

Zafa! Kwahlwa! Kwasa!:
*African Responses to the Rinderpest Epizootic
in the Transkeian Territories, 1897-8*

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Bek'indlebe, mntwanam!
Lend me your ears, my child!
Ndikutyel' iindaba zamandulo,
Let me tell you tales of long past,
Mandul' umhlaba uselinqatha,
In the days of riches and plenty,
Iinkomo zityebile zimbumba zithandeka.
When the cattle were fat, rounded and admirable.
Amathol' ayedloba phay'emadlelweni,
Calves cavorting in the veld,
Mandulo phambi kwesibetho:
Long ago, before that calamity!
Ulindipasi!
The calamity - Rinderpest!

Kwowu! Hayi ke khon'eso sihelegu!
Oh! No! What a calamity! What a disaster!
Eso sihelegu! Ulindipasi! Isihelegu!
That calamity! Rinderpest!

Zafa! Zafa! Zafa!
They died! They died! They died!
Zaf' iinkomo zamadoda, zafa!
They died! Cattle of the men, they died!
Kwahlwa! Latshon'ilanga. Kwahlwa!¹
The sun set! Darkness descended, all over the land!

1. M. Huna, *Ulindipasi* (Cape Town: Via Africa Ltd, nd.), 13.

This epic Xhosa poem dramatises movingly the tragic story of the rinderpest epizootic that decimated cattle in southern Africa between 1896 and 1898. Despite its continental scale and historical importance in African history at the turn of the nineteenth century and beyond, there has been surprisingly little systematic investigation into this epizootic. Although most historical accounts of late nineteenth century southern and central Africa make passing reference to the plague, there has been little analysis of its impact and how Africans tried to cope with the crisis it unleashed. For southern Africa, an exploratory 1972 article by Charles van Onselen remains the standard reference.² There have been more recent assessments of limited scope: a little known unpublished thesis that focuses only on the impact of the murrain among Transvaal Afrikaner farmers;³ a recent important study of the veterinary aspects of the rinderpest;⁴ and a study of the role of the rinderpest in weakening the African peasant economy in Natal.⁵ My own recent work on the rinderpest in Lesotho is probably the first to examine systematically the history of the epizootic in an African society.⁶

This article extends this analysis to the Transkeian Territories in the Eastern Cape.⁷ It assesses the impact of the epizootic and the various survival and recovery strategies that Africans deployed to cope with the challenges the cattle disease posed. Especially, it investigates the influence of the epizootic on labour migrancy in this vast African territory. The findings confirm those emerging from Lesotho. As the isiXhosa sub-title and epic poem suggest, the rinderpest was a massive calamity on an unprecedented scale. But African societies in the Transkeian Territories survived the effects of this most devastating epizootic by reacting energetically to the crisis. Similar to the pattern that unfolded in Lesotho, the rinderpest did not dramatically change the levels of migrancy.

‘Like a wayward wind’: trajectory

Rinderpest – the only animal disease credited with changing the course of history – was unknown in Africa until it appeared in the Horn of Africa around 1889.⁸ Of Central Asian origin, the murrain was probably brought to the continent through infected draft and pack oxen, imported from India or Arabia,

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2. C. van Onselen, ‘Reactions to Rinderpest in Southern Africa, 1896-7’, *Journal of African History*, vol. 8, 1972, 473-88.
 3. J.P. Kotze, ‘Die Rinderpes in die Transvaal en die Onmiddellike Gevolge Daarvan, 1896-99’ (Randse Afrikaanse Universiteit, Magister in die Lettere en Wysbegeerte in Geskeidenis), 1974.
 4. D. Gilfoyle, ‘Veterinary Research and the African Rinderpest Epizootic: The Cape Colony, 1890-1898’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 29(1), 2003, 133-154.
 5. C. Ballard, ‘The Repercussions of Rinderpest: Plague and Peasant Decline in Colonial Natal’, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, vol. 19(3), 1986.
 6. P. Phoofofo, ‘In Times of Plague: The BaSotho and the Rinderpest, 1896-8’ (Ph.D thesis, Rhodes University, 1999); also Phoofofo, ‘Face to Face with Famine: The BaSotho and the Rinderpest, 1897-1899’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 29(2), 2003, 503-528.
 7. For the purposes of this study, the term ‘Transkeian Territories’ refers to the entire area between the Nciba (Kei) and Umzimkhulu Rivers (Archives of Government House (G.H.), Cape Archives, Cape Town, Gazette No. 8456, 11 July 1902, Proclamation 112/1902, 3 July 1902).
 8. For the latest incursions of rinderpest in Great Britain before the murrain appeared in Africa, and the massive toll it wrought, see R.H. Dunlop and D.J. Williams, *Veterinary Medicine: An Illustrated History* (St. Louis: Elsevier Health Science Division, 1996), 277-81; S. Hall, ‘The Great Cattle Plague of 1865’, *British Veterinary Journal*, vol. 122, 1966, 259-66; C.S. Orwin and E.H. Whetham, *History of British Agriculture, 1846-1914* (London: Longman, 1964), 200-2.

