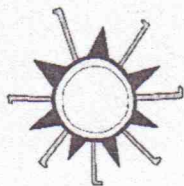


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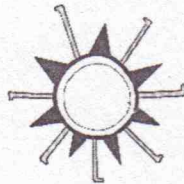
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CHAPTER EIGHT

LONG-TERM RESEARCH IN GWEMBE VALLEY, ZAMBIA

Thayer Scudder and Elizabeth Colson



Introduction

We began our study of the Gwembe or Valley Tonga of Zambia in 1956 when Zambia was the British Colonial Territory of Northern Rhodesia and Gwembe Valley was still a relatively isolated region served by few roads, schools, or shops. Within a decade it had been transformed; and since then each decade, sometimes each year, has brought new challenges.

Gwembe Valley occupies the Zambezi River valley between Victoria Falls and the confluences of the Zambezi and Kafue Rivers (figure 8.1). The valley floor lies at about 1,300 feet above sea level, flanked by 3,000- to 5,000-foot plateaus. In 1956 the larger part of the population lived on the north bank of the Zambezi in Northern Rhodesia, separated by a permeable international boundary from kin living on the south bank in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). It is with the fortunes of the Zambian inhabitants of Gwembe that we are primarily concerned. Between 1946 and 1991 they were under a single administrative district, Gwembe District, which evolved into three subdistricts: Gwembe North, Gwembe Central, and Gwembe South. In 1991 these became formalized as separate districts: Siavonga, Gwembe, and Sinazongwe. To maintain continuity with earlier publications, we here retain the old designations and use *Gwembe* to refer to the former district and its subdivisions.

The experience of the Gwembe people since 1956 epitomizes what has been happening throughout much of the Third World, where the building of dams and other massive projects transforms physical environments, populations become more vulnerable to centralized power, and transnational economic forces transform the political and social environment. The Gwembe people have experienced both boom and bust, have found their countryside an arena for guerrilla warfare, have been forced to contend with environmental degradation, have suffered from new diseases (especially AIDS and cholera), have had to compete with incomers intent on exploiting local resources, and have been exposed to the planning strategies of international organizations as well as those of their own government. They have learned to think internationally of donors, foreign exchange, markets, passports, and visas.



Ted Scudder and Sam Clark (right) with Mazulu village children, 1995. Photo by Lisa Cliggett.

Beginning in 1956, one or the other (or both) of us visited Gwembe, at least briefly, on twenty-six different occasions, with the most recent being Colson's visit in 2001. Colson's earlier visit to Gwembe Central in June 1949 was incidental to research among the neighboring Plateau Tonga. Mary E. D. Scudder joined us in 1962-1963, 1972, and 1981-1982, while Roger Noll collaborated with us in 1972. Others associated with the study have been Jonathan Habarad, who spent fifteen months in Gwembe during 1987-1988; Sarah Madrid and Carlos Madrid, briefly in the summer of 1991; Sam Clark, some months in 1991, 1995, 1996, 1997-1998; Rhonda Gillett-Netting, in 1993 and 1997; Lisa Cliggett, eighteen months in 1994-1995, and in 1996, 1998, and 2001; and Ben Clark, in 1998, 1999, and 2000. Ute Luig and Ulrich Luig, who have worked in Gwembe South intermittently since 1987, are good colleagues with whom we have exchanged field data, although they are not part of the longitudinal study group.

The Gwembe Study through Time

Initiation of the Study

A longitudinal study was not part of the original research design conceived in 1955 by Henry Fosbrooke, then director of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute (later the Institute for African Studies of the University of Zambia, and now the Institute for Economic and Social Research). When he heard that a hydroelec-

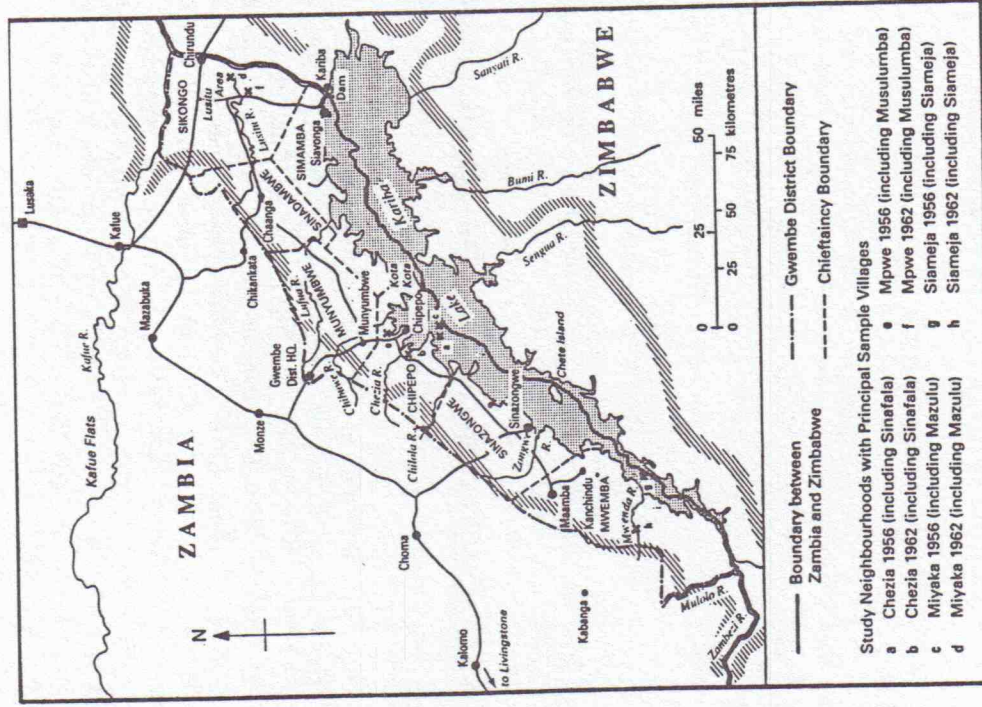


Figure 8.1. Gwembe District and Kariba Lake Basin, Zambia.

