one of the aims was to ensure that the cattle would be kept alive. The boreholes were put in by the Native Development Fund and maintained by them, there was absolutely no local participation. Boreholes were often sited near dip tanks. At this time people often complained of inadequate numbers of boreholes and long breakdowns. The Land Development Officer was in charge of water. (Interview with Mr J Nhiziyo 04/08/92)

The movement into ‘lines’ refers to the centralisation policy of the late 1930s and the 1940s which appears to have been conducted in association with resettlement into the district. Centralisation was justified on the basis of planned land use, with the designation of areas for arable and grazing land and for village settlement and was intended to overcome perceived problems of land degradation and to facilitate conservation measures. However, it was only partially successful in Nkayi largely due to the constraints of inadequate water. In 1945 the Land Development Officer reported the discontinuation of drawing of the lines: ‘there is not sufficient water on the lines for them to be occupied’ (LDO 17/12/45).



*c. 1960s and 1970s*

These decades saw the growing politicisation of water as political activity in the 'reserves' burgeoned in the 1960s and the war finally broke out in the 1970s. During this period both explicit and implicit struggles for control over water supplies was a critical factor in people's lives.

Political activity initially included a refusal to use cattle dips and many of these were later destroyed by guerrillas. We can assume that this might have a significant effect on ability to use the adjacent boreholes. One informant referred to exclusion from the area around the dip tanks which must have included the borehole:

During the war we didn't dip the cattle. We started again in 1980. No one was allowed to come near the dip then – the guerrillas stopped us. One of the men I was working with was killed. (Mr Mkelele, Dipkeeper Ngwaladi 02/10/92)

More explicitly, many people remember the Native Commissioner who disconnected boreholes in areas where he believed there was hostile political activity (Interviews with Councillor Dube 30/09/92, Mr D Nyoni 06/12/92, Mr J Nhliziyo 08/10/92). The Native Commissioner involved, Noel Hunt (1963-66) was quite explicit in his admission that he deprived people of access to water as a form of collective punishment:

What happened was that... they were refusing to dip their cattle or some bloody thing, so I disconnected all the boreholes; there was no water for them, which was highly effective... When it collapsed, of course, I put all the parts back and everything was OK again... (NAZ AOH/240 Noel Allison Hunt).

The severity and significance of this episode can be emphasised by reference to the 1965 Delineation Reports from Nkayi which in community after community identify water supplies as their greatest need and lack of water as their greatest problem.

It seems likely that in a period of increasing political activity control over water supplies may have been an issue in other areas in addition to Nkayi. Certainly the Secretary for Internal Affairs writing about water supplies in 1963 suggested that 'unrest' had adversely affected the development of new supplies (NADA 1963).

By the early 1970s the war had begun in earnest, at first mainly affecting the remoter parts of the district but gradually moving in from the forest and bush to threaten the district centre itself. Water supplies suffered and borehole maintenance was a particular problem according to the current District Administrator, who remembered that during the war water was a major issue because people had to depend on other sources (Mr J Nhliziyo 04/08/92). Another informant accounted for the large number of non-operational water points:

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During the war the situation was very localised. No one would come from the District Administration to mend the borehole if the area was politically active. Especially in the remoter areas which were full of guerrillas. Moreover, if a user went to Nkayi to report a broken borehole, it would be suspected that they were going to report guerrilla activity and they were killed. (Mr D Nyoni, Eguqeni 06/12/92)

People believe that it was only plentiful rains during this period (a supernatural sign of approbation for their cause) that enabled them to survive and keep their cattle alive from surface water alone.

*d. 1980s and 1990s*

During the 1980s water supplies continued to be caught up in political conflict and the legacy of this continues even into the 1990s. By Independence it is estimated that at least 50% of boreholes were out of order (LWF 1989), a situation which must have led to considerable crowding at working facilities and a heavy reliance on scarce surface water supplies.<sup>2</sup>



FIGURE 2. Tins in a line, waiting for the pump to open

The initial post-independence period saw an atmosphere of euphoria and heightened expectations when reconstruction works took place with high levels of donor funding. Non-governmental organisations such as UNICEF and LWF began to operate in the district, mainly supporting the development of hand dug communal wells. However from 1983 onwards the security situation in Matabeleland seriously deteriorated with a recurrence of hostilities between 'dissidents' and government forces. Nkayi was one of the most badly affected districts and suffered disruption and the imposition of curfews to restrict the movement of people. Water development activities did continue for some of this period although under conditions of extreme difficulty. In a report evaluating the UNICEF well sinking programme in Matabeleland North (which ran from 1982-86 and included Nkayi) the situation was described in the following terms:

