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Inequalities in the Land: Colonial Legacies and the Quest for Land Equity in Zimbabwe

Admire Mseba

In Zimbabwe, and other former settler colonies, unequal rights to land are broadly attributed to colonial dispossession and racial inequality. This is for a good reason. Settler colonial states took land from indigenous peoples and distributed it to white settlers. They also corralled many indigenous peoples in poor, diseased, semi-arid and wretched places that they called native reserves.

Attempts to address land inequalities in postcolonial/post-apartheid Southern Africa have largely sought to address these inequalities. Indeed, between 2000 and 2008, Zimbabwe's postcolonial rulers transformed the country's racialised agrarian landscape. A fast-track land reform programme transferred land from large-scale white commercial farmers to the country's black inhabitants.¹

¹Ian Scoones, *Zimbabwe's Land Reform: Myths and Realities* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2010); Prosper B. Matondi, *Zimbabwe's Fast Track Land Reform* (London:



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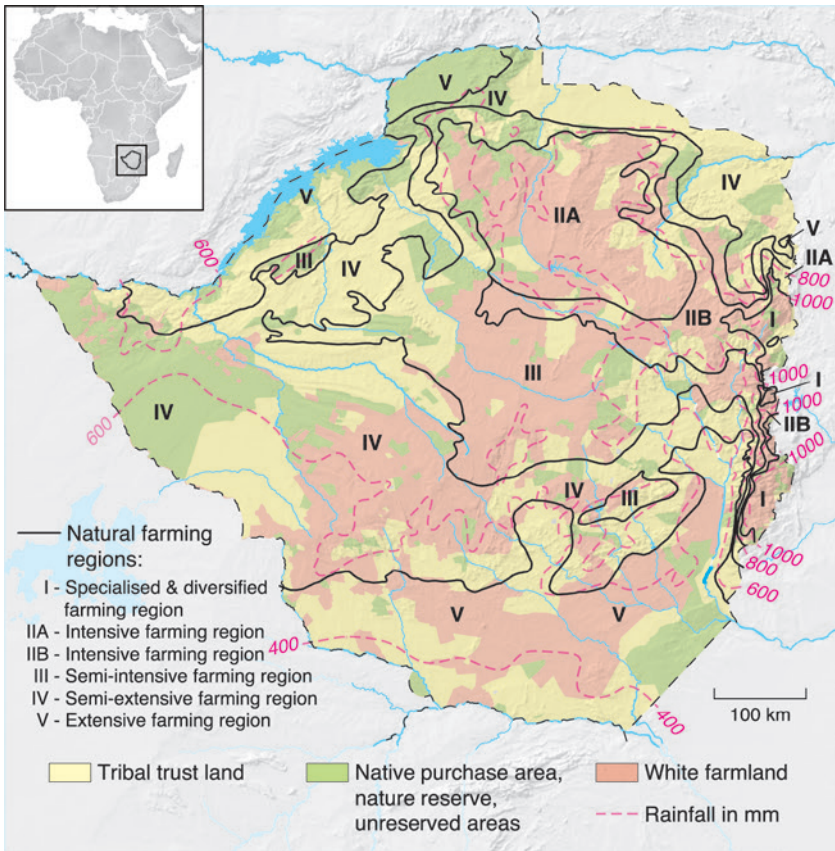
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Map 1. Land allocation, farming regions and rainfall in Southern Rhodesia.



Source: Eric Leinberger, Cartography, Department of Geography, University of British Columbia, reprinted with permission of Ohio University Press, Muchaparara Museumwa and Eric Leinberger, from Muchaparara Museumwa, 'Land, water and race: *In Search of Truth* and the search for environmental justice in Southern Rhodesia', in Graeme Wynn, Jane Carruthers and Nancy J. Jacobs (eds), *Environment, Power and Justice: Southern African Histories* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2022), p. 259.

