



Rural Landlords, Rural Tenants, and the Sharecropping Complex in Gokwe, Northwestern Zimbabwe, 1980s-2002

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RURAL LANDLORDS, RURAL TENANTS, AND THE SHARECROPPING COMPLEX IN GOKWE, NORTHWESTERN ZIMBABWE, 1980s-2002¹

by

Pius S. Nyambara

INTRODUCTION

The Gokwe region of northwestern Zimbabwe has since the 1950s experienced a large influx of in-migrants who came in search of land. After independence in 1980, the wave of immigration into Gokwe increased rapidly largely due to severe land shortages in the areas of origin; the post-independence cotton boom which attracted more immigrants; the effects of the Economic Structural adjustment Programme initiated in the early 1990s which resulted in massive retrenchments of people from work. The majority of the retrenched found their way into Gokwe villages. By the 1990s, there were clear signs that the frontier was closing and land pressure had become evident as manifested in ubiquitous land disputes among various land claimants² (see Nyambara 2001).

As land shortages have become a reality in Gokwe villages, the landless households have resorted to various forms of sharecropping with land rich households. Yet, the main models of Zimbabwe's land reform program take little account of sharecropping as a way to access factors of production, especially land. Recent in-migrants, especially young adults and single women of all categories often lack sufficient land to produce food and cash crops.

Sharecropping gives the land-poor farmer access to additional land. In turn, the landlord overcomes his shortage of labour. Such arrangements have become very common in Gokwe villages recently partly because of land shortages and partly because cotton, the main cash crop of the region, is labour intensive.

This paper will examine the roots of sharecropping in selected Gokwe villages. It seeks to determine at what stage and under what circumstances sharecropping became one of the significant means of accessing factors of production. It will pay particular attention to the

¹ The field research on which this article is based was conducted in the Munyati area of Gokwe between September 1996 and November 1997, and again between November 2000 and August 2002.

² For details on land conflicts in Gokwe villages, see, for instance P. Nyambara (2001).

parties involved in sharecropping arrangements, i.e., years of settlement in Gokwe, areas of origin; reasons for coming to Gokwe; position in the family cycle; and ethnic background. More specifically, the paper will seek to analyze the division of the harvest, duration of arrangements, purchase of inputs, credit and the dynamics of these factors over time, especially as more and more in-migrants poured into Gokwe since 1980. The paper will also examine the nature of agreements, verbal or written, and the problems that often arise in the event that one party fails to comply with the terms of the agreement.

Sharecropping in this paper is contextualized within the broader framework of the post-independence land reforms. How, for instance, has the slow progress in land reforms before 2000, affected sharecropping arrangements? Does sharecropping undermine official land reform programme in any way? How can the government and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) regulate sharecropping, or what role can they play in facilitating sharecropping? What steps can be taken to formalize sharecropping as a mechanism for reducing land pressure and land conflicts which have often characterized the Gokwe region in recent years? Before we answer these questions, let us examine some of the general misconceptions in the literature about sharecropping?

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT SHARECROPPING

Sharecropping is an arrangement in which two or more parties agree to combine their privately held resources in a productive enterprise, and to share output in prearranged proportions. It is a means of spreading the risks of production in the effort to secure subsistence, but it is also sufficiently flexible as a mode of collaboration to allow either or both parties to gain when circumstances beyond their immediate control – the caprices of weather markets or official policy – are favourable (Robertson 1987, 1). Sharecropping is usually regarded in the literature as inert, repressive and inefficient. Informed by the evident stagnation in European sharecropping and later by the plight of poor tenants in the Americas and South Asia, economic theory has pronounced sharecropping both inefficient and inequitable, and prophesied its demise in the progressive thrust of social revolution. It has been designated ‘pre-capitalist’ or ‘quasi-feudal’, a system in which a small class has monopolized the most scarce productive factor – land – and bonded the suppliers of labour in rigid fabric of contractual obligations. For these reasons, governments in some countries have sought for many decades to proscribe sharecropping (see for example Sen 1966; Warrior 1969; Jacoby 1971).

Most recent empirical enquiry in other parts of the world has made it clear that sharecropping is not always like this: it can accommodate innovation readily, produce high yields, help redistribute productive resources and wealth.³ Its persistence and versatility are manifest in its recent reappearance in the highly mechanized agriculture of North America and Australasia. Sharecropping is potentially so versatile that there is no justification for regarding it as an obstacle to progress. Its role in historical transformation has been vital. It is a means by which capitalist relations take root, and small-scale farmers are drawn into world markets. For this reason, it merits the constructive attention, not the disdain of those concerned with organizing rural development (Robertson, 2).

Sharecropping does certainly adjust to good and bad crops, high and low prices better than any other mode of renting. It releases the peasant farm family from some of its inherent limitations by allowing it to combine with others whatever privately held resources it may have. The hazards of dependence on a single staple crop or on an unreliable production process, and the broader uncertainties of weather, disease or infestation, may also prompt this sort of collaboration. But it must be emphasised that dispersing risk in this way involves the construction of a relationship usually more complicated than fixed rents and labour hire, and with longer-term costs and benefits which may elude conventional economic analysis.