Security deteriorated drastically in the course of the programme, armed police or army escorts were required in most project areas and movement was greatly curtailed. There was increased shortage of skilled staff available and community level support was greatly hampered at many sites. (UNICEF 1986: 13)

In a report on the joint Lutheran-Catholic well sinking project which began in Tsholotsho in 1984 and other districts of Matabeleland North in 1986 reference is made to the burning out of one of their field trucks and the negative attitude of the community towards government projects 'or any projects' (LWF 1989: 16).

There is a common belief in Nkayi that many wells were not dug deep enough at this time because well-sinking teams were too afraid to stay in an area for long in case they became targets of either dissidents or soldiers. The UNICEF report partially confirms this and suggests that hand-dug wells were the technology they chose (despite the need often to dig 40 metres or more to reach water) because at that time borehole drilling rigs would have been subject to attack (UNICEF 1986: 38).

Although a new donor funded integrated water supply and sanitation programme was planned in 1986, movement outside Nkayi service centre was not considered safe until mid 1988 and so little rehabilitation of existing waterpoints or implementation of new ones took place until then. The Integrated Project therefore was unable to begin activities until 1989 and these are ongoing.

#### WATER AS A WEAPON?

As a result of this brief history we could attempt to present water as a 'tool', sometimes even a 'weapon' of government policy. We could argue that the provision of water supply facilities was used specifically to further economic and fiscal policies (cattle trade, native taxation) and to support forced resettlement

in pursuance of the promotion of European agriculture. Secondly, we could argue that the withholding of water supplies, or of access to water, was used as a weapon of political control during periods of political conflict and war.

However, this conclusion may be too generalising. It is evident even from my very limited archival data that officials at district and national level had very different views about what the policy priorities were, and hence differing views of the importance of water supply provision. Drinkwater has illustrated the conflicts in view between district level and national level officials and has suggested that, 'Within state institutions, both in the present and in the colonial period, the primary opposition to the authoritarian and technocratic attitude of the centre has come from those who work at the local level' (Drinkwater 1989: 289).

Indeed, it seems that policies towards water supply development were often disputed and sometimes contradictory. Officials at various times appear to have evoked different causes in support of cases to develop water supply facilities and to have disagreed over the desirability of water supply development. A good example of such varying views amongst officials, both at national level, is illustrated by the following: in 1935, after a seriously dry year, the Superintendent of Natives wrote to the Chief Native Commissioner bemoaning the lack of an engineer for water conservation measures in the reserves: '

Had we been able to put up numerous earth dams, cleaned out mopani pans, sunk wells in the banks of rivers and streams and clay cored long sandy stretches in rivers before the last rains, thousands of stock would have been saved' (SN to CNC16/1/35).

A contrasting view is provided by the Chief Native Commissioner who wrote in his Quarterly Review of Native Affairs April 1936 that there were some benefits from a lack of water supplies:

'There is no doubt that the very heavy loss among cattle which occurred in Matabeleland during the drought, was in effect, beneficial in as much as it reduced overstocking.' (CNC, 21/4/36).

We have already noted how officials of district level were concerned with the survival of cattle for fiscal reasons. However a major theme in national policy towards agriculture at this time was one of conservation. Until the 1940s a concern about conservation and overstocking seems largely to have been dealt with in Nkayi by opening up new areas for settlement and grazing through the provision of water supplies. Reporting for 1931 the Assistant Native Commissioner for Shangani Reserve noted that the bulk of the residents were living along the Gweru and Shangani Rivers

These riverine tracts are becoming overpopulated and congested with stock; all arable land is being occupied. It is anticipated that boring operations being carried out in unwatered areas will do much to relieve the position... (ANC Shangani 1931)

It is not clear whether this 'congestion' was due to actual pressure of population or was part of officials' view that African methods of agriculture caused erosion and degradation. The perception that residents 'abused' natural resources through fecklessness is a constant theme throughout the Native Commissioners' reports. In his 1936 report the Native Commissioner Bubi even implied that the residents were themselves responsible for water shortages. He claimed that the reserves 'are becoming overcrowded, denuded of pasture and drained of water' (NC Bubi 1936).