By 2010, scholars were assessing the results. Even the most favourable of these evaluations observed that ‘the land reform exercise focused on racialized imbalances of highly skewed landholdings and discriminatory land tenure systems’, and failed to address gender disparities.² ‘Women, [especially ordinary] women were always at the end of the queue in ... [land] allocations and other benefits.’³ Earlier land reform efforts in Zimbabwe in the 1980s and early 1990s had similarly failed to address gender inequalities and much the same is true of land reforms in South Africa and Namibia. All sought to undo racialised patterns of landholding, but reinforced inequalities rooted in gender, patriarchy, generation, class and ideas of belonging.⁴ Indeed, Zimbabwe’s land reform exercise excluded farm workers, many of whom were immigrants.⁵

The settling dust of the land reform exercise revealed that powerful elites and those in close proximity to power had accumulated far more land than ordinary Zimbabweans. Many of the powerful were said to be involved in land grabs that displaced rural landholders. Early in 2015, Zimbabwean newspapers reported that the poor landholders in Manzou farm in Mazowe district had been evicted at the instigation of the country’s then-powerful First Lady, Grace Mugabe. Six years later, the people of Chilonga in Chiredzi communal lands faced eviction by the state intended to facilitate lucerne production for a private dairy company, whose owner was

Zed Books, 2012); Sam Moyo and Walter Chambati, *Land and Agrarian Reform in Zimbabwe: Beyond White Settler Capitalism* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2013).

² Joseph Hanlon, Jannette Manjengwa and Theresa Smart, *Zimbabwe Takes Back Its Land* (Boulder: Kumaran Press, 2013), p. 160.

³ Matondi, *Zimbabwe’s Fast Track Land Reform*, p. 185.

⁴ Allison Goebel, *Gender and Land Reform: The Zimbabwean Experience* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005); Chris Alden and Ward Anseeuw, *Land, Liberation and Compromise in Southern Africa* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009)

⁵ Lloyd M. Sachikonye, ‘The Situation of Commercial Farm Workers in Zimbabwe after Land Reform’. A Report Prepared for the Farm Community Trust of Zimbabwe (FCTZ) (Harare, 2003); Blair Rutherford, ‘Conditional belonging: Farm workers and the cultural politics of recognition in Zimbabwe’, *Development and Change* 39 (1) (2008): 73–99.

described as ‘closely linked to President Emmerson Mnangagwa’.⁶ Most recently, in the messy divorce proceedings of former president Mugabe’s daughter and her husband, the latter listed 21 farms that he claimed should be shared upon dissolution of the marriage.⁷ Ordinary Zimbabwean couples are officially restricted to a single farm.

How does one account for efforts to address racialised patterns of landholding that ignore inequalities rooted in gender, class, social standing, identity and other forms of social difference? How does one make sense of alleged massive land grabs by members of the ruling elite without resorting to stereotypical images of greedy post-colonial patron rulers? In my view, the answer to the first question lies in how land (and resource) questions have been framed in the former colonial world, especially in former settler colonies. The answer to the second lies in understanding that power has shaped access to, possession of and use of land (and other resources) in many ways beyond the often-invoked colonial and racialised form.

In Zimbabwe, and other former settler colonies, land inequalities are often simply understood as a colonial, racialised problem.⁸ Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe exemplified this approach when he said in 2002: ‘this fundamental question has pitted the black majority who are the right-holders, and, therefore, primary stakeholders, to our land against an obdurate and internationally well-connected racial minority, largely of British descent and brought in and sustained by British colonialism’.⁹ This framing is not so much wrong as it is

⁶ Cyril Zenda, ‘Fresh Land Grabs in Zimbabwe Kick Villagers off Ancestral Lands’, 29 April 2021: <https://www.fairplanet.org/story/fresh-land-grabs-in-zimbabwe-kick-villagers-off-ancestral-lands/> (accessed 14 Nov. 2022); VOA Zimbabwe, ‘Over 13000 Zimbabwe Villages Face Eviction in Area Set Aside for Cattle Feed Production’, 7 March 2021: <https://www.voazimbabwe.com/a/zimbabwe-farmers-eviction-chiredzi/5804754.html> (accessed 14 Nov. 2022).