Many criticisms of sharecropping seem very distant from the realities and complexities of peasant agriculture. Many believe that it is a device for extracting a surplus from the peasantry in certain kinds of agrarian setting usually termed 'quasi' or 'semi-feudal'. According to David Lehmann, "there does not seem to be any inherent incompatibility between sharecropping and capitalist development." For one thing, "sharecropping does not in itself denote an exploitative relationship in which the landlord inevitably has the upper hand and he may be the impoverished victim of the contract and the tenant the prosperous capitalist" (1984, 36). In a similar vein, P. Bardham and A. Rudra, in their study of sharecropping in an Indian village, have argued that, "the institution of sharecropping tenancy as it has been evolving . . . does not at all conform to the stereotype of landlord-serf relationship familiar from European or Japanese history. On the contrary, there is a considerable amount of evidence that the institution has been adapting itself more and more

³ T. Keegan (1983) gives one of the most successful stories of sharecropping in Southern Africa in the early twentieth century.

to the needs of increasing production and profit by enterprising farmers, both owners and tenants” (1980, 290).

INFLUX OF IN-MIGRANTS INTO GOKWE VILLAGES, 1950s-1990s

In order to fully understand why sharecropping has become such a significant factor in Gokwe, one has to trace the history of in-migration into Gokwe since the 1950s. Prior to the 1950s, the indigenous Shangwe⁴ sparsely populated the Gokwe region of northwestern Zimbabwe. However, since the early 1950s, Gokwe was settled by many in-migrants who were evicted by the colonial state from Rhodesdale Crown land to give way to the land demands of European ex-servicemen, and to accommodate the increased number of European immigrants (Palmer 1977, 243).⁵ In the 1960s and 1970s, Gokwe witnessed another major wave of in-migrants especially from the southern parts of the country where land pressure had become excessive. During the guerrilla war in the 1970s, many people took advantage of the war to immigrate to Gokwe where land was still available and cotton had become an established cash crop. While the first wave of in-migrants came primarily from Rhodesdale, and were forced, subsequent in-migrants originated from many parts of the country and were largely ‘voluntary’, in that they left their original homes on their own free will, but they were forced to do so by land shortages largely a creation of colonialism.

The in-migrants can roughly be categorized into four broad groups: 40 percent of the in-migrants households were either landless or had very little land in their areas of origin; 15 percent were former migrant workers who had migrated from neighboring countries such as Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia in search of work. They had worked in various mines and farms around the country, but had retired due to old age and wanted a piece of land to establish their homes where they could spend the rest of their lives. Another 15 percent of the

⁴ ‘Shangwe’ is a pejorative term used by in-migrants to name the indigenous of Gokwe. The term is associated with primitiveness and backwardness. The indigenous people object to be called as such and insist that the term Shangwe describes the place in which they live rather than who they really are. The Shangwe, on the other hand, call the in-migrants ‘Madheruka’, which means people who came from another place and were dumped in Gokwe by government lorries. For more details, see P. Nyambara (2002).

⁵ Rhodesdale was a vast Estate bounded by a line roughly connecting Gwelo, Que Que, Hartely, Enkeldororn, Umvuma, Lalapansi and Gutu. Lonrho, a British multinational company, owned the Estate. By the end of the Second World War, there were between 10,000 and 12,000 ‘squatters’ residing on this property under the Private Locations Ordinance (1908). After the war, these squatters were evicted to give way to European settlement (Bhebe 1989, 74).

in-migrants was composed of an entrepreneurial class of people who had at least sufficient land, but were attracted by the prospects of securing more land to engage in large scale farming operations. Included in this group were individuals who had accumulated some capital and wanted to invest in small-scale businesses. Others came as civil servants working in various government departments as teachers, tsetse control personnel, road construction, etc., and decided to settle permanently in Gokwe. The other category was composed of 15 percent of the in-migrants were people who had been evicted wholesale from crown land together with their chiefs as a result of the Land Tenure Act of 1969.⁶ By the 1982 census, Gokwe had over the past decade registered a net in-migration rate of 44,7+ and this was the highest in the country (CSO 1985, 75-76).