The Native Commissioners appear to have faced something of a dilemma. Conservation concerns dictated that new areas should be opened up for grazing and settlement but this often only served to provide further examples of erosion and degradation because of the dependence in these areas on limited numbers of boreholes. Nevertheless, it seems that the main solution was still viewed as the opening up of further land through the provision of additional boreholes:

The limited grazing of the district suffers considerably from the tramping to and fro from the dip tanks of thousands of heads of cattle weekly. This condition is aggravated by the fact that many of the tanks are erected at the only permanent water within reasonable distance. Here again it is hoped that boring operations will do much to relieve and even improve the position. (ANC, 1931 Shangani Reserve)

The major resettlements of the 1940s and 1950s saw a stronger emphasis on destocking, families to be moved into the area were to be asked to destock as were those already there (9/11/50 letter from CNC to NC Lupane). However, more prominent in the records for this period is the need expressed by national and provincial officials to proceed rapidly with borehole drilling in order to accommodate the immigrants. Opposition amongst the administrators at district level to resettlement was frequently expressed in terms of the non-availability of water. The Native Commissioners appear to have feared the influx of large numbers of disgruntled, politicised and detribalised people into their hitherto backward and peaceful district (Report of NC for 1946, Interviews with Mr J Nhliziyo 07/03/94, Mr D Nyoni 06/12/92, 06/03/94). There may have been considerable reason for these fears, as Ranger has documented the development of a political opposition amongst Filabusi residents in the 1930s prior to their removal from that district (Ranger 1985). The lack of water supplies was frequently used as a justification by the Native Commissioners for delaying resettlement. In 1951 the Native Commissioner in a letter to the Provincial Native Commissioner says that he does not know how many people to accommodate, does not have the infrastructure, and believes the district to be unsuitable for intensive settlement: 'I do not wish to be tiresome by again mentioning the Kalahari Sand, forest areas and lack of water' (NC Lupane 25/1/51 to Provincial NC).

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As written records from the mid 1950s onwards were not available to me it is not possible to adequately trace 'official' attitudes towards the use of water as a weapon of political control during the war years. However, in his own account Noel Hunt suggests that he was unable to reveal his disconnection of boreholes to the Provincial Native Commissioner who was allegedly under considerable political pressure over the incident (AOH/240 Noel Allison Hunt). It seems likely however that water supplies would have been a disputed resource during the war years, whether or not disconnection was an officially sanctioned policy.

## VOLUNTARY LABOUR AND EVERYDAY RESISTANCE

If water was used as a tool of government policy, however variably, it seems likely that resistance would have formed around this issue. However, here we are faced with a problem, as water is necessary to survival and so overt opposition through boycott or destruction of government provided facilities on a sustained basis is unlikely. We therefore have to look a little deeper for manifestations of opposition. I suggest that, although there are intermittent instances of deliberate sabotage of water supplies, the main evidence of opposition can be found in everyday forms of resistance and in the construction of a culture of minimal water use strongly associated with both natural and man-made scarcity, solidarity and survival.

James Scott suggests that peasants are unlikely except in desperate circumstances to risk outright defiance of authorities over policies which they perceive as being disadvantageous to them. Instead they are likely to adopt less risky everyday forms of resistance; non-compliance, foot dragging, deception (Scott 1985). Moreover he suggests that in the interests of survival and the imperative to meet basic needs, resistance is not necessarily directed at the immediate source of appropriation. Such a model of peasant resistance would seem to fit Nkayi before the years of overt political activity escalating into war and, intermittently, since then. Here I will try to illustrate everyday resistance to labour on development works in Nkayi and the significance of this for water supply development and in the last section of this paper I shall explore the implications for water supply development today.