tric dam was to be built at Kariba Gorge on the Zambezi River (Soils Inc. in association with Chalo Environmental 2000), Fosbrooke recognized that the creation of Kariba Lake would challenge the Gwembe Tonga to adapt to new environments, and he planned for anthropologists to observe the process. The study was to include an initial period in 1956-1957 prior to resettlement and a return visit some years after the move to examine adaptation. The emphasis was to be on the long-term consequences of living in a new region rather than on the transition period associated with the disruption of resettlement. That period was assumed to be aberrant (Colson 1971b). We no longer accept this perspective since it assumes the following causal sequence: (1) a stable adaptation within a

stable ecological context, (2) a disruption, and (3) the emergence of a new equilibrium within a social and physical environment also marked by stability.

Fosbrooke was inclined to opt for a ten-year interval between visits to give the people a chance to change from permanent and semipermanent cultivation of alluvial soils to shifting cultivation and lake fishing, but for logistical reasons he settled on a five-year interval. He recommended a third visit after another five years but sought financing (20,000 pounds, or \$56,000) for only the first two phases of the study. We were then recruited to carry out the study. Colson had learned a dialect of Tonga and visited Gwembe during earlier research among the neighboring Plateau Tonga (1946–1947, 1948–1950). Scudder, with a background in biology and geography as well as anthropology, was recruited to work on Gwembe ecology.

It was not until 1962–1963 that we began to comprehend the long-term possibilities involved in a study of continuity and change among a people who, having been forcibly resettled in connection with a major dam, were soon to be incorporated within the independent nation of Zambia as colonial rule gave way to a new political formation. Since then, the Gwembe people have had to contend with further changes. Concomitantly, we have had to modify research plans and methods.

The article prepared for the 1975 Wenner-Gren Conference reported on the first twenty years of the study and was imbued with the optimism associated with the first ten years of Zambian independence when Gwembe District and its people fared relatively well (Scudder and Colson 1979). Since the mid-1970s, they have suffered, along with the majority of Zambians, from the plummeting of the Zambian economy. During the latter half of the 1970s, Gwembe residents also experienced disruptions associated with the war for Zimbabwean independence. Gwembe District borders Zimbabwe and, in consequence, became a war zone. Land mines and commando raids led to the death of at least one person in each of our study villages (Colson 1995). Zimbabwe's independence in 1980 was not followed by improvement in either the local or the Zambian national economy. Unfavorable government policies and adverse international terms of trade for Zambia's major exports and imports led first to a continued economic decline, and then to calamitous urban and rural poverty when structural adjustment programs urged on Zambia by its creditors brought the inevitable consequences of unemployment, disruption of basic services, and general malaise.

Gwembe has always been drought prone, but drought years increased in the 1980s and 1990s, making people dependent on imported food in 1981–1984, 1987–1988, 1991–1994, 1996, and 1998. In the mid-1980s, AIDS became a serious health problem. Zambia today has one of the highest AIDS mortality rates in the world. The impact on Gwembe, though grim, has been instrumental in bringing about changes in sexual practices. As health services have declined nationally, other diseases have acquired new significance. In 1991, cholera spread into Gwembe from cities where the infrastructure was breaking

down. Drug-resistant strains of malaria and tuberculosis are also now common. Mortality rates have risen (Clark et al. 1995; Clark 2001).

Periodization

We have found it useful to break the twentieth-century history of Gwembe into four time periods, defined primarily by economic markers (Scudder 1985). The first (1901–1931) began with the establishment of administrative stations in the district by the British South Africa Company and ended eight years after the company transferred control over Northern Rhodesia to the British Colonial Office. During that period, the primary task of the administrators was to impose "law and order," collect taxes (which forced men to leave the district as labor migrants), and provide famine relief during the periodic years of hunger that have plagued Gwembe to the present. The second period (1932–1954) was characterized by a more active administration that attempted, in various ways, to alleviate hunger and to strengthen such recently established institutions as a district council and treasury and a local court system, as well as to encourage legislation against such practices as childhood betrothal. Both periods were prior to our involvement with Gwembe. Our field research documents the third and fourth periods.

The third period (1955–1974) was characterized by relatively rapid economic and political change triggered by the building of roads and other infrastructure associated with the Kariba resettlement and the fisheries in the newly formed Kariba Lake, by resistance to European domination symbolized by the formation of the Central African Federation, and then by the expansion of employment opportunities and governmental services during the first decade of independence. Living standards, as assessed by both the people and ourselves, rose for the majority during these years.

The fourth period, starting in the mid-1970s, has been characterized by economic downturn, exacerbated by political discontent which first focused on the single-party system initiated in 1972. The coming of a multiparty system in 1991 and the installation of a new government with different economic priorities and greater openness to criticism were associated with a brief euphoria when people believed that Zambia and Gwembe were entering a new period. Political disaffection then reemerged as inflation soared, corruption became increasingly apparent, intolerance of opposition increased, and the national economy contracted. During this period government has largely ceded its role in the provision of services to a multitude of donor agencies.

Kariba Dam and Its Impact

Since 1958, Gwembe landscape has been dominated by Kariba Lake, impounded behind the 400-foot-high dam which was begun in 1955 and sealed in late 1958. When the waters reached the reservoir margin in 1963, Kariba, then the largest human-made lake in the world, reached a length of over 170 miles and