Following the end of the guerrilla war in 1979 there was a large and immediate increase in the number of in-migrants pouring into Gokwe from overcrowded parts of the country, particularly Masvingo and Mberengwa in the south who took advantage of the end of the war to migrate to Gokwe. Another major source of in-migrants was the Mapfungautsi Forest Area, just to the southeast of Gokwe town, where, after independence, the new government evicted a number of squatters who had occupied the Forest Area during the war. As the war wound down in the late 1979, thousands of families who during the war had run away to towns and other more secure places, returned to their homes, took up farming again, and expanded their holdings. Young couples, who had married during the war, took advantage of this period of flux to move away from their parents and establish independent farms. Fields abandoned during the war were reclaimed and farmers expanded into lands designated as grazing areas (Rohrbach 1988, 93-94; Masst 1996, 214).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s Gokwe witnessed yet another significant wave of in-migration, this time of people who were retrenched from work. The majority of the immigrants came from Kwekwe town where many people were retrenched from the Zimbabwe Iron and Steel Company (ZISCO), due to the Economic Structural Adjustment Program (ESAP).⁷ The devastating drought in 1991/92 affected much of southern Africa and in particular Zimbabwe. The drought accounted for further in-migrations of families to Gokwe in search of better-quality land with more reliable water supplies. In addition, there

⁶ These percentages were constructed from a sample of 50 households where field research was conducted. In the questionnaire, household heads indicated the reasons why they had chosen to come to Gokwe.

⁷ For a detailed analysis of the performance of ZISCO up to 1990, see E. Pangeti (1995), chapter 4.

were the ongoing, localized problems of land degradation and soil infertility, land shortage and illegal and/or insecure settlement elsewhere that prompted migration. The result was that during this period, many land-hungry families from other parts of the country, and from other parts of Gokwe itself, poured into Gokwe in search of plentiful, fertile land they had heard about from friends and relatives, from strangers on buses and in beer halls, and in some cases from politicians, bureaucrats and chiefs (Hammar 1999, 5).

Politicians, especially Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU-PF) officials, have also been responsible for encouraging people to migrate to frontier regions such as Gokwe for political reasons. Local politicians argue that in-migrants who have a long history and experience of agriculture and animal husbandry in their areas of origin, will impart their skills to their counterparts in Gokwe upon settlement.⁸ They claim that it is the national duty of the in-migrants to teach 'better methods of agriculture' to those who had been neglected by colonial agricultural policies in the past, such as the Shangwe, the autochthones of Gokwe. The politicians further argue that once in-migrants settle in these areas, they help boost agricultural production and this would make the country the breadbasket of the region. Thus, "politicians tactfully present immigration as a phenomenon that is in line with national goals of self-sufficiency and national identity" (Dzingirayi 1996, 23-24).

In other instances, politicians claim that the in-migration of other ethnic groups into frontier regions would bring about ethnic fusion, thus fostering genuine national unity. Thus, in-migration is also presented as a useful ideological tool in nation building. These arguments are usually presented towards parliamentary and rural district council elections, and are widely publicized at political meetings, on the radio and in the press. Yet, it is well known that politicians encourage in-migrants primarily in order to get more people to vote for them. The actions of some politicians have therefore been responsible for the influx of in-migrants who find themselves without land when they arrive in Gokwe. The table below shows population growth and density in Gokwe largely as a result of in-migration up to 2000.

⁸ A detailed study of the perceived differences in agricultural skills between in-migrants and the indigenous of Gokwe is given in P. Nyambara (2002).

Table I: Population growth and settlement density in Gokwe, 1962-2000

Year	Population	Density*
1962**	60,320	4,19
1969**	130,400	9,07
1982**	238,566	16,59
1989	281,801	19,66
1990	291,851	20,29
2000	399,906	27,81

Source: (Mutizwa-Mangiza 1990, 13).

Notes: * Persons per square km.

** National population census years.

The Harvest of Independence: Cotton Boom in Gokwe villages

After 1980, the communal areas of Zimbabwe in general experienced an unprecedented agricultural boom that has been widely documented in the literature (Amin 1992; Burgess 1997; Robrbach 1988; Warner 1988, 1991). The key to the agricultural ‘revolution’ was the distribution of agricultural services. Agricultural institutions, including the extension service- Agricultural Technical Extension Services (AGRITEX), the credit agency, Agricultural Finance Corporation (AFC), and parastatal marketing boards such as the Grain Marketing Board (GMB) and Cotton Marketing Board (CMB) were reoriented to assist communal area farmers. Programs of infrastructure development, including road construction and the installation of marketing depots and collection points, were initiated throughout the communal areas. The government also adjusted producer prices upwards as a result of farmer lobbying, though the rate of inflation led to a gradual decline in real prices (Burgess, 26).

Cotton production in Gokwe in particular grew faster than in any other region perhaps because of favorable weather conditions and because of cotton’s superiority over the other crops in this area. The importance of cotton in Gokwe can be judged by the fact that on average, cotton accounts for about 30 percent of the cropped area compared to five percent in other cotton growing areas of the country. While Gokwe’s contribution to national cotton output since the mid-1970s fluctuated between 31-51 percent, other communal areas contributed 21-38 percent (GoZ 1991). The table below shows the increase in the number of registered cotton growers and value of cotton in Gokwe from 1979 to 1988:

Table 2: Number of Cotton Growers and Value of Cotton (Z\$) in Gokwe: 1979/80-1987/88

Year	Production (mt)	Area	Number of growers	Value Z\$ (000)
1979/80	13,300	14,088	8,760	4,700
1980/81	30,300	na	24,800	12,160
1981/82	17,800	na	31,000	7,141
1982/83	18,600	na	36,700	9,141
1983/84	30,000	60,900	47,400	18,950
1984/85	50,000	65,200	55,700	28,437
1985/86	55,000	55,400	na	40,830
1986/87	37,000	44,000	na	28,100
1987/88	40,000	48,000	na	

Sources: Agriserve, 1986; Agritex Office; Reid, "Gokwe Cotton Major Events Sequence."