There are a variety of conflicting accounts about how water supply facilities were constructed in the years before independence. Theoretically 'native labour' was paid for participating in development works and Native Commissioners reports of the 1930s and 1940s abound with complaints about the reluctance of natives to come forward and 'volunteer' for such work. An explanation for this reluctance may be found in the view of the District Councillors whom I discussed this with in December 1992, who were unanimous in the view that this had in fact

been 'forced' labour and that they had little choice when called up by the Native Commissioner but to participate. Moreover, it seems that labour on constructing boreholes was also used as a form of punishment as this example illustrates:

In 1934 I was arrested for running away with a young girl and taken prisoner at Nkayi. My sentence was to do community service under Mr Cupboard, which was helping in the drilling of Manyabe Borehole. (Interview with A Nyoni, Eguqeni 9/3/94)

The resettlement programme nationally was dependent on the construction of additional infrastructure as suggested by the Chief Native Commissioner in his Quarterly Review of Native Affairs. Under the heading 'Resettlement' he comments on the problem of availability of borehole drilling rigs and then continues:

Another factor militating against the opening up of such areas is the reluctance of the natives themselves to provide labour and it is obvious that dams and other water conservation work cannot be done without labour. (21/10/36)

We may speculate that resistance to such labour in a district where agricultural yields were low, markets non-existent and other employment opportunities distant, constituted a deliberate act of defiance; part of Nkayi residents' everyday forms of resistance. This view may be reinforced by the apparently contradictory views of two different administrators about the problem of labour. The first, who if we can judge from his reports was a conservative and hardline administrator, wrote in his 1946 report:

Labour has been scarce during the year, even for development works in native areas. The native is quick to allege he is starving and to request that the paternal government should assist, but once offered employment at current rates of pay, developing his own area, he discovers he has urgent business at home.... The lack of labour for essential work in the native areas has reached such a point that legal sanctions must be provided for the 'inducement' of able-bodied natives to turn out on important development works. (NC Shangani 1946)

However only three years later his more liberal colleague wrote:

I have had no trouble in obtaining labour for road gangs, brick making for the Native Engineering Department, and dam building. The men are asked to work for three months and are paid 30 shillings per month. (NC Nkayi 1949)

Perhaps we cannot read too much into this later success, particularly as a serious drought year had intervened in 1947, but it is interesting to speculate that the ability of this Native Commissioner to obtain labour may have been due to a temporary suspension of everyday resistance in response to an administrator who was at least willing to listen to the views of the Nkayi residents and who found them 'pleasant people'.

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There is little doubt that even when paid, the issue of labour for development works was a contentious one. Throughout the 1930s, there was little overt resistance to the state in Nkayi and minimal activities of opposition organisations, a fact noted by the Native Commissioners with some relief. However, their reports repeatedly and in great frustration mention apathy (towards improved agricultural techniques), non-cooperation (in the form of Chief's failure to assist properly in the collection of taxes) and reluctance to provide 'voluntary' labour or development works. Labour on such works appears to have become a contentious issue, as one of the Native Commissioners suggests. Writing of meetings that he suspected were organised by the Matabele Home Society in his district he claims that the 'political' nature of the meetings was clear from the subjects discussed which included more land for Africans, destocking, labour for repair to roads etc., the Land Apportionment Act and the exclusion of European traders (NC, Nkayi Quarterly Report 30/6/49).

Palmer suggests that deficient water supplies were one more grievance adding to the trauma of forced resettlement in Matabeleland 1915-25 and the subsequent development of political opposition:

To be turned off a farm in central Matabeleland often entailed a trek of fifty to a hundred miles to the nearest reserve, which was usually deficient in water supplies, and many Ndebele whose homes were on the highveld succumbed to malaria when they moved to the lower, fever stricken areas. It was in such circumstances that Nyamanda, the eldest son of Lobengula and his cousin ... gained considerable support in their campaign to restore the Ndebele monarchy and establish a national 'home'. (Palmer 1977: 238)

Although the written evidence is minimal, it does not seem too fanciful to propose that residents of Nkayi resisted policies which they perceived as being detrimental to them, partially through non-cooperation in development activities. This was one of the few means of opposition available to them at this time.

