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Inventing Bushcraft: Masculinity, Technology, and Environment in Central Africa, ca. 750–1250

Knowing Undocumented Pasts: The Stakes

Deep and undocumented pasts can be dangerous tools. In the absence of records telling us directly what people living long ago thought about their actions, it has been easy to read our own visions of ourselves onto the archaeological and biological records. For example, it is conventional wisdom to suggest that Man's mastery over Nature through the invention of hunting (Man the Hunter) was a transformative moment in human history. Although Woman the Gatherer is acknowledged for supplying the bulk of the diet, this dyad attributes to men the innovations—achieved through technological mastery of environments—that separated humanity from our beastly cousins. These ideas seem to say more about the high modernist techno-environmental projects of the mid-twentieth century than what men and women, children and the elderly, thought about the significance of their subsistence techniques in the Paleolithic era.

But not all undocumented pasts are inaccessible. Indeed, the ideas about gender and the environment developed by communities who left behind no written records are important and necessary political tools in modern-day debates about who endures climate change and who benefits from environmental degradation for two important reasons. They remove the possibility of naturalizing current gendered experiences of climate change and access to environmental resources, and the technologies developed to exploit them. In so doing, deep and undocumented pasts contribute—as historians and anthropologists have long done—those alternative conceptualizations, values, and case studies that are vital to challenging hegemonic narratives in the present. I am not, of course, suggesting that deep histories should be used only to reveal mistakes to be avoided or lifeways to be replicated; rather, broadening our knowledge of the possible necessarily produces ideas and questions that are (re)braided into our own lives, potentially changing the storyline in the process. In the story told here, new environments, lexicons, and masculinities were invented together in medieval south central Africa (as they have been many times in human history), but in ways that had to acknowledge the contribution of women because success in any endeavor in new

environments was understood to be homologous to human procreation. I'll return to this point about thinking through homologies in the conclusion.

The Problem: Men, Techno-environments, and Social Clout in Central Africa

Figure 1: "Two Baila men with their long hunting cones." Photograph by William Chapman. Reprinted from William Chapman, *A Pathfinder in South Central Africa: A Story of Pioneer Missionary Work and Adventure* (London: W. A. Hammond, 1910).

Between the mid-eighth and mid-thirteenth centuries, men who practiced metallurgy or hunting and fishing with spears in south central Africa (fig. 1) invented and named a new category of environment: *isokwe*, often glossed in English as "the bush." The coproduction of *isokwe*, bushcraft technologies, and the fame and even political authority enjoyed by metallurgists and spearmen has often been explained by an instrumental approach to men's labors: such men produced protein and metal—both essential to the subsistence economy. Of course, protein was more readily available through growing or gathering legumes, trapping, and communal fishing. Other scholars have explained the status of technicians of the bush through a symbolic analysis of the supposedly inherent dangers of their work, or how such labors appropriated the power of women's fertility, a point to which we will return. But we can and should listen to Africans' own words rather than assert the explanations that make sense to us.

Like many other times and places in human history, some central African men—those engaged in the "high prestige" work of hunting and smelting—claimed social and

political influence based on their ability to master high-tech work in a special environment. But, the relationship between men's status, new technologies, and environments in central Africa ca. 750–1250 explicitly acknowledged women as being central to successful actions in the environment—smelting and hunting—and did not attempt to mask that codependency. This stands in stark contrast to our emerging knowledge about the hegemonic masculinities controlling access to wealth-generating and climate-corrupting extractive carbon economies in the more recent past (see contributions to this volume).

Bellows Work and Bluster: Reworking the Ancient Windy Character of Fame

We'll pick up this story in the mid-eighth century, when speakers of the protolanguage Central Eastern Botatwe (fig. 2) cultivated personal distinction by inventing a new category of work—bushcraft—and asserting that such work was unique from a cluster of related, banal activities that had long been a part of daily life.[1] At the heart of this change was the invention of new categories of celebrated technicians. As part of a region-wide revolution in spearcraft, Central Eastern Botatwe speakers reconceptualized skill in hunting and fishing with spears as being more socially meaningful than other kinds of hunting skill. We can see this process in changing regional lexicons. Inhabitants of the southern savannas, from northeast Angola to central Zambia, developed a new noun from an older word for a kind of long blade: **-pàdó*, a "celebrated, skilled hunter/spearman." Skill in hunting with spears was nothing new, but the category of man who might become famous for it was a novel contribution to the social landscape. Famous, celebrated

