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'The Politics of the Womb': Women, Politics and The Environment in Pre-Colonial Chivi, Southern Zimbabwe, c.1840 to 1900*

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Abstract

Women have always played a vital role in the environment of pre-colonial Zimbabwe especially as they constituted the backbone of traditional agriculture. Pre-colonial studies have either ignored or understated that fact. This article seeks to demonstrate that pre-colonial Shona politics and even violence have always involved struggles and competition over environmentally productive areas, that although politics were dominated by men, it rested upon the productive and reproductive power of the women. Among other things, women were exchanged to foment political alliances or to conclude peace, while male status in political hierarchies depended on who their mothers were. In most cases, as Chivi history will show, female status was only hailed where it served to buttress male hegemony, which also implied male control of environmental resources.

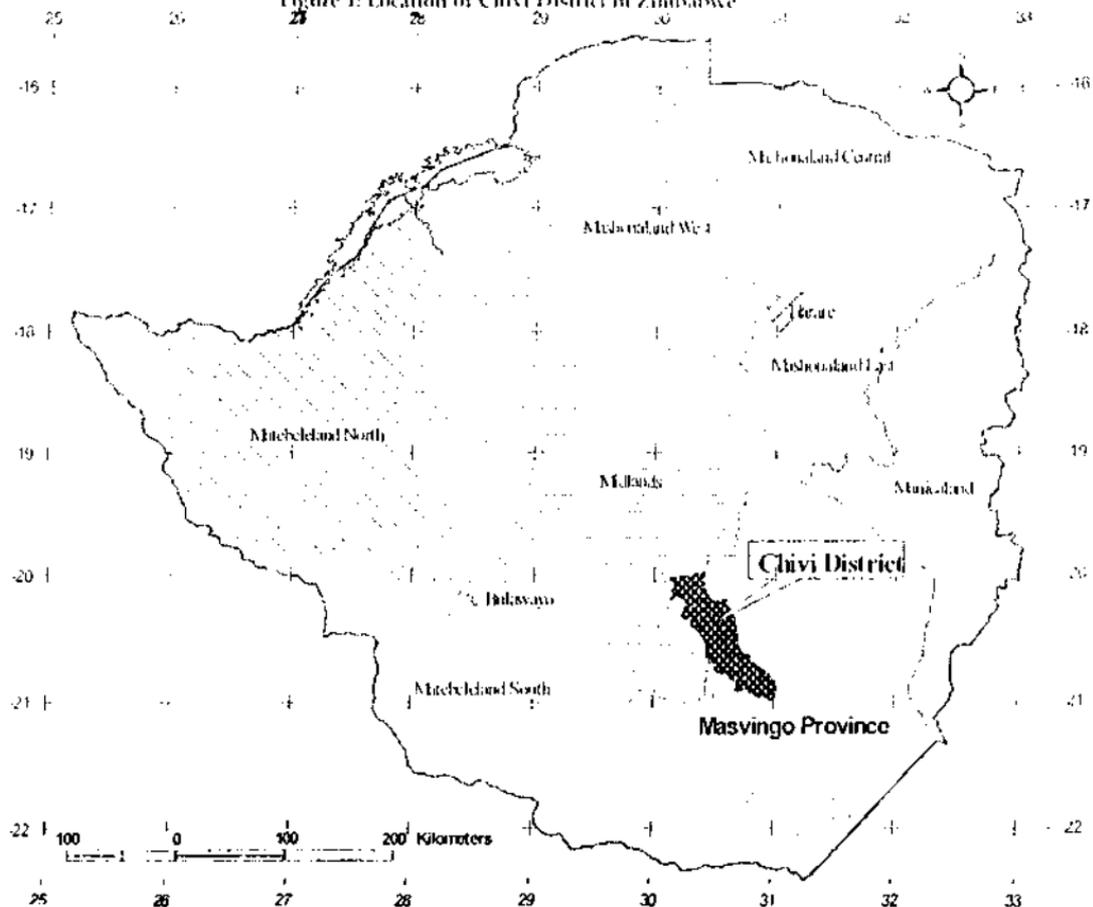
Introduction

The period after 1840 is a landmark in Shona history in general. It saw the demise of Rozvi overlordship of the entire southern Shona area and its replacement by loose Ndebele influence that mainly took the form of intermittent but at times, futile raiding expeditions. This made possible the emergence of certain Shona power nuclei zones which, either by establishing Rozvi style tributary networks as did the Nyajena or by building up a military culture as that of the Wedza, helped bring to life smaller Shona polities. This is true of the polities that emerged between the Runde and Tugwi rivers, which now constitute the major boundaries of the modern day Chivi district.¹ As the article will show, both mechanisms of state formation involved the exploitation of women.