⁷ Fidelis Munyoro, ‘Simba Lists Staggering Properties in Bona Divorce Case’, *The Herald*, 3 May 2023: <https://www.herald.co.zw/simba-lists-staggering-properties-in-bona-divorce-case/> (accessed 22 Sept. 2023).

⁸ Robin Palmer, *Land and Racial Domination in Rhodesia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); Henry V. Moyana, *The Political Economy of Land in Zimbabwe* (Gweru: Mambo Press 2002).

⁹ Statement by His Excellency the President of the Republic of Zimbabwe

incomplete. In both colonial and postcolonial Zimbabwe, access to land, like access to other resources, was informed by multiple forms of power. As the Berkeley anthropologist Donald Moore, writing on the Gairezi region of northeastern Zimbabwe had it, the engagements of farming men and women with the colonial state exposed individuals and their communities to competing sovereignties that informed access to land in the postcolonial period.¹⁰ Or, as Oxford University historian Jocelyn Alexander notes in an important review of the vast literature on land in Zimbabwe, the country's multi-faceted conflicts over land were 'built on the long history of repeated evictions, unresolved contestations over authority, and bitter struggles for survival' borne out of the legacies of colonial and postcolonial rule.¹¹

Colonialism entrenched systems of inequality – based on gender, generation, status, kinship and origins – which antedated it. It also produced the racialised land inequalities that postcolonial governments have yet to address. But in Zimbabwe a preoccupation with colonialism's impacts, particularly those rooted in race, has clouded understanding of the ways in which earlier structures of power shaped patterns of access to resources, including land. Focused, unsurprisingly, on addressing colonially-induced inequalities in the allocation of land, the post-colonial state left intact those prior structures of power. Addressing these issues requires that we reframe questions of land, power and inequality, to consider both colonial land dispossession and older forms of social difference such as gender and generation.

Comrade R.G. Mugabe, on the Occasion of the World summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), Johannesburg, 2 September 2002: <http://www.un.org/events/wssd/statements/zimbabweE.htm>.

¹⁰ Donald S. Moore, *Suffering for Territory: Race, Power and Place in Zimbabwe* (Durham: NC, Duke University Press, 2005). See also Joost Fontein, *Remaking Mutirikwi: Landscape, Water and Belonging in Southern Zimbabwe* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2015).

¹¹ Jocelyn Alexander, 'The historiography of land in Zimbabwe: Strengths, silences and questions', *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies* 8 (2) (2007): 190–91. None of the works in this extensive review discusses pre-colonial contestations over land.

Two longstanding ideas about land and society in precolonial African societies warrant particular attention here. These assumptions – built on both colonial fantasies about tribal Africa and ideas rooted in African understanding – characterise African landholding as communal. In other words, African access to land came to be associated with membership of a ‘tribe’. Such thinking produced images of Africans who lived either under the despotic authority of their chiefs or in an essentially egalitarian society. By coupling tribal membership and access to land, this thinking reifies the idea of the tribe. Certainly many communities framed rights and obligations in the idiom of kinship, but this idiom often reflected political relations more than lineage.¹² Moreover, the equation of community membership with access to land fails to interrogate the ways in which social and power relations within communities mediate claims to the resource.

Alongside the notion that Africans held land as communities stood the idea that, in precolonial Africa, land was abundant and labour scarce.¹³ As a corollary, so the narrative went, political and social control ‘tended to be over people rather than over land’ and ‘neither individuals nor kin groups bother[ed] to lay specific claims to large tracts of territory’.¹⁴ The lack of interest in controlling land is said to have ended with the advent of colonial rule. In the colonial period, argued the American social anthropologist Elizabeth Colson, unoccupied land became subject to highly specific rights due to rapid population growth and to the intervention of colonial officials in land matters.¹⁵ What is more, increases in the value of land stimu-

¹² James L. Giblin, ‘The politics of disease control in the lowlands of North-eastern Tanzania’, in Gregory H. Maddox, James L. Giblin and Isaria N. Kimambo (eds), *Custodians of the Land: Ecology and Culture in the History of Tanzania* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1996), pp. 127–51.