Survey data for 1986 show that established and experienced cotton growers increased their acreage and new producers came onto the scene. The new producers began with cotton in a modest way and built up their hectareage as they gained experience (ibid). It therefore appears that the increase in production was largely due to the expansion rather than the intensification of cultivation. For instance, the gross area cultivated in the communal areas as a whole increased from about 1,3 million hectares in 1980 to 1,7 million hectares in 1988, an increase of about 33 percent at the expense of pasture and marginal areas (Bruce 1990, 7). In the Munyati area of Gokwe, as early as 1981 official reports were expressing concern at the rapid increase in migrant population and the shortage of grazing and arable land. According to one report, "there is a general shortage of arable land and the problem is worsened by recent immigrations into the district."⁹ The Sebungwe seminar held in 1982 similarly noted that in Munyati, "the human population had grown to such an extent that soil erosion had become a major threat to deforestation of the area to get access to the arable land" (de Swardt 1984, 4).

The resettlement program, initiated by the government in the early 1980s has been painstakingly slow in dealing with land shortages in the communal areas. Literature on this subject is enormous, but suffice it to say that although the government's intention as stated in its first policy document "Growth with Equity" was to resettle 162,000 families within a

⁹ GOK/16A: Munyati Area File, Cheziya-Gokwe District Council, 1980-1984.

period of three years from 1982-1985, by the time the next major policy statement was issued in 1986 in the First Five Year Development Plan, 1986-1990, only 36,000 families had been resettled on 2,5 million hectares of land. The next target for 1990 was set more modestly: 75,000 families of which about 16,000 were resettled (GoZ 1981; 1986).

Progress in tackling land shortages in the communal areas has therefore been inadequate, constrained, among others factors, by lack of finance; the lack of suitable land available on the open market; soaring land values; the Lancaster House Constitutional limitations which stipulated land purchases on a “willing-seller-willing-buyer” basis; the years of drought (1981-82- 1983-84), which affected the economy severely; and finally, the lack of political will to readily address the constraints. In addition, since the mid-1980s, the criteria for selecting settlers for the resettlement schemes were tightened to give priority to master farmers with an impressive agricultural track-record (Amin 1992, 126; Palmer 1990; Moyo 1995).

In Gokwe by 1985, only 45 families from the entire district had been resettled in Copper Queen resettlement scheme in the north. Less than 100 families from Gokwe had been settled in Copper Queen and other resettlement schemes by the end of the 1980s. In 1997 for instance, out of a population of 400,000 people in Gokwe, more than 60,000 families were on the waiting list for resettlement.¹⁰ Field research revealed that landlessness especially among young household heads, recent in-migrants and single women (widowed, separated, unmarried, divorced) has grave proportions and is growing at an alarming rate. Conflicts over land have become ubiquitous between various categories of land claimants.¹¹ It is within this wider context of land pressure and landlessness that the significance of sharecropping in the agrarian structure of Gokwe should be understood.

SHARECROPPING IN GOKWE VILLAGES

Sharecropping in Gokwe villages usually takes place between on one hand households that have accumulated land but are unable to sufficiently utilize it due to resource constraints and on the other hand the landless in-migrants. It is however, not uncommon for some land rich farmers to enter into share cropping arrangements with other land rich farmers for the

¹⁰ *Herald*, 27 January 1997.

¹¹ For a more detailed study of land conflicts in Gokwe villages since the 1980s, see P. Nyambara (2002).

purpose of maximizing their production capacity, especially during good cotton seasons. This paper will specifically examine two categories of parties that enter into sharecropping arrangements, that is, the rural 'landlords' and the rural 'tenants.' Let us examine each of these categories.

The Rural 'Landlords'

What are the origins of the rural 'landlords' and how did they accumulate the land they currently hold? The post-independence cotton boom provided the means for some farmers to acquire rights to more land than others and a process of agrarian accumulation was clearly underway. According to D. Weiner (1988: 71-72), "In all the regions, a small group of households had considerably more land available to them . . . it is these few farmers who produce the bulk of the market produce in the communal areas . . ." The acquisition of land has facilitated the production of cotton as well as increased access to labour through sharecropping, among other mechanisms. Land acquisition through political connections, through individual initiative and through outright purchase, has enabled some farmers to increase output and other forms of wealth. Although inequality in land sizes in the communal areas is not as spectacular as it is in Asia or Latin America, the process of land concentration has only begun and further concentration of property is likely to occur. The difference between having access to say two acres and ten acres may not seem much, but in terms of cash crop production capacity, it can represent the difference between hunger and comfort. In a situation of land scarcity differentials in the amount of land between households is significant and access to greater amount of land increases the ability of the household to accumulate and ensure security. Although obtaining more land is not necessarily equated with becoming richer and losing land does not necessarily mean getting poorer, it has in many cases had the result of enriching the rich and depriving the poor.