* This article is based on research done in Chivi since 1996. The author is grateful for advice from the late Professor D. N. Beach who supervised an earlier pre-colonial project on the district, to Professor N. Bhebe and Dr J. Pikirayi for their assistance in moulding some of the ideas into a larger project on the pre-colonial and colonial environmental history of Southern Zimbabwe. I also wish to thank the organisers and participants at the Women and Environment Conference held on 5 August 1999 where the paper was first presented.

1. For a detailed discussion of Shona dynasty formations see D. N. Beach 1994 *A Zimbabwean Past, Shona Dynastic Histories and Oral Traditions*, Mambo: Gweru.

Figure 1: Location of Chivi District in Zimbabwe



The region was also recovering from the devastating effects of the droughts that had caused the *mfecane* further south of the Limpopo and the dynasty formation that coincided with this was not only a pointer to the increasing importance of women as reproductive forces, but also implied a significant population increase.² Indeed, the oral traditions of the period suggest a possible population boom, but emphasize, even more, the violent struggles over the environment that went with it. Iliffe and Beach have amply demonstrated that Shona socio-economic life at this time was pre-occupied with the desire to avert such ecological disasters known locally as 'Shangwa'.³

While oral traditions record the important role of women in these struggles, women only feature where they matter politically, so that important women outside the Chivi political framework remain obscure or are not even recalled. Earlier historians focused mostly on the history of Shona politics and did not always see the links with the environment or the centrality of women in these conflicts.

The first section of the article will provide a description of the Chivi environment and its inhabitants and show how the environment necessitated competition over productive areas. The second section will show the role of women in the environment of pre-colonial Chivi and how this has been underplayed by patriarchal power, while the third deals with dynasty/state formation within the Chivi environment and how this involved the exploitation of women. The study concludes with a case study of Mhari politics, where, with the ever-increasing population pressure on the Chivi environment manifesting itself in violent struggles over land, women became important as tokens of peace, and in fomenting military alliances. More important, however, they were used as tags identifying patriarchal lineage factions which, in turn, sought to out-compete others in controlling the ever-diminishing ecological resources of the Chivi environment.

Chivi: Landscape and People

The land that is modern day Chivi lies forty kilometres south of Masvingo and is bordered by the Runde and Tugwi rivers. The area lies within

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2. J. Iliffe 1990 *Famine in Zimbabwe 1890-1960*. Mambo: Gweru. He has shown that although these droughts and famines threatened severe mortality in pre-colonial Zimbabwe, very little evidence suggests the occurrence of deaths directly due to these. This view is also complemented by J. Scoones *et. al.* 1996 in *Hazards and Opportunities: Farming Livelihoods in Dryland Africa: Lessons from Zimbabwe*, London: Zed Books: 169, who argue that local exchange between surplus and deficit areas was sufficient to sustain people's food supplies in Chivi in such years.
 3. Iliffe *Famine*, Chapter 2; D. N. Beach 1984 *Zimbabwe Before 1900*, Gweru: Mambo: 40; D. N. Beach 1986 'Second Thoughts on Shona Economy', *Rhodesian History* 7; D. N. Beach 1986 *War and Politics in Zimbabwe 1840-1900*, Gweru: Mambo: 128.

natural regions IV and V and is historically known to be drought prone. The district receives, on average, between 500 to 600mm of rainfall per year and its temperatures sometimes reach a scorching 25°C and drop to only 15°C in the coldest month.⁴ The environment is not uniform mainly due to the influence of the landscape, particularly the mountains, which have a considerable climatic impact and seem to have influenced settlement patterns in the district since time immemorial. These are mostly 'massive granite', outcrops or 'dwalas' concentrated in the southern and central parts of the district. Dividing these granite concentrations is a belt of ultramafic schists characterising the Munaka Range that rises to prominence and runs the entire width of the district in the south into the Runde river to connect with the Buchwa Range of Mberengwa.⁵ Beyond the central region is plain country locally known as 'deve'.

Chivi's rainfall is mainly the result of convectional moist south-easterly winds⁶ and, therefore, is most pronounced in the mountainous areas. Because the mountainous areas receive good rainfall, most of the land between the mountains is mostly dambo (*Makwatara*) or seasonally waterlogged grassland area. Dambos were very important in Shona crop and livestock agriculture.⁷ The higher mountains in the area, such as the Munaka and Nyuni hills, also enjoy occult precipitation in the form of 'Guti' [extended drizzle conditions] even in the cold months so that they have developed thick and ever-green vegetation.⁸ However, the mountains also have had a negative impact on other sections of the Chivi environment, for example, the area falling within the rain shadow of the Munaka Range such as that under headmen Handizvihwi, Mushayi and Makovere which is mainly dry, infertile and *Acacia* ridden. Similar conditions occur in the Deve area, which receives low rainfall and has poor ground cover. Here, shifting cultivation has been the traditional mode of agriculture.