Botatwe (diverged ca. 500 CE)
I. Greater Eastern Botatwe (diverged ca. 750 CE)
- a. Central Eastern Botatwe (diverged ca. 950 CE)
  - i. Kafue (diverged ca. 1250 CE)
    1. Ila
    2. Tonga
    3. Sala
    4. Lenje
  - ii. Falls (diverged ca. 1700 CE)
    1. Toka
    2. Leya
  - iii. Lundwe
- b. Soli

II. Western Botatwe (diverged ca. 1200 CE)
- a. Zambezi Hook (diverged ca. 1400 CE)
  - i. Shanjo
  - ii. Fwe
- b. Machili (diverged ca. 1425 CE)
  - i. Mbalangwe
  - ii. Subiya
  - iii. Totela

Figure 2:
Outline classification of Botatwe languages. Approximate dates of divergence of protolanguages are in parentheses, and extant languages are underlined.

1 For details of the linguistic methods and evidence undergirding this essay, see de Luna (2015).

spearmen were "marksmen" in two senses of the word. They "marked" prey, but they also "marked" certain kinds of knowledge and labor that had once been quite banal (in this case, spearcraft) as available for new social meanings.

From the vantage point of our individualistic culture, it is tempting to naturalize fame by assuming a universal ambition for its trappings. But scholarship on the historical construction of emotions, affects, and feelings suggests that we should investigate how fame was understood by the communities who invented new ways to acquire it in the closing centuries of the first millennium: How did fame work? How was it recognized? And what did it feel like to both the celebrated and the celebrants? The answer for Central Eastern Botatwe speakers was "windy" or "blustery." They inherited an old name for fame, **mpʊwo*, which derived from an older Bantu word, **-pʊ̀ʊ̀p-*, meaning "blow, wind, breath from lungs." This single root encapsulated a nested set of ideas that shaped how Central Eastern Botatwe communities thought fame worked. From the broadest, oldest meaning of "wind, breath, and lung," many Bantu languages, including some Eastern Botatwe languages, developed meanings like "spirit," "news," "opinion," "talk," or a "thing well known." This range of meanings illustrates the connections between the discursive mechanisms by which fame was literally called into being (and even physically experienced as breathless or whispered speech) through gossip, opinions, and exchanging news, and the social circuits of the living and the dead through which fame was later understood to be inherited.

As Central Eastern Botatwe speakers reconfigured the relationship between fame, subsistence technology, and the politics of knowledge in the last centuries of the first millennium, they also added new words to their lexicon of fame. At the same time that the status of **-pàdʊ́* was invented, Central Eastern Botatwe speakers similarly invented the status of **-vʊbi*, "famous, rich person," from their knowledge of an object used in metallurgy: the bellows. The development of a new form of fame from the tool used to blast air through a smithy or smelting furnace built on older ideas about the blustery, aerial character of fame encapsulated in the term **mpʊwo*—even as the knowledge and materials through which men could build up great fame and wealth shifted at the end of the first millennium.

For Central Eastern Botatwe speakers in the latter part of the first millennium, hunting, metallurgy, fame, and wind all resembled one another, however distinct they may seem to us. When the windiness of the core objects in play—a spear, bellows, spirit, or fame—was embodied in people or in their tools and landscapes, it necessarily involved the other material attributes embodied in the same entities. Such linked attributes opened connections to further metaphors and, thereby, new arguments about the social meaning of labors like hunting and metallurgy. In this case, further overlaps in the material qualities of spears and bellows and in the embodied experience of hunting and metallurgy converged at the human-made intersection between the geographies of spearcraft, smelting, and spirits' influence: the bush, **-sókwe*.