The rapid commercialization of agriculture after independence generated intense competition for land, and in this increases competition, the powerful and wealthy often managed to manipulate land allocation institutions and rules and engaged in what J. W. Bruce calls 'land grabbing.' According to Bruce, with the increase in cash crop production, land increases substantially in value.

In these circumstances, competition for land increases and inevitably, some members of the community, because they are more powerful or wealthy or aware, move faster than others. The rules of the game are changing, and such transitional

situations offer clear opportunities for land grabbing, often through manipulation of traditional land tenure rules and institutions (1991: 2).

Since the 1980s, some households in Gokwe villages that I studied managed to open up additional land in the virgin soils of *chidhaka* area, a low-lying area with fertile soils in what was formerly a grazing area. In the period around and shortly after independence, old authority structures were broken down, and many people used the opportunity in this period of flux to secure themselves a piece of arable land on virgin land and in areas that had hitherto been designated for grazing. Eric Worby has vividly described *chidhaka* soil as,

. . . very rich heavy black clays . . . for which Gokwe district is renowned . . . The soil holds moisture for long periods of time, enabling plants to successfully endure the mid-season droughts that plague the lowlands almost annually. Their typically rich nutrient content fosters rapid plant growth; cotton plants often grow to the height of an average adult in the richest soils of Gokwe, a sight which rarely fails to impress visitors to the district (1992:164).

According to an informant, “*Chidhaka* soil is the richest you can ever get in Gokwe. It is dark and fertile. You do not need to use fertilizer during the first two or three years of cultivation.”¹² *Chidhaka* land is where much of the cotton in Gokwe can be grown profitably. *Chidhaka* is both an area as well as a soil type and it is a privilege to own this type of land. In villages where research was conducted, *chidhaka* area constituted between 15-20 percent of the cultivable area. The remainder of the land, about 75-80 percent is largely composed of sandy soils which require heavy inputs of fertilizers to yield a profitable cotton crop. This type of poor land was allocated to households under the Native Land Husbandry Act of 1951 and is therefore exhausted because of continuous use without rotation.¹³ It is no wonder that *chidhaka* land is highly priced and competition for this land intensified especially after 1980. The powerful and well-placed people in the villages seem to be the only people with access to *chidhaka* land. The few households that hold land in the *chidhaka* area have more than 20 acres and are mostly lineage heads and their families and friends as well as powerful individuals like rainmakers, vidcos and village heads. However, some wealthy and influential

¹² Interview, June 2001.

¹³ The NLHA was the most ambitious rural ‘development’ programmes instituted by the colonial government with the intention of replacing ‘traditional’ land tenure with individual tenure. Literature on the NLHA abound. See for instance, Southern Rhodesia (1955); Duggan (1980); Bulman (1975).

recent in-migrants have also been able to secure land in the *chidhaka* by ‘buying out people.’ For example, one of the village heads acquired control of *chidhaka* land through appropriating the *zunde ramambo* field. This is a field which is associated with the village head title. Because it was traditionally the village head's privilege and obligation to host strangers who visited his village, he would normally have more farmland than other villagers. The colonial government recognised this practice when it implemented the NLHA in the 1950s. The village heads were also entitled to labour services in cropping these fields. However, in recent years, such labour services have disappeared, but the *zunde* still exists. In another village, one of the occupants of *chidhaka* land is again a village head, who is closely related to chiefly lineage. Another prominent holder of *chidhaka* land is a very powerful rainmaker who used his position to acquire as much as 60 acres of *chidhaka* land in the mid-1980s under very mysterious circumstances. Lineage head and powerful rainmakers are not the only people who have managed to accumulate good quality land, but also some powerful recent immigrants have been able to ‘buy people out’ in order to secure land in the *chidhaka*. One such individual virtually monopolizes transport in the local area and most farmers employ his services to carry crops to Gokwe and cotton to Kadoma and has over 80 acres which he secured through ‘buying people out.’¹⁴ These rural ‘landlords’, with fairly large holdings, lack the capacity to fully utilize them, and therefore often enter into sharecropping arrangements with landless young men and very recent in-migrants who immigrated to Gokwe when there was no more land.

The Rural ‘Tenants’

Who are these rural tenants and what are their origins? The majority of the tenants are landless young men as well as recent in-migrants who came to Gokwe in the 1990s, when there was no more land. The landless young men are comprised mostly of those from in-migrant households. In one village when the elders decided to allocate the landless young men in a forest area, the young men from in-migrant households were left out. They were considered outsiders who had not stayed in the village for a long time and therefore did not deserve to be allocated land at that point. It is common in some of the Gokwe villages to find 10-15 percent of the households not registered with the ward councilor because they were brought in by village heads illegally. In some of the villages, the proportion of unregistered households is as high as 25 percent. Legitimacy for residents in Gokwe villages is sought by

¹⁴ Interview with Anonymous C, Gokwe Village, November 2001.

formal registration. Village heads bring in most of the in-migrants illegally, after having been paid substantial amounts of money. They are allocated residential stands only in the hope that eventually they would be allocated a piece of arable land when it becomes available.