Clearly, the landscape influenced the environment and this explains why claims to land in the oral traditions are related to mountains and why the mountains constitute useful mnemonic devices in the memory of most

4. *Tabex Encyclopedia*, Harare: Quest: 73.

5. See M. P. Stuart Irwin 1970 'Geology Report', in *Rhodesian Schools Exploration Society, Chibi Expedition*: 19-23.

6. M. P. Stuart Irwin 1970 'The Avifauna of Chibi and Bikita: Some Comparisons', in *Rhodesian Schools Exploration Society, Chibi Expedition*: 26.

7. I. Scoones 1997 'Landscapes Fields and Soils: Understanding the History of Soil Fertility Management in Southern Zimbabwe', in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 23 (4): 618. See also J. Jonsson 1998 'Early Plant Economy in Zimbabwe', Fil. lic. Thesis, Uppsala University: 24.

8. See *Rhodesian Schools Exploration Society, Bukwa Expedition* 1973: 29.

of the Chivi people today.⁹ However, this was also because the mountains influenced settlement patterns. Computer simulations in archaeology have established preference for hilltop settlements among the people of this area since pre-historic times.¹⁰ In addition, these settlements gave the inhabitants a bird's eye view over crops and enabled them to protect the crops from thieves and the 'tribes of baboons' observed by Bent in the district in 1891.¹¹ Moreover, people were also attracted by the good soils in these areas, for as Nyamapfene demonstrated, the Shona had developed a comprehensive system of recognising and describing soils and 'edaphological' conditions in their environment.¹² The soils and their relations to the Chivi environment are dealt with in much greater detail elsewhere.¹³ Suffice it here to say that the environmental variations outlined above meant that there would be competition over the productive areas and the major narratives of such competition have much to say about the role of women in them although most historians of the Shona have ignored this perspective.

Five main Shona groups inhabit the district. To the north and central parts of the district are the Mhari under Chief Chivi of the Shumba-Murambwi totem and, to their west are the Ngowa under headmen Msipambi and Kuvhirimara of the Dziva-Hove totem. Immediately south of Chivi's area is the chieftaincy of Nemavuzhe of the Ngara-Govera totem, which is further subdivided into the headmanships of Makovere, Handzivihwi and Mawadze, all of the same totem. To their south are the twin headmanships of the Beta totem under Gororo and Madzivire, respectively. Finally, towards the confluence of the Runde and the Tugwi and constituting the southern border of the district with Mwenezi is the chieftainship of Shindi or Nebgwine of the Shava-Mhara totem.

What is interesting about these polities is that they were formed at almost the same time in the 1840s but, more strikingly, their establishment was partially based on the exploitation of women. Before examining this issue, however, it is important to analyse the role and status of women in pre-colonial Chivi society.

9. G. C. Mazarire 1997 'An Oral Historiography of The Chivi People: A Study of Chivi Oral Traditions From the Earliest Times up to 1900', Unpublished B.A. Honours Dissertation, University of Zimbabwe: 27.

10. Jonsson 'Early Plant Economy': 12-13.

11. J. T. Bent 1969 *The Ruined Cities of Mashonaland*, Bulawayo: Books of Rhodesia: 43.

12. K. W. Nyamapfene 1983 'Traditional Systems of Soil Classification in Zimbabwe', in *Zambezia*, 11 (i): 55-57.

13. G. C. Mazarire and J. Jonsson Forthcoming *Oral Traditions, Archaeobotany and The Agricultural History of Chivi District*.

Women in Pre-Colonial Chivi

Pre-colonial Chivi society acknowledged the importance of women and their role in utilising and conserving the environment. This was depicted in the people's cosmology, their myths, totems, and art, in a manner that Edward Matenga (1997) has termed the 'Shona Fertility Complex'. He argues that traditional Shona culture despised both human and agricultural infertility, and that the Iron Age Shona were so dependent on agriculture that they employed a series of fertility metaphors to entice the spirits to bring rain.¹⁴ Thus, for instance, the manufacture of figurines symbolized the crystalization of these human and agricultural concepts of fertility into a Shona fertility ideology.¹⁵ As Matenga rightly observed, the figurines were mostly female. The body scarifications on them:

are only done on women, and are primarily seen as marks of beauty and, in both a visual and tactile sense, are highly erotic. Their execution was conceived as a rite of passage initiating girls into the prime age of courtship.¹⁶

In 1890, the traveller Theodore Bent described women in this area as the main agriculturists.¹⁷ In Chivi, he observed what he called 'The Breast and Furrow Pattern'. He wrote:

At Mlala too we were first introduced to the women who have their stomachs decorated with many long lines or cicatrices. Between 30 and 40 of these lines ran across their stomachs, executed with surprising regularity and resembling the furrows on a ploughed field.¹⁸

This pattern he also observed on granaries and on clay pots that certain villages specialized in. Bent also noticed this on the many iron-smelting furnaces that littered the district. Robinson (1971) analysed two of these found at Gumanye mountain which are presumed to have archaeological links with the Chivi-Mhari dynasty, the dominant group of the district who are known to have been associated with the *Mbwelete* (female sex organ) totem before they adopted their present *Shumba-Murambwi* totem.¹⁹ Women neither built these furnaces nor were the furnaces accessible to them.

14. E. Matenga 1997 'Images of Fertility Complex: Iron Age From Zimbabwe', in W. J. Dewey De Palmaenaer eds *Legacies of Stone: Zimbabwe Past and Present* Vol. 1, Tervuren: Royal Museum For Central Africa: 58-59.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*: 61.

17. Bent *The Ruined Cities of Mashonaland*: 44.

18. *Ibid.*: 46-47.

19. See K. R. Robinson 1961 'Two Iron Smelting Furnaces From Chibi Native Reserve, Southern Rhodesia', *South African Archaeological Bulletin* 16: 21.

Therefore the female symbolism was typical of Shona cosmology and not imposed on society by women.

There are more examples of female symbolism predating the Mhari civilisation in the area as depicted in the rock art recorded by Elizabeth Goodall which depicts women tending livestock.²⁰ At Dengeni Cave, Peter Garlake found a painting of women figures with aprons and sticks seemingly dancing behind giraffe and other tail-less animals.²¹ This clearly depicted women's roles in hunting, for as Carl Mauch was to observe among the Mhari people of Masunda in 1872, during a hunting session in which the hunters used nets (*mambure*), he observed that women provided the hunters with food to eat and brought baskets with which to carry the meat home. They were also responsible for beating the drums, dancing and ululating to make noises that scared the animals and drove them into the *mambure*.²²

This female imagery shows that Shona society, in general, and that of Chivi, in particular, acknowledged women's importance in sustaining human and agricultural fertility, but as this study will show, this importance was downplayed and subsumed under male hegemony. Thus, apart from examining the so-called 'fertility complex', this study will also discuss the "male superiority complex", a recurrent theme in Chivi history. This is mainly because female fertility, as Schmidt (1992) put it, was also associated with the fecundity of the land, so that control over this vital resource also determined whether people would eat or starve.²³ Therefore, control over women indirectly meant control over the environment.

Women and Dynasty Formation in Chivi

The reproductive capacities of women became particularly important during the establishment of dynasties or political chiefdoms because, the more wives a man had, the more sons he could sire and the easier it was for him to establish a lineage. This could also mean access to more land since control over land in theory was vested in a ruler as the leading member of a dominant lineage.²⁴

20. E. Goodall 1959 'The Rock Paintings of Mashonaland', in *Prehistoric Rock Art of The Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland*, Salisbury: Salisbury National Publication Trust: 31.

21. P. S. Garlake 1987 *The Painted Caves. An Introduction To the Prehistory Art of Zimbabwe*, Harare: Modus: 82.

22. E. E. Burke ed 1969 *The Journals of Carl Mauch: His Travels in The Transvaal and Rhodesia 1869-1872*, Salisbury: National Archives of Rhodesia: 161-162.

23. E. Schmidt 1992 *Peasants, Traders and Wives: Shona Women in The History of Zimbabwe, 1870-1939*, Portsmouth: Heinemann.

24. Beach, *Zimbabwe Before 1900*: 21.

The rise of the Chivi dynasties was made possible by the fall of the Rozvi Empire, which had held sway on the region through an effective tributary system.²⁵ The Empire's last visible display of authority in Chivi had been the killing of the Ngowa puppet ruler, Zengeya by a poison ordeal. Until the 1840s, Chivi was held in trust for the Rozvi by the Ngowa by virtue of their earlier settlement. With the demise of Rozvi power, however, the land increasingly attracted incoming groups such as the Mhari, the Govera, and Nebgwine. These managed to gain access to the land through the assistance of either the Nyajena or the Wedza, as noted earlier on.