Central Eastern Botatwe men who engaged in those forms of hunting and metallurgy that were associated with fame and wealth, did so under the cover of the bush. The bush was a key concept for understanding the ritual dimensions of local landscapes. It was associated with metaphysical forces implicated in acts of transformation (like hunting, initiation, and smelting). Entry into this space and activities undertaken within it required careful planning and ritual management to be successful, but the bush itself contributed to that success because it contained strong, potentially generative powers. Although many villagers traveled through the bush and harvested its wild fruits and medicines, speakers discussed what was now gendered about some people's experiences of and in the bush—novelties that were dependent on the changing bodily experiences of those men involved in bushcraft, as the next section elaborates. To understand the gendering of the landscape through its varied uses, we need to understand its name.

The new name for this landscape, **-sókwe*, was developed from an older, more widespread verb **-còk-* (to incite), which itself derived from an ancient Bantu term that glosses as "to poke in, put in, prick with a point, hide, ram in." Contemporary attestations reveal a complicated network of meanings tying together ideas about "provoking," "inciting," and "stabbing" with "being first," "establishing," or "originating." When Central Eastern Botatwe and neighboring communities named the open bush around them with the passive form of the verb **-còk-*, they imagined this landscape to be a place of potential creation, "the poked, the prodded, the hidden, the entered" place. The windy qualities of spearcraft and metallurgy were still present, but they were bundled with the qualities of pricking, piercing, poking, and inciting. It was this

latter cluster of kinesthetic experiences that was emphasized in the name *-*sókwe* as the quintessential encounter with the landscape. *-*Sókwe* was a place of great power activated by skilled hunters and smelters: thrusters of spears and blustery inciters of flames, capable of prodding such generative forces towards acts of creation and social significance.

Central Eastern Botatwe communities were already familiar with this landscape. Why did they invent the new name *-*sókwe*, with its emphasis on inciting acts of creation through prodding, poking, and spearing? Perhaps this was a matter of controlling the power of the bush or those who worked within it. Yet, the homologies and materialities in play suggest a far more complicated situation. When hunting, smelting, and the bush took on new meanings and new names in the Botatwe area in the centuries around the turn of the first millennium, they also changed older ideas about how spiritual powers were harnessed and understood to work, through the metaphor of human fertility—a metaphor that necessarily implicated both men and women.

Sex, Technology, and Generation

When hunters, metallurgists, and their friends, neighbors, elders, and dependents spoke about bushcraft in south central Africa in recent centuries, they were also often indirectly speaking about sex. This connection is old. Using such evidence as the breasts and gynecological attributes adorning ancient furnaces, and parallels between bearing children and hunting and smelting in songs and proverbs, Eugenia Herbert (1993) has eloquently argued that human fertility was used by central Africans to conceptualize the transformative power involved in activities like smelting and hunting. She argues that men appropriated the power of female procreativity and sought to replicate it in technologies they controlled. But the invention of *isokwe* (its morphology, derivation, and materialities) insists on the vital contribution of *virility* in addition to fertility. The invention of the bush as *-*sókwe* depended on the idea that, as Herbert observes, the drama of human fertility explained how some kinds of powers worked. But the sensuous, affective qualities of technology mattered because only men experienced the kinesthetic resemblances between poking and prodding as an act of origination in the use of new iron-tipped spears or of bellows, and the generative act of sex.

Conceptualized as homologous to human fertility, this new form of masculinity both depended on and was subject to the whims of women. For example, it was believed that wives' infidelities could kill husbands who were away, working in *isokwe*. Similarly, incestuous sex with a mother or sister was an empowering act that ensured a spearman's success and brought great wealth to his female relatives (in the context of matrilineal kinship, he owed support to his sisters and mother before his wives and children, who belonged to a different lineage).

Celebrated spearmen and smelters created a new way of acting in and on the world, inciting and prodding creative acts in the seclusion of the pierced landscape of the bush. Their way of being—their fame, wealth, and virility—was built on the older "windiness" of fame but also incorporated new material conditions and settings that limited access to fame. What was special about spearmen and metalworkers had nothing to do with the inherent ritual dangers of their crafts, as anthropologists undertaking symbolic analyses have long insisted. Rather, these technicians saw that some of their bundle of "windy" objects and actions also shared an overlapping "piercedness, proddedness, incitedness" and new convergences with older explanatory paradigms, like the drama of human fertility. By using the passive form of the verb to name *isokwe* as the "pierced, prodded place," speakers insisted that those whose work defined the landscape were the initiators of all such endeavors. In other words, technicians used the material dimensions of their bodies, tools, and actions to conceptualize new landscapes that were named for new ways of acting as a successful man. But their homologous thinking ensured that success was understood to depend on the actions of women, even if women did not traverse the environment with men.