The majority of in-migrants who came to Gokwe villages between 1990 and 1995 originated from Kwekwe town where they had worked at ZISCO. In one of the villages where I conducted research, about 30 percent of the households in the village (20 households out of a total of 60 households) were all retrenches from ZISCO who came to Gokwe in 1992. ZISCO faced a host of financial and organizational problems in the early 1990s, largely due to the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP), that led to the down sizing of its operations. This exercise entailed the retrenchment of many semi-skilled and unskilled workers. In 1993, for instance, ZISCO retrenched over 1000 employees with retrenchment packages of between Z\$3 000 and Z\$7 000.¹⁵ Many of the retrenchees found their way into Gokwe villages, perhaps because of Gokwe's proximity to Kwekwe, but more important these in-migrants hoped to get land because they believed that land was still available in Gokwe. Unfortunately, because of land shortages, these retrenchees were only allocated residential stands on which to build their huts. In their first year of settlement in Gokwe, they used their retrenchment money to enter into sharecropping contracts with the land rich. They bought the inputs such as seeds, fertilizers, etc., and provided the labour in return for the right to use land and a share of the crop.¹⁶

The Contract and Sharecropping Arrangements

The majority of sharecropping contracts are usually unwritten and dependent on the sanctions of communal relationships rather than on the formal force of law. Only a fraction of the contracts are written down. According to one informant, "Here they just trust each other. They do not want any witnesses or written agreement when they enter into sharecropping contracts."¹⁷ Another informant said that, "We make a verbal agreement without any witnesses present."¹⁸ Most of the informants emphasized the power and binding nature of the verbal contracts. They all agreed that verbal agreements bind the parties concerned, i.e.,

¹⁵ *Herald*, 9 July 1993. ZISCO is the largest iron and steel company in the country. It is located in Kwekwe town, 140 km to the south of Gokwe.

¹⁶ Interviews, Gokwe Village, June 2001.

¹⁷ Questionnaire 5, Gokwe, June 2001.

¹⁸ Questionnaire 2, Gokwe, June 2001.

stranger, neighbour or brother with equal vigour.¹⁹ It is therefore a mistake to assume that contracts involving close relatives or friends cannot be ‘contracts’ in a legal, binding sense. In other words, social proximity does not necessarily connote contractual leniency. There is no reason to presume that writing makes the process more efficient and comprehensive, or minimize disputes. Written agreements may not include all binding details, and written details may not all bind. Successful oral contracts depend much more on trust which is more a product of relations of community than of domination. The power and binding nature of verbal share cropping contractual agreements are clearly manifested in a popular saying in Gokwe that says that, “the conduct of a person is worth more than all the contracts in the world” and “the words of a man are worth more than pieces of paper.”²⁰ The table below gives particulars of sharecropping contracts in two Gokwe villages.

Table 3: Particulars of Share Contracts in Gokwe Villages (Based on a sample of 25 households in each village)

Number and percentage of contracts involving	Village A	Village B
Kin	15 (60%)	20 (80%)
Non-kin	10 (40%)	5 (20%)
Oral	22 (88%)	20 (80%)
Written	3 (12%)	5 (20%)
Witnesses	5 (20%)	8 (32%)
No Witnesses	20 (80%)	17 (68%)

Source: Compiled from interviews and questionnaires.

It is clear from the table that the majority of contracts are oral and involve close kin. Because they involve kin, there does not seem to be any reason for witnesses to be present. In a few cases however, contracts are written down with witnesses present. Written contracts are few but common especially among large-scale landholders who enter into sharecropping arrangements with total strangers. Whatever the nature of contract, both parties to the contract must know with some precision the duration of the arrangements. Most of the

¹⁹ Interviews, Gokwe, June 2001.

²⁰ Interview, Gokwe Village, August 2001.

contracts are initially for a short period, usually one season, but can always be extended, sometimes for indefinite periods. Short contracts are preferred, especially from the point of view of the landlord, until he gains some trust and confidence with the lessee.²¹ Longer contracts can help to disperse the risk of inter-seasonal variations, allow improvements, which may be in the interests of both parties, and reduce transaction costs. This is because the longer the contract the likely the tenant will feel a sense of security and ownership and therefore he is likely to invest on the land. In some cases, contracts are assumed to continue indefinitely until one party, for whatever reason, opts out. The table below shows the duration of the contracts in two villages.