Although oral traditions of the origins of dynasties that involve lone hunters who establish kingdoms have often been dismissed by the more sophisticated historians of oral tradition as clichés,²⁶ when more rigorously probed, these stories reveal crucial points about the role of women in pre-colonial society. Tavengweyi, the founder of the Chivi chiefdom only got access to this area through marrying the Ngowa ruler's daughter vaChifedza.²⁷ He gained control over the most fertile parts of this district when his sons, led by Matsveru, embarked on a war of aggression that ousted their maternal uncles.²⁸ In the process, they hired the Dumbuseya mercenaries of Wedza to assist them in the war and they rewarded them with a woman, the daughter of Musvuvugwa by the name of Ndada. There is little doubt, however, that this move was designed to counter a similar one made by Masvina, the then Ngowa ruler, who had solicited Dumbuseya/Wedza assistance by giving them a wife when the war with the Mhari seemed inevitable.²⁹ Apart from seeking to control the fertile central area of the district, this war had much to do with the land shortage in the poor *deve* area around Chitonje hill where Tavengweyi had initially settled before he had a large family with vaChifedza. This was also before marrying other wives, in the fashion of dynasty establishment as outlined above (see genealogy).

The Ngara-Govera of Nemavuzhe are claimed by certain traditions to have settled where they did after giving a daughter to the then Chivi ruler Tavengweyi. The most widely accepted tradition, however, claims that the Mavuzhe dynasty was established after the discovery of a lone woman

25. For an illustrative account of the demise of Rozvi power and its impact on the southern Shona see Beach, *War and Politics*: 13-38.

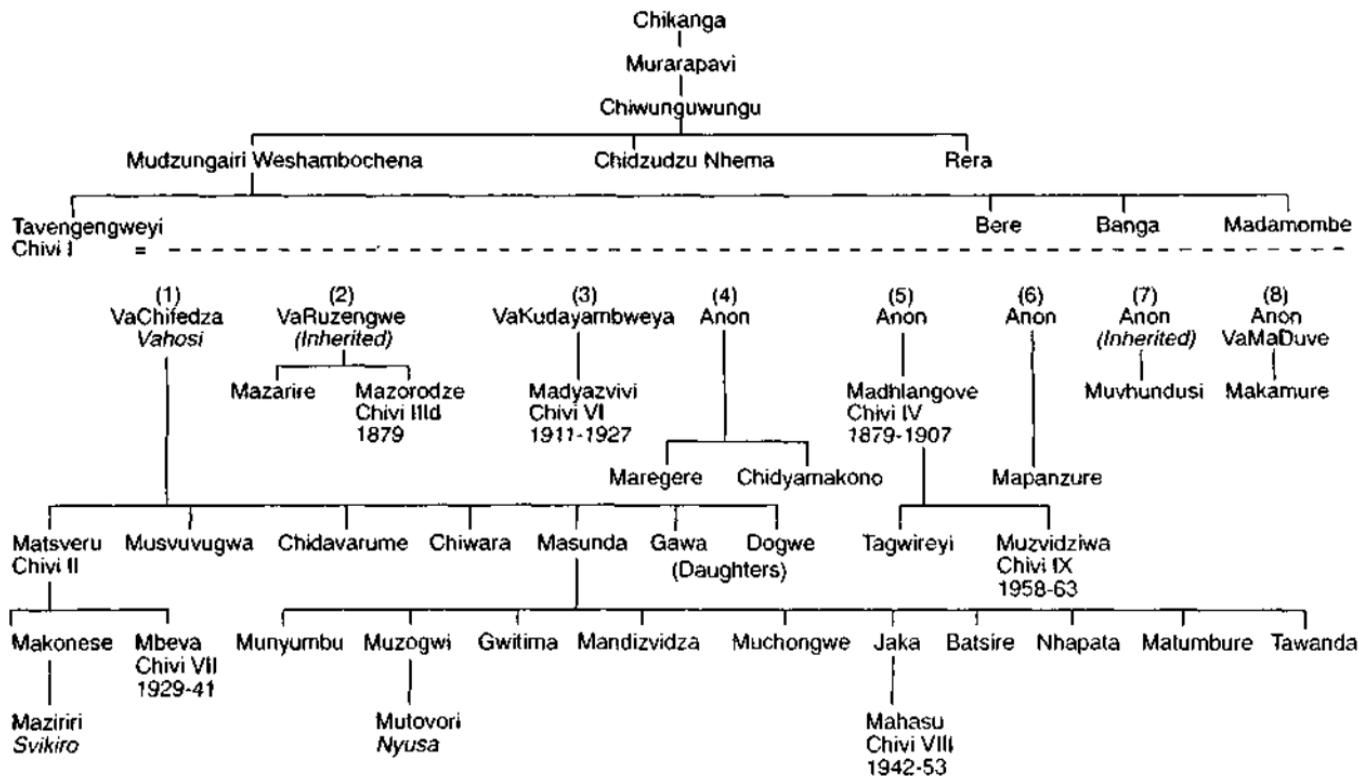
26. See J. Vansina 1985 *Oral Tradition as History*, London: James Currey.

