Gokwe District by Asa Mudzimu (University of Zimbabwe)

Gokwe district is in the north-western part of Zimbabwe. It located in the Midlands Province whose admin centre is Gweru. Gokwe district is found in ecological region IV. This region is experiences semi-arid to arid conditions with annual rainfall ranging between 250 to 500 mm. Its average temperature vacillates at 40ºC.\(^1\) At some stage, during the colonial period, the area now known as Gokwe was called Sebungu and was established on 15 March 1898. Sebungu and Mafungabutsi were later conglomerated and Sebungwe-Mafungabutsi was formed on 2 August 1901. Sebungwe-Mafungabutsi was then condensed to Sebungwe on 21 February 1907. Sebungwe was retitled to Gokwe on 18 January 1957.\(^2\) Gokwe is delimited by Sanyati River to the east. To the south it is bounded by Chemagora African Purchase Area and Nkayi Districts of Matabeleland North. Kariba and Binga districts border the region to its western and northern boundaries respectively.\(^3\) The terrain is comparatively flat and is typically characterised by bulky expanses of mopane woodland.

Before the colonial era, the area now known as Gokwe was fairly populated. It was nonetheless largely occupied by the Shangwe.\(^4\) Cobbing highlights that the Gokwe-Mafungabutsi region was a thinly populated area where a mixed population of Shangwe, Rozvi and Tonga dwelt. In 1898 Gielgud, who was the Native Commissioner for Gokwe District predicted the population of the Mafungabutsi area to be around 600.\(^5\) The occurrence of tsetse fly and the semi-arid conditions in the region prohibited settlement by large population. Besides, wild animals particularly elephants and jackals plundered the African fields, specifically millet, maize

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\(^1\)See J. Ford, The role of trypanosomiasis in African Ecology: A study of the tsetse fly problem, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1971, pp. 290-1. A table inserted, which was adapted from Rhodesian Climatological Tables reveals that the district’s mean annual temperature is 19.72ºC.
\(^2\) NAZ, GN 27/1957, Gokwe.
\(^4\) The name Shangwe was pejorative and scornful, and it was embraced by the immigrants to refer to the people whom they found inhabiting the area from the 1940s. This name meant people who have nothing but snuff (powdered tobacco). See P. S. Nyambara, ‘Madheruka immigrants and the Shangwe’, pp. 3-9, Beach, ‘The Shona Economy: branches of production’ in The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa, R. Palmer and N. Parsons (eds.), Heinemann, London, 1977, p. 43. On how the Shangwe manufactured and smoke tobacco see D. K. Parkinson, ‘The ‘Batonka Pipe’’, NADA, Volume 10, Number 1, 1969.
crops and cotton balls which they preferred for their sweetness and this also deterred human settlements.\(^6\) By and large, the settlements were more clustered alongside the river banks. It is not agreeable that the population was in harmony with the local environment for there was ecological equilibrium before the advent of colonial era.

The chiefs in Gokwe include Chireya, Nemangwe and Njelele. Other heads are Tjabi, Pashu, Nkoka, Mashame, Gumunyu, Nembudziya etc. It is difficulty to ascertain a coherent narration of the chieftainship among the Shangwe people for the record is complicated and diverse. Partially, this has been as a result of the hesitancy of Chief Chireya to give a clear narrative on the history of their origins.\(^7\) Nevertheless, it has been established that like many Shona clans, Chief Chireya and Njelele are alleged to have originated from ‘Guruuswa’, and they founded a confederacy led by Chireya shava dynasty.\(^8\) In spite of the fact that the Shangwe relied more heavily than their plateau neighbours on hunting, fishing and gathering, the available evidence shows that this confederacy was prosperous.\(^9\)

During the post-Second World War period, Gokwe came to be dominated by the new immigrants. These immigrants were named the Madheruka by the autochthons.\(^10\) Some of these new comers were voluntary immigrants whereas others were involuntary evicted by the state from their ancestral areas due to the strict implementation of the 1930 Land Apportionment Act.\(^11\) The Madheruka immigrants mainly came from Gutu area, Gohlawayo Purchase Area near Filabusi, Victoria Reserve and Bikita. The relationship between the late comers and the autochthons was therefore influenced by this background. Those who were forcibly displaced to

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\(^7\) NAZ, S2929/7/3, Delineation Report for Gokwe. Chief Chireya and his people were all unwilling to disclose their past due to their disputed succession to power and his change of *mutupo* (totem) from *moyondizvo* (heart) to *mhofu* (eland).


\(^9\) See for example NAZ, NB6/1/5, NC Sebungwe, Annual Report, 1904. The Shangwe sold small stock, cultivated and sold small-leaf tobacco to the mine workers in Nyamandlovu district.

\(^10\) The Shangwe replied to their naming by taking a form of counter-stereotyping. They named the new immigrants *Madheruka*. For an account of such naming games see Nyambara, ‘Madheruka immigrants and the Shangwe.’ The Shangwe also referred to the new immigrants basing on geographical area of their origins such as ‘MaVhitori’.

Gokwe described the local environment as uncontrollable and unfit for human settlement, and their relationship with the Shangwe was sour for they often perceived them as backward.

Upon the attainment of independence, under the Government Growth Point Policy, Gokwe centre pronounced a growth point. This followed the division of such vast district into two, Gokwe North and Gokwe South. The growth point for Gokwe North became Nembudziya, or sometimes referred to as Mtora. This reveals one of the success of the Government Policy since Gokwe was in 2007 proclaimed to become a town. However, the division of Gokwe into different districts and constituencies was not only targeting economic development. This came about also as a political gimmick, where the ruling party wanted to create a number of seats in the parliament in areas which were obviously occupied by their supporters. The district mainly relies on cotton growing which attract foreign and local owned cotton companies like Cottco, Grafax and Olam. Apart from the cotton, maize and sorghum production are also the mainstay of the locals in Gokwe.

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12 Gokwe district historically is well-known for its reluctance to agitate for a regime change in Zimbabwe. Its partition into a number of constituencies follows that the ruling Party has an aided advantage in terms of securing seats in the Parliament.
REFERENCES


NAZ, S2929/7/3, Delineation Report for Gokwe.


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