Table 4: Duration of Share Contracts (Based on a sample of 25 households in each village)

Percentage of contracts	Village A	Village B
With duration of more than one season	15	10
with duration of one season	80	74
with duration of smaller than one season	2	4
indefinite contracts	2	2

But even where the relationship is continuous and apparently tacit, there is invariably some discussion and rescheduling of arrangements for the forthcoming year. This commonly takes place during the relaxed and convivial period following harvest. Competence to contract is regulated by age, sex and identity, among other things. So much of what they can do is sustained within the complex webs of interaction (villages, communities, ect.) whose dynamism is continually changing not only the relationships among people themselves, but the value of goods and services exchanged. However, that subtle commodity, trust, can absorb costs and confer benefits in the economic enterprise of sharecropping. By trust one does not wish to imply some utopian communitarianism, rather those more complicated and costly sentiments of dependence and self-interest of friendships and suspicion, which are the product of enduring, multiplex social relationships. There are occasions when the currency of trust is no substitute for legal sanctions or for close personal vigilance.

²¹ Interviews.

Sharecropping can either involve fixed rents or a share of the harvest. In my case studies, half of the contracts involved fixed rents and the other half involved a share of the harvest. Tenants with substantial amounts of money prefer to pay fixed rents to the landlord. The amount of rent paid is usually determined by several factors including the location of the land, quality and size of the land, the relationship between the landlord and the tenant, and also by what each party contributes until the crop is harvested.²² In eighty percent of such contracts, the tenant is prepared to pay a high fixed rent in order to enjoy some control and freedom over the land and the product of the land with minimal interference from the landlord.

It should be noted that it is not easy to find a definite pattern in crop sharing. Crop share varies from one contract to another even in the same village depending on the varying bargaining power of individual lessors and lessees or on their differential risk-aversion or on farm size used as a screening device. There is a remarkable association between the crop and the incidence of cost sharing by the landlord. When the landlord does not share in the costs, the tenant's crop share is in general higher in the villages; and when the landlord shares in the costs, the tenant's crop share is usually one-third or lower. In twenty percent of the contracts, the landlord leases and ploughs the land, but both parties contribute towards the purchase of inputs like fertilizers and seeds. Labour for weeding and harvesting is provided by the tenant who normally mobilizes household labour or employs paid labour if he has the means. In this type of contract, the landlord takes two-thirds of the harvest and the tenant a third. However, I found cases of tenants who successfully negotiated for half the share of the harvest but these were rare cases. The reason was that in addition to providing the labour, the tenants also provided all the necessary inputs. The landlord only provided the land and ploughing services. This was at a time when the price of inputs had risen by a substantial margin.²³

In extremely rare cases, the proportion of the harvest swings in favour of the tenant, where the tenant gets more than half the share of the harvest. This normally happens when the landlord provides only the land, and the tenant provides everything else, including ploughing services, land preparation, inputs and the labour for weeding, spraying and harvest. Village B had a fairly large proportion of tenants who obtained more than 50 percent of the share harvest, and in one case the tenant gets as high as 75 percent of the harvest. The explanation

²² Interviews, Gokwe, June 2001.

²³ Interview, Gokwe, July 2001.

for tenants getting more than half the share has to do with the life-cycle of the landlord household. In one particular case, the landlord had scaled down his agricultural operations due to old age and only insisted on getting one-quarter of the harvest without contributing anything else except the land. The only role played by the landlord was to make decisions about what crop to grow on the land.²⁴

Table 5: Proportion of harvest share between landlord and tenant

Percentage of tenant's harvest share	Village A	Village B
More than 50	5	6
50-50	15	9
less than 50	80	85

Conflicts often occur when one of the parties to the agreement does not comply. Disputes take place over the use or misuse of the land or over the share of the crop. 60 percent of the disputes in my sample villages take place largely over the share of the harvest, 25 percent over cost sharing, especially on inputs. With the rise of the cost of inputs like fertilizers, seeds and pesticides, disputes over cost sharing have been on the increase recently. The remaining 15 percent of the disputes occur as a result of misuse of land by the tenant, control of the production process and other reasons. When disputes occur, a number of channels are open for resolving them. The most common method is for the two parties involved to resolve the dispute without the mediation of a third party. This channel constitutes 75 percent which is the largest proportion of dispute resolution mechanism. But where no agreement is reached over the dispute, the intervention of a third party becomes necessary. Often legal action is resorted to²⁵, or the tenant will opt out of the agreement and enter into an agreement with another landlord, hoping for better terms.²⁶ Sometimes the matter is taken up to elders, for instance, the village head, for hearing.²⁷ The table below gives a sense of some of the

²⁴ Interview.

²⁵ Questionnaires 2, 3, 9, 14 and 15.

²⁶ Questionnaire 5.

²⁷ Questionnaire 16.

common reasons for share contract disputes and the channels that are available for dispute resolution.