27. S2929/8/2 MLG DDA Delineation Report, Msipambi, J. D. White 1973 'Esitshebani', Shabani: Unpubl: 119.

28. See H. Franklin 1927 'The Conspiracy of the five sons', in *NADA*, 5: 45-47.

29. White, 'Esitshebani': 123. H. Von Sicard 1968 'The Dumbuseya', in *NADA*, 9 (v): 26. Interview with Imbayago Sundire, Musvuvugwa, 14/3/97.

Figure 3: Chivi Genealogy Incorporating Women



Key
 1-8 = Tavengngwei's Wives
 Anon = Anonymous Wife

by one of the two Govera hunters, Garabwe and Vambe. The latter married her to bring forth the long line of Nemavuzhes. The sons (in this case, the only ones that are remembered) were assigned homes in the various hills in the area, with Masukume controlling the area around Mhandambiri. Mawadze and Matawu were given Mukwazi hill, Marazanye, Guhudza hill, while Maringire took up Mharihuru.³⁰

Garabwe had married the daughter of Vambe by the lone woman, and his descendants flourished to become the Makovere lineage of today. Like the Mhari to the north, they were expansionist, much to the alarm of the Nemavuzhes. Consequently, Nemavuzhe tried to check their expansion by placing his brothers Mawadze and Makamadzi in areas to the immediate west of his country. The Makoveres cried foul and sued for a boundary at the Tende River. The ensuing boundary dispute resulted in a war between the people of Nemavuzhe and the Makoveres, culminating in the latter's defeat and incorporation in the ever-expanding Mavuzhe country.³¹ Meanwhile, Handizvihwi, another descendant of Mavuzhe, was also expanding into the remainder of Ngowa country, succeeding in scattering the VaNgowa and sending their leader Musifari into exile in Chivi's country.³²

The founder of the Shindi polity of the Nebgwine people, Neshuro, fled from the Rozvi area after a woman had committed suicide in one of his game pits in order for her sons to get *rovora* or bride price 'from the compensation that they would get from Neshuro'. He established himself in his present area but his successor, Shindi, had barely taken over the throne when he got entangled in a boundary dispute with Gororo, a Ndau from Chipinge who had just settled immediately north, through the assistance of Nyajena.³³ Shindi was defeated by Gororo, with the assistance of his kinsmen Madzivire and Maswata. He went into exile in Nyajena and there surrendered his sister to Nyajena-Masunda. Before long however, Nyajena-Masunda was killed by a lion and the people of Nyajena accused Shindi of witchcraft because, 'Masunda had taken his sister without paying *rovora*,' but the matter was settled when Shindi's sister was 'inherited' by the succeeding Nyajena.³⁴

Meanwhile, Madzivire was attempting to establish links with Nyajena, since he knew that the key to power in the region lay in the latter's hands.

30. S2929/8/2 MLG DDA Delineation Report, Nemavuzhe.

31. *Ibid.*

32. S2929/8/2MLG DDA Delineation Report, Mawadze.

33. S2929/8/2 MLG DDA Delineation Report, Madzivire.

34. S2929/8/2 MLG DDA Delineation Report, Shindi.

He married Nyajena's niece and gradually accumulated power. This made Gororo so nervous that he connived with his old enemy, Shindi to poison Madzivire. Unfortunately, Madzivire's wife, much to the fury of her uncle, drank the poisoned drink meant for Madzivire. Nyajena threatened force but could not act, as he still needed both his tributaries, Gororo and Shindi to build up strength for the impending threat of the Dumbuseya-Wedza. He however appeased his bereaved nephew-in-law by granting him some territory in the trouble-ridden region. This is what became the Madzivire polity.³⁵

Soon, the Dumbuseya-Wedza struck as was predicted, conquering Madzivire, Gororo and their Nyajena overlords, and drew tribute from them. However, after a short time, Nyajena retaliated by resuscitating the long standing coalition of Gororo, Madzivire and Shindi and successfully drove out the Wedza. Shindi was given back his land and Nyajena re-established his tributary network.³⁶

This is how the land between the Tugwi and the Runde came to be constituted and, as has been demonstrated, women mattered in each establishment but always either as pawns or as originators of dynasties. The establishment of these dynasties and the unsettled conditions in the region denoted increasing pressure on the environment, as population was fast increasing. This enhanced the importance of women, as they provided legitimacy for groups of male lineage factions, which sought to aggrandise themselves with the environment based on houses. An analysis of 'house politics' among the Mhari will serve to illustrate this point.