¹³ Gareth Austin, *Labour, Land and Capital in Ghana: From Slavery to Free Labor in Asante, 1807–1956* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2005).

¹⁴ Jack Goody, *Technology, Tradition and the State in Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971).

¹⁵ Elizabeth Colson, ‘The impact of the colonial period on the definition of land rights’, in Victor Turner (ed.), *Colonialism in Africa: Vol.3. Profiles of Change:*

lated by colonists' production of cash crops or exploitation of land for commercial purposes furthered interest in controlling land.¹⁶ Recent scholarship has rejected this 'dominant paradigm of precolonial Africa's free surplus land – indifference to territoriality and absence of property, as well as the inalienability of land'.¹⁷ Anthropologist Carola Lentz's study among the Dagara and Sisala communities of West Africa has shown that they possessed an acute sense of property / land ownership in precolonial times. Her informants connected claims to land with ideas of autochthony – being the original inhabitants. 'Struggles over land rights and their transmission', explains Lentz, 'were punctuated by narratives of migration, settlement and first possession.' 'First-comer narratives', she elaborates, 'locate the origin of legitimate property not in any social contract, but in the encounter between man and nature, or to be precise, man and earth deities.'¹⁸ In this conception of property, outsiders faced exclusion.

On the other hand, many African origin traditions celebrate an immigrant clan or dynastic founder who settled land already inhabited by people lacking the ability to make fire, or who ate their meat raw, or cultivators without knowledge of hunting – in short people who were 'uncivilized'.¹⁹ These traditions legitimated the founders' assumption of power and their claims to a particular territory or landed domain. In these narratives, autochthonous communities are both dismissible and subject to rule. New migrant rulers refuse to recognise the autochthones' social structures and, because the rul-

African Society and Colonial Rule (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 193–215.

¹⁶ David McDermott Hughes, *From Enslavement to Environmentalism: Politics on a Southern African Frontier* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006).

¹⁷ Carola Lentz, *Land, Mobility and Belonging in West Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), p. 9.

¹⁸ Lentz, *Land, Mobility and Belonging*, pp. 18–19.

¹⁹ Joseph C. Miller (ed.), *The African Past Speaks: Essays on Oral Tradition and History* (Folkestone: Dawson & Sons, 1980); Jan Bender Shettler, *Imagining Serengeti: A History of Landscape and Memory in Tanzania from Earliest Times to the Present* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2007), pp. 18–21; Steven Feierman, *The Shambaa Kingdom: A History* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1974).

ers are immigrants and the ruled are first comers, there could be no sense of a tribe with common origins and no basis for the claim that land was accessed in equal measure in African communities.

Several other factors informed where, and how, precolonial Africans lived and farmed. In parts of the Zimbabwean plateau in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, when changing political conditions made some inhabitants particularly concerned about their safety, access to good defensive sites was shaped by existing power inequalities. 'The politically powerful naturally tended to get the best sites, which were not common in Chivero's country, so the less powerful often had to adopt the policy of using the best hills and rocks available even if it meant scattering homesteads', observed a somewhat condescending David Beach.²⁰ So, too, in the Mhari territory between the Tugwi and Runde rivers in south central Zimbabwe, Gerald Mazarire found that lower class members of the community 'were placed in plains or *deve* where they were vulnerable to Ndebele raids while higher class Mhari occupied the mountainous areas in the safety of strongholds'.²¹ Other power asymmetries, including those between ruling elites and their subjects, men and women, seniors and juniors, insiders and outsiders, informed patterns of access to land in many African communities before the advent of colonialism.

Colonial rule deepened these inequalities. In the colonial period, the settler state gave chiefs authority over land while strengthening the patriarchal power of senior men over women and their junior male counterparts.²² Early in the colonial period, the Southern Rhodesian state insisted that

²⁰ David Beach, *The Shona and their Neighbors* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 45.