Table 6: Common reasons for share contract disputes and dispute resolution mechanisms (based on a sample of 25 households in two villages)

Percentage of disputes	Village A	Village B
Over harvest sharing	55	65
Cost sharing	25	20
Misuse of land by tenant	15	11
Other reasons	5	4
Percentage of disputes resolved	Village A	Village B
By parties involves	75	70
By village heads	24	27
By legal action	1	3

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Share contract is a versatile programme of productive arrangements, an often lengthy process by which labourer can be transformed into independent farmer, or lessee into lessor. And, cumulatively and in the long term, it is a means by which the institutions governing land, labour and capital are themselves modified. These mediating processes are revealed only if analysis is extended beyond a narrow definition of economic interests to the complexities of social context. The contract transforms not only resources but also relationships, intervening between generations and between people in geographically separate areas. Given that the majority of contracts involve friends, relatives and other kin, and that such types of contracts extend beyond one year, some kind of trust and understanding develops over time and eventually, the tenant might negotiate the taking over the land from the landlord. This evolution from a tenant to a landowner is determined by several factors. The most significant factor is the life-cycle of the landlord. When the landlord is old he has a tendency of scaling down agricultural operations and resorting to a smaller piece of land which he can manage. In this case, he is more willing to let go the land to the tenant. But his decision depends on long years of sharing cropping with the tenant in which relations of trust are built over a number of

years of sharing cropping. Sometimes conditions are built into the contract at the beginning of the contract which require the tenant to contribute more resources to share contract, and after several years, the tenant is assured of his own piece of land from the landlord. In some cases, the landlord decides to diversify his portfolio from agriculture and invest in enterprising non-agricultural ventures.

Sharecrop contracts mediate the movement of resources between households, often over many years. As such, they contradict the ideal-typical image of the autonomous peasant family farm, operating snugly within its own resources. My case study reveals how share contracts can accommodate the quest for subsistence and for profit. In Gokwe, sharecropping matures from an interest in subsistence crops towards the production of cotton. There is also a pattern in the development of a contract which proceeds from an investment of labour, to the accumulation of capital, and to the consolidation of land resources. Sometimes a few households consolidate the advantages found in the heyday of the domestic cycle and take recourse to non-agricultural wealth to secure not simply the short-term welfare of the household, but the perpetuation of the farm enterprise itself; the family farm may be released from the toils of the domestic cycle, and become the family firm.

What makes a share contract worthwhile for many young sharecroppers is the knowledge that, over time, terms are likely to mature in their favour as they may be in a position to eventually secure a piece of land for themselves after years of sharecropping as tenants. In the Gokwe region, which has been characterized by land conflicts involving the young landless men, sharecropping offers some ray of hope for them, in that it gives the landless a channel to secure a piece of land through processes that have already been described.²⁸ Not only do the landless get access to land for subsistence farming, but it also enables them to engage in cotton production which has become a profitable cash crop in Gokwe. Sharecropping is therefore a mechanism for reducing land conflicts and disputes. This is even more so in view of the fact that in Gokwe very few young men would like to be resettled under the fast track resettlement programme. Most landless young men indicated that they are used to growing cotton in Gokwe and they fear that they may be resettled in areas where cotton is not the major crop.

However, for rural district council officials, sharecropping is a symptom of 'laziness', an 'easy way out' for farmers who cannot or will not run their own farms. Such attitudes betray

²⁸ This sentiment is also expressed by B. E. Rourke (1970, 41).

a naïve enthusiasm for ‘self-reliant’ households, and ignorance of the necessity, complexity and versatility of collaborative arrangements among small-scale producers. Eurocentric historiographical devices like ‘feudalism’ or ‘slavery’ often qualified by weak prefixes like ‘semi-’ or ‘quasi-’ are not helpful in understanding the antecedents and functions of sharecropping in Africa. Nor is there much merit in an analysis that sees sharecropping as expressive of some ‘pre-capitalist mode of production’ engaged dialectically with other modes of production.

In conclusion, I want to reiterate that it has become common in the literature on production relations, to equate tenancy with feudalism and indebtedness by poor peasants to their landlords. I argue against this perception, first, because a substantial proportion of the land under tenancy is usually leased in by enterprising farmers who are already large owners of land. But even in villages where the institution of tenancy is important and where poor tenants are entering into land-lease with their landlords, my survey indicate that the institution as it operates is far from being anything akin to feudalism by most accepted definitions of the term. It is commonly agreed that one essential feature of feudal relationship is associated with the appropriation of surplus in the form of unpaid labour services and other obligatory payments by primarily rentier lords through extra- economic coercion, that is, through various social and politico-legal compulsions. In Gokwe unpaid and obligatory service by the tenant for the landlord is uncommon – even less common is the phenomenon of a tenant being tied to any particular landlord. The landlord quite often shares in the cost of seeds, fertilizers, etc., participates in decision-making about the use of these inputs and in general takes a lot of interest in productive investments on the tenant farm, quite contrary to the prevailing image of rentier or usurious landlords. It should however not be rules out that, sometimes desperate conditions of poverty often afflict the small sharecropper and push him into unequal relationships of mutual dependence with the landlord. But unequal contracts giving rise to economic dependence-dominance relationship are not distinguishing features of feudalism as opposed to other modes of production.

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