'House Politics' and The Environment Amongst the Mhari

According to Beach, the wives of rulers were not mere chattels, but powerful personalities in their own right.³⁷ This, however, did not apply to every wife and Beach failed to appreciate class differences amongst the so-called rulers' wives and how this impacted on the status of their sons in politics, inheritance, and other means of accumulation in the pre-colonial economy. Among the Mhari, competition over the environment was based on these class struggles or 'house politics' discernible amongst some polygamous families of today. These 'houses', strictly speaking, were identified by their mothers. In order to illustrate this for the Mhari, it is important to first identify Tavengewezi's wives, their status in the polygamous hierarchy and their children.

35. S2929/8/2 MLG DDA Delineation Report, Madzivire.

36. S2929/8/2 MLG DDA Delineation Reports, Gororo and Shindi.

37. D. N. Beach 1980 *The Shona and Zimbabwe*, Gweru: Mambo: 96.

With his first wife vaChifedza, Tavengegweyi had five sons, namely, Matsveru, Musvuvugwa, Chidavarume, Chiwara and Masunda, and two daughters Gawa and Dogwe.³⁸ Apart from vaChifedza, traditions say that Tavengegweyi inherited his father Mudzungairi's wives and married others as well. According to Robinson, other people also gave him their daughters to marry.³⁹ Thus, VaRuzengwe was a wife that Tavengegweyi inherited from his father, namely, *Mukadzi WeNluka*. She was the mother of Mazarire and Mazorodze. Her niece also became Tavengegweyi's wife, but her name is unknown. She mothered Maregere and Chidyamakono. Another inherited wife was the daughter of Musidikanwi, who was the mother of Muvhundusi. Also inherited was the mother of Makamure, vaMaDube, presumed to have come from Manicaland. Tavengegweyi also married the mother of Mapanzure whose name is unknown but who came from Gutu. He was also given vaChifedza's younger sister, vaKudyambweya, the mother of Madyazvivi, his youngest son.⁴⁰

However, for all these women and others, vaChifedza was the *vahosi* or the senior wife, while they were the '*varongo*' or minor wives. In order of importance, the *vahosi* ranked highest, followed by the properly married wives, then last in the line were the inherited wives, who were not considered to be married but only being held in trust for their deceased husbands. Traditionally, the status of the women corresponded directly with the status of their sons in the political hierarchy. The lowest in the hierarchy were the sons of inherited mothers who, although sired by the Chief in question or dynasty founder, were regarded as born on behalf of the deceased and, therefore, not entitled to the inheritance of their biological father. As the struggle over the land became more pronounced, these class differences clearly manifested themselves.

One such occasion where this 'politics of the womb' came out clearly was in the distribution of land after the defeat and flight of the Ngowa. Matsveru conducted the distribution in his capacity as the eldest son and leader of the war of conquest. He distributed the land as follows: He occupied Chomuteme hill and had other *mizinda* or villages at Chitanga and Chishave hills,⁴¹ and Mazarire remained in Nyaningwe but later moved to Rusvinga hill, leaving Nyaningwe 'to the younger brothers'.⁴²

38. See Mazarire 'An Oral Historiography of the Chivi People': 22.

39. *Ibid*: 20

40. K. R. Robinson 1971 'Tale From The Old People', in *NADA*, 10 (iii): 80.

41. For more details about the mothers and their origins see Mazarire, 'An Oral Historiography of The Chivi People': 22, 30. See also H. Franklin 1928 'Nyaningwe', in *NADA*, 6: 82; and J. D. White 1980 'The VaMhari', in *NADA*, 12 (ii): 117.

42. S2929/8/2 Delineation Report, Matsveru; Interviews with Chindireva Run'anga, 15/3/97, Mukumbira Kraal, Chomuteme Hill and Matsveru Chegovo 1/3/97, Matsveru Village.

Musvuvugwa was given Zihxwa, Ngorogwe and Gwete hills.⁴³ Chidavarume had been given Gungwe hill but he refused on account of the many baboons there, so that Gungwe was taken over by Chiwara, while Chidavarume retired to the area around Zvikato.⁴⁴ Masunda occupied Chongogwe hill. Other sons, such as Makamure, did not receive anything but only managed to gain foothold in Run'ai hill after giving Nemavuzhe-Maringire a daughter called Makuruva or Mucharipa.⁴⁵

It would appear that Matsveru favoured his brothers at the expense of half brothers from other houses, as only his full brothers from his 'mother's womb' were allocated areas in the fertile and mountainous parts of the chiefdom. Nyaningwe remained the old home for all the other half brothers. Because of this, one of the traditions claims that Matsveru placed his brothers in strongholds (*nhare*) in the interior mountainous parts of the country, while he left the other half brothers in the open country or *deve* where they were vulnerable to Ndebele raids.⁴⁶ This might explain Posselt's reference to a section of the Mhari called '*vaDeve*', who occupied the plain country and paid tribute to the Ndebele and to those occupying the hilly parts of the country known as the '*vaMhari*'.⁴⁷