## SOLIDARITY, SCARCITY AND SURVIVAL

Whilst the interlinkages between issues of land and resettlement, labour and resistance, and their connections to water supplies can be traced, I suggest a less obvious dimension of forced resettlement into water scarce areas is significant. This is that an ability to survive both natural and man-made scarcity has become deeply embedded in the discourse of solidarity and resistance. Moral-ecological explanations for the incidence of rainfall are common in Nkayi this account being characteristic of older people:

In the 1950s there was plenty of rain but from the start of the liberation struggle the rains started to decline. 1967 was the last year that we had good thatching grass around



here... The lack of rains is due to the bad deeds by the people who are no longer following the traditional ways. There is too much fighting and too much blood being shed. The other problem is that long back the *hosanas* [spirit mediums] were respected. They would come without being asked and they were really respected. Now little respect is shown. (Amos Nyoni, Eguqeni 14/11/92)

Alternatively, many people suggested that they were blessed with plentiful rains during the war years and that springs flowed then which have since dried up. The abundance of surface water, believed to be a sign that God and the ancestral spirits were supporting the people, allowed them to survive the disconnection of boreholes and restrictions imposed by soldiers and guerrillas.

During the war [Liberation<sup>3</sup>] the borehole was not functioning, the pipes were removed and we used to get water from Kana Valley. These pipes were put back after Independence in 1982. During those days our livestock were drinking from a pool which was in the forest, just behind the school. We were lucky because in those days we had good rains and the pool did not dry up. ('Major' Nhliziyo, Sando, 3/10/92)

Wilson, writing of another area of Zimbabwe, has referred to the links between sacredness and political hegemony over natural resources and people's resistance to imposed development activities through a retreat into mysticism (Wilson 1988). However, there appears to be another form of resistance which involves attributing moral value to solidarity achieved through scarcity. People in Nkayi have a strong and deeply embedded belief in their ability to survive on minimum basic resources. In the course of my stay several people pointed out the *marula* tree, claiming that the juicy fruits of this tree had enabled them to survive during war years, on days when they were unable to leave their homes to fetch water. Additionally, accounts of such privations were generally accompanied by references to cooperation – to neighbours living together as 'one family', sharing scarce water and food:

During the war [Gukhuhundi] many many people ran away, so the few who were left stuck together or we would all be dead. We warned each other if the soldiers were coming, then would run away and spend the night in the forest together and help each other with food and water. We loved each other then. If that had continued we would be God's own people. (Mrs Sibanda, Ngwaladi Clinic 03/10/92)

It is notable that quantities of water used for domestic purposes in Nkayi are very small (estimated at 8-12 litres per capita per day) and there are strong conventions relating to preservation and non-wastage of water. Minimal water use is not merely a seasonal phenomena and scarcity conventions remain in force throughout the rainy season, sometimes in a relaxed form. As soon as a pump breaks down or source dries up, however, the scarcity conventions are fully employed. We could easily explain this minimal water use as a result of living in an area subject to natural seasonal dry spells and intermittent droughts. But it

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is possible that a culture of minimal resource use has been reinforced and extended to enable people to survive man-made drought and scarcity and to construct a discourse of solidarity around this ability.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES

A number of problems relating to attempts to develop water supplies in Nkayi since Independence can be identified, and some of these may be at least partially attributable to the historic legacy as outlined above.

Water continues to be a significant factor in determining compliance with or resistance to state directed development. The very slow progress being made in Nkayi with the Villagisation and Land Use Planning exercise is made no better by the recalcitrance of households who refuse to move out of designated 'grazing areas' into 'lines' of settlement. Many such families live close to the river beds and give easy access to 'sweet' water as a prime reason for refusing to move. They point to the queues often seen at boreholes and refer to the 'salty' or 'oily' quality of borehole water as evidence that their lives would be considerably worsened by such a move.



FIGURE 3. Taking water from a well in the dry bed of the Shanagami River

There has been intermittent, concerted and apparently inexplicable vandalism of new water supply facilities. At Zenka borehole (one of the older boreholes in a resettled area) attempts were made in the reconstruction period following Independence to improve facilities by building a tank and headworks. The work was repeatedly vandalised at night, however (Mr J Nhliziyo 4/8/92). More recently the Minutes of the District Water supply and Sanitation Sub Committee (03/08/92) referred to some communities vandalising new water supply facilities.

An explanation for this may be found in the extreme suspicion with which Nkayi people view the state and state-directed activities. People developed policies of obfuscation during the war years so as to let the authorities know as little about themselves as possible. Examples told to me were the practice of giving false names for communities (confusion over names persists to the present day) and electing old, incapable or unimportant people to positions of authority such as on village committees, so that they wouldn't be seen as 'leaders' and therefore targets for soldiers, guerrillas or later 'dissidents'. It is possible that the vandalising of boreholes is an additional manifestation of the continuation of forms of resistance.