Alternative Futures: Old and New

Ancient pasts of worlds very different from our own are sources of new ways of thinking about the relationship between masculinity and the environment. Most importantly, they insist that the status quo is neither natural nor inevitable. The particular story of the invention of *isokwe* in south central Africa illuminates the intersection of bodily feelings (especially gendered experiences of the environment and of sex), technology, metaphor and homologies, and skill, and the social and economic dependencies such intersections generated and threatened. There are obvious parallels here with the

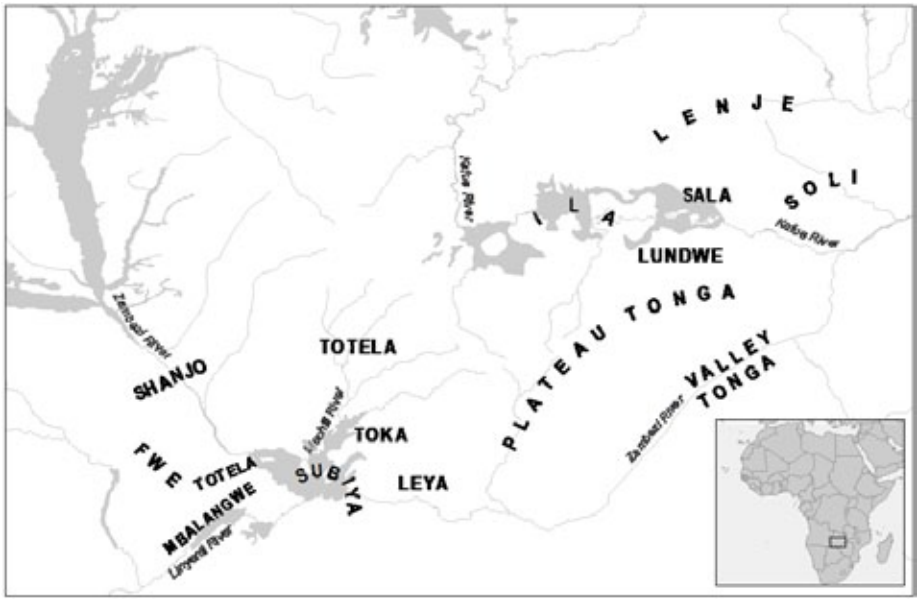

Figure 3: Location of Botatwe languages, ca. 1900. Map by Jean Aroom.

present. In both the late first millennium world of south central Africa and the early third millennium world we inhabit today, men's assertions of expertise are tied to the power to control the environment, as many contributors to this volume demonstrate. But, the investments and vulnerabilities of men and women are also alarmingly different in the modern context. Here, I return to the idea of thinking with homologies.

Across the spectrum of debates about environmental degradation and climate change, human reproduction is a core issue; readers of this volume might argue that damage to the environment and climate threatens humans' abilities to reproduce and this requires immediate and robust intervention. Detractors might argue that such intervention (particularly in the form of government regulation) threatens profits and, thereby, jobs: the economic means by which humans sustain social and biological reproduction. Communities living in south central Africa some millennia ago shared this association of work, personal and reproductive success, and exploiting the environment, albeit with vastly different scales and technologies. But the way the association between working in and on environments and ensuring life and livelihood were conceptualized was vastly different. Today, we think about causation when we link environments and life; in the

undocumented past of south central Africa, men and women thought through homologous rather than causal relationships, which ensured recognition of the significance of women's actions in men's efforts to develop careers that exploited the environment. We know well the stalemate of causal thinking in modern debates; how might thinking through homologies change our modern understandings of gender, the environment, climate, and power? We need older histories, I would argue, to be able to recognize and conceptualize anew both our current gendered world and its shared futures.

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