Beach has suggested that one can interpret the history of women through the expansion of the Mhari, as in the case of the Njanja,⁴⁸ and that it could be investigated whether the occupation of certain lands by Tavengewezi's sons had anything to do with the origins of their mothers.⁴⁹ However, unlike the Njanja where the expansion followed the house of Neshangwe's wives, namely, Chikono, Charwe, Dondi and Marudya, the expansion of Tavengewezi's sons was dictated by the single and senior powerful 'house' of the sons of vaChifedza. Expansion of the sort suggested by Beach was only discernible in the second generation Mhari who sought land from their mother's areas, as the problem of land escalated due to increasing population pressure. Thus, Nyengera the son of Masunda by his wife vaMataga, the daughter of Nemavuzhe, lay claims to the land of his maternal grandfather and succeeded in driving out the then Nemavuzhe-Musukume from the area a few years before the Pioneer Column entered Chivi. Manyumbu, another son of Masunda, is said to have conquered Pako

43. Interview with Gwaziwa Marufu.

44. S2929/8/2 Delineation Report, Musvuvugwa.

45. S2929/8/2 Delineation Report, Matsveru; Interview with Gwaziwa Marufu.

46. S2929/8/2 Delineation Report, Nemavuzhe and Makamure.

47. Mazarire 'An Oral Historiography of the Chivi People': 28.

48. F. W. T. Posselt 1935 *Fact and Fiction*, Salisbury: Rhodesia Publishing and Printing: 37.

49. Beach *A Zimbabwean Past*: 266-7.

country around Chirogwe hill because his mother came from there.⁵⁰ Thus, patriarchs used their mothers' status to acquire land and to avert the ecological crisis developing in an environment threatened by overpopulation and diminishing resources.

Manyumbu's advance on Chirogwe is also a good example of the unifying force of women in Chivi's history. In addition, his land distribution policy revealed an interesting case of a more equitable form of 'house politics'. Manyumbu rallied his younger brothers who swore by their sister Negadze 'to die fighting for the country'⁵¹ and then descended on the Pako whom they defeated at Chembazve and Chivare and the Pako stronghold at Chirogwe. After the war, Manyumbu, like Matsveru before him, distributed the land among his brothers. He, however, employed different 'criteria of the womb' from Matsveru's. Muchongwe and Jaka got Chivare, Ngurundu and Sese hills because they came from the same mother. Masiya, Mandizvidza, and Chengeta, all from the same mother, got Chembazve hill. Gwitima was given Zamamba hill, and Muziki and Tawanda, Chirogwe hill, while Muzogwi, Batsire, Nhapata and Matumbure received Chimowa hill for the same reason. Manyumbu himself assumed supreme control over the entire Masunda area.⁵² It is significant to note that, while the identities of the mothers were the bases on which land was allocated, women themselves were not allocated any land at all.

The exploitation of women's identities and their continued marginalisation continued into the colonial period. Indeed, some patriarchs even solicited assistance from Europeans to gain access to more land or to settle old scores over the land, but, in the process, continuing to exploit women. For instance, in 1892, the Pako unsuccessfully sought the assistance of Messrs Duncan and Promitz, to oust Manyumbu from Chirogwe area.⁵³ In 1895, the Ngowa, under Msipambi, gave the Native Commissioner, M. E. Weale or 'Chari', as he was known, a wife in order for him to intervene in a land dispute between themselves and the Mhari house of Matsveru.⁵⁴

Conclusion

This study attempted to demonstrate that women were very important in Shona society, although always subjected to a subordinate position, and that politics in pre-colonial Shona territory involved, essentially, struggles

50. Beach, Personal Communication, January 1997.

51. For a detailed account of this expansion see Mazarire, 'An Oral Historiography of the Chivi People'.

52. S2929/8/2 Delineation Report, Masunda-Chipindu.

53. H. Zvakavapano 1964 'The Story of the Masunda Headmanship', in *NADA*, 9 (i): 57.

54. D3/1/1 'The Queen vs Robert Duncan', 3 February 1893.

over the environment. Although historians have hitherto regarded these struggles as simply the working out of hostilities among warring tribes, this study has argued that the struggles offer insights into how gender influenced pre-colonial politics. It has argued that, for the people of Chivi, although women could be exchanged to substantiate male interests in the environment, men depended for the legitimisation of their political claims on their identities, as defined by the identities of their mothers. Thus, a gendered approach cuts across a number of key issues, which expose particular contradictions in Chivi society, that are not easily discernible when one simply looks at this society's political history.