Policies in the contemporary water supply sector are aimed at encouraging communities to participate in the construction, rehabilitation or maintenance of water supply facilities. It is suggested that people should develop a sense of 'ownership' and 'responsibility' for their wells and boreholes and that this will be facilitated by such participation. Such problems inevitably run into difficulties in Nkayi. Common responses when we asked people 'who owns this borehole' were 'the government', sometimes even 'Smith' (a reference to Ian Smith who was Prime Minister before Independence). Even more common was a belief that they could not identify ownership as the borehole was already in place when they were resettled in the area, 'we don't know who owns it because it was here when we came to this place'. Several people mentioned being brought to Nkayi and literally dumped in the forest, there being nothing there except a borehole.

As 'ownership' also involves exclusion of others from a water source it is a contentious issue and there is great pressure to maintain access to a wide variety of sources across community boundaries. This makes sense not just because certain wells and boreholes may become depleted during the dry season but because of the historic legacy of disconnection. If people fear that it is possible they may be prevented from using their regular water supply for political reasons, then it makes sense to try and maintain relations of 'water reciprocity' across an area wider than their own immediate locality. During the 1992 drought year, maintaining access to water sources became a contentious issue as, although no explicit exclusion took place, restrictions on hours of use and the

banning of scotchcarts and large drums at certain waterpoints had the effect of restricting access to users from outside the immediate community.

The legacy of 'community labour' on development works is likely to have serious repercussions on the willingness of people currently to participate in development projects. There is often an unwillingness to do this except for Food For Work schemes, or some other form of payment.

There appears to be an unjustified bias against the wells which were sunk in the 1980s and which have demonstrably made a difference to the lives of many people, particularly women, in bringing water supplies closer to home. Despite the fact that the failure rate of wells during the 1992 drought was broadly comparable to that of boreholes, people perceive that wells dry up more quickly and are less reliable. This could be due to their association of wells with the 'Gukhuraundi' period and the common belief that they were not dug deep enough as the well sinkers and the people assisting them were afraid of the soldiers and guerrillas.

Finally, there is the continued problem of minimal water use. Despite mobilisation activities and health education messages extolling the benefits of using greater quantities of clean water, people generally do not substantially increase their use of water for domestic purposes when they gain access to new facilities. This drought-induced culture of minimum water use is reinforced by the perceived need to be able to survive on as little as possible in the event of being denied access to water points. People are unlikely to substantially relax their scarcity conventions until they no longer have any fears or suspicions that they will be subject to political disconnections or restrictions on access.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper I have tried to suggest ways in which issues around the control of water could be incorporated into the history of Nkayi District. In doing this it has become clear that water is a central issue, and that in trying to implement contemporary water development projects the historic legacy should be taken into account. A number of additional issues are worthy of consideration but lack of data precluded me from discussing them here. If control over water has been so important then what evidence is there that it has been negotiated between communities; for example, what role have 'traditional' leaders had in negotiating access to artificial water supplies? Secondly, how far has the existence and location of artificial water supplies served to define or change community boundaries? These would seem to be fruitful areas for further research.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Boundary changes and sub-divisions throughout the century have resulted in the district existing under different names throughout this period. The area originally designated as Shangani Reserve by a Land Commission in 1894 was administered under Bubi District from headquarters in Inyati. In 1929 Shangani sub-district was created and in 1954 Nkayi District formed out of Shangani and parts of Lupane. Native Commissioners reports are variously written from stations at Inyati (Bubi), Lupane and Nkayi (Shangani).

<sup>2</sup> It is estimated that the 'normal' level of non-functioning handpumps in Zimbabwe is about 20% of the total (Taylor and Mudege 1992). This figure may vary according to location and season and the water sector is much exercised by the task of improving the maintenance system to reduce breakdowns and downtime.

<sup>3</sup> Nkayi people use the term 'the war' in relation both to the Liberation war prior to Independence in 1980 and the 'dissident' period post-Independence c.1983-87, which is known locally as 'Gukhurahundi'. In quotations taken from interviews with people I have indicated in brackets whether they are referring to wars of 'Liberation' or 'Gukhurahundi'.

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