²¹ Gerald Chikozho Mazarire, 'Defence Consciousness as a Way of Life: The "Refuge Period" and Karanga Defence Strategy in the 19th Century', Typescript, March 2005, 14; Gerald C Mazarire, "'The politics of the womb': Women, politics and the environment in precolonial Chivi, Southern Zimbabwe, c. 1840–1900', *Zambezia: Journal of the Humanities of the University of Zimbabwe* 30 (1) (2003): 35–50.

²² Elizabeth Schmidt, *Peasants, Traders and Wives: Shona Women in the History of Zimbabwe, 1870–1939* (Portsmouth: NH, Heinemann, 1992).

land is held under the tribal system & is as a rule divided under sub-chiefs who are sons of the ruling house ... the sites of the gardens are shown to his people by the headman of the kraal. After picking the sites for his own and his immediate relations' gardens the headman allows the remainder of his people to pick their lands in succession according to their status in the kraal.²³

In this view, those who occupied the lowest rung of the social ladder would almost inevitably occupy the marginal lands left unclaimed by the members of the ruling families. In the mid-twentieth century, the colonial state, through the Native Land Husbandry Act (1951), assigned each household's land title to its male head. This decision entrenched generational inequalities in landholding. Young men who were labour migrants were most obviously disadvantaged by the implementation of the 1951 Act. When officials reallocated land in reserves, many young men were unable to meet the requirement that they had cultivated Rhodesian land in the previous year because they were away at work in cities or mines. African elites also manipulated the act to their benefit. As historian Terence Ranger learned when he accompanied the nationalist, George Nyandoro, to Seke Reserve in 1958: 'At Sadza village the headman turned out to have twelve acres, and an angry commoner complained that he had been given only three.'²⁴ Under the Native Land Husbandry Act, the standard household acreage in wetter areas such as the Seke reserve was six acres. More was allocated in drier areas.

When postcolonial states address racialised inequalities without paying attention to gender, generation, status and other forms of social difference, they essentially ignore longstanding forms of inequality, anchored in systems of power with deep roots in the precolonial past and reinforced by colonial policies. This is what happened with

²³ Native commissioner, Chibi district, Written Evidence to the South African Native Affairs Commission N3/6/3, National Archives of Zimbabwe.

²⁴ Terence Ranger, *Writing Revolt: An Engagement with African Nationalism, 1957–1967* (Harare: Weaver Press, 2013), p. 33. For disparities elsewhere in Zimbabwe, see also Pius Shungudzapera Nyambara, 'A History of Land Acquisition in Gokwe, Northwestern Zimbabwe, 1945–1997', Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University (Evanston, IL, 1999).

Zimbabwe's land reform. In South Africa, in the meantime, land reform efforts have limped along, occasionally placed on the agendas of political parties but frequently relegated to the periphery of policy implementation. When land reform policies were implemented, they increasingly tended to redistribute land from white owners to a new black elite, and to return some land to Africans who were dispossessed after the passage of the 1913 land Act.²⁵ Other measures meant to address tenure reform have entrenched the powers of unelected male chiefs whose positions and authority had already been reinforced by the colonial and apartheid systems of indirect rule.²⁶

Postcolonial / post-apartheid states would be well advised to address inequities rooted in the precolonial period as well as the racialised inequalities created by colonialism. The former not only persisted alongside colonially-induced inequalities based on race, they continued (and even deepened) long after the end of colonial rule. Put in slightly different words, if the quest for equity envisioned in land reforms is to be achieved, postcolonial scholarship and states should address all forms of inequity.

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²⁵ Edwards Lahiff, 'Land Reform in South Africa: A Status Report 2008', Program for Land and Agrarian Studies, University of Western Cape, Research Report, 38, 2008; Ben Cousins, 'Land Reform in South Africa is Sinking. Can it be Saved', Paper Commissioned by the Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2016.

²⁶ Lungisile Ntsebeza, *Democracy Compromised: Chiefs and the Politics of Land in South Africa* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2006); See also the work of the coalition named 'Stop the Bantustans': <https://stopthebantustanbills.org>