and used by Italian soldiers in their Somaliland campaigns in 1887, 1888 and 1889.⁹ Once it had broken out on the Horn of Africa, it spread north to the Mediterranean, and west to the Atlantic. It also started its southward trajectory down the continent. In its relentless sweep, it played havoc with African cattle north of the Zambesi through the next decade before reaching southern Africa, leaving utter devastation, widespread famine and massive human mortality in its wake.¹⁰

On its southward journey, it appears to have been checked for some time by the Zambesi River.¹¹ Early in 1896, it crossed that boundary and spread swiftly and relentlessly, helped by the wild game and the extensive ox-wagon transport system that linked Bulawayo to southern entrepôts. Within twenty-five days, it had spread through the Bechuanaland Protectorate and by the end of March, had crossed the Molopo River, reaching Mafeking in April. Around the same time, it crossed the Limpopo into the Transvaal.¹² By the end of June, it had spread to the Cape side of the border, arriving in Vryburg around mid-July 1896. By early September it appeared simultaneously in the Herbert and Barkly West districts, and arrived in Kimberley towards the end of the month.¹³

These latest outbreaks confirmed that the disease was out of control. The last resort was to concentrate all efforts to combat its spread at the Orange River. This natural barrier ran across the whole country from the Atlantic Ocean to

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9. R.B. Percival, *A Game Ranger's Notebook* (London: Brian Patch Press, 1924); idem. in E.D. Cumming, ed., *A Game Ranger on Safari* (London, 1928); R.W.V. Mettam, 'A Short History of Rinderpest with Special Reference to Africa', *Uganda Journal*, 1937, 22-26; M.W. Henning, *Animal Diseases in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Central News Agency, 1932), vol. 2, 829-30. The British and the Germans may also have brought in animals infected with rinderpest around the same time. The British may have done so in the Gordon relief expedition at Khartoum in 1884-5, while a German legion, with pack and draft oxen acquired from Aden and Bombay, and probably infected with rinderpest, was quartered on the East African Coast late in 1889. See Great Britain War Office, Intelligence Division, *Handbook of British East Africa including Zanzibar, Uganda and the Territory of the British East African Company*, 1893; O. Bauman, *Durch Maasailand zur Nilequelle* (Berlin, 1894) in H. Kjekshus, *Ecology Control and Economic Development in East African History: The Case of Tanganyika, 1850-1950* (London: Heinemann, 1977), 129; R. Waller, 'The Maasai and the British, 1895-1905', *Journal of African History*, vol. 17(4), 1976, 519-53; K.M. Homewood and W.A. Rodgers, *Maasailand Ecology: Pastoralist Development and Wildlife Conservation in Ngorongoro, Tanzania* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991); J. Ford, *The Role of the Trypanosomiases in African Ecology: A Study of the Tsetse Fly Problem* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971); A.B. Percival, 'Game and Disease', *Journal of the East Africa and Uganda Natural History Society*, vol. 13, 1918, 310, 131; W. Littlewood, 'Cattle Plague in Egypt in 1903-04-05', *Journal of Comparative Pathology*, vol. 18, 1905, 312-21; T.P. Ofcansky, 'The 1889-97 Rinderpest Epizootic and the Rise of British and German Colonialism in Eastern and Southern Africa', *Journal of African Studies*, vol. 8, 1981, 32.
 10. Contemporary accounts of the spread and ravages of the rinderpest in its southward trajectory are too extensive to cite here, but see, for example, P. Phoofofo, 'In Times of Plague'; also P. Phoofofo, 'Face to Face with Famine', footnote 6. For later studies on the trajectory and ravages of the disease, see J.H. Driberg, *The Lango, a Nilotic Tribe of Uganda* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1923), 91; Kjekshus, *Ecology Control*; R. Mack, 'The Great African Cattle Plague Epizootic of the 1890s', *Tropical Animal Health and Production*, vol. 2, 1970, 211-19; R. Pankhurst, 'The Great Ethiopian Famine of 1886-1892: A New Assessment', *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Science*, vol. 21, 1966, 95-124, 271-94; Pankhurst, *Economic History of Ethiopia, 1800-1935* (Addis Ababa: Haile Sellassie University Press, 1968), 217ff; D. Robinson, 'Rinderpest in Kenya and Uganda, 1889-1900: Enquiries into its Origins and Spread' (Seminar paper, Department of History, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, April 1977); J. Rowe, 'A Decade of Destruction: The Great Rinderpest Panzootic of East and Central Africa, 1887-1897' (Paper presented to the Symposium on Diseases and History in Africa, Duke University, April 1975); C. van Onselen, 'Reactions to Rinderpest in Southern Africa, 1896-7', *Journal of African History*, vol. 8, 1972, 473-88.
 11. George Fleming, former principal veterinary surgeon of the British army, quoted in *Agricultural Journal*, vol. 9 (17), 20 August 1896.
 12. There were probably 750-800,000 cattle in the Transvaal in early 1896. By March 1897, however, reports estimated that two-thirds of the cattle had died (South Africa, xxxiii, 1897, 429); see also A.N. Pelzer, 'De "Arm-Blanke" in die Suid-Afrikaanse Republiek Tursen die Jare 1882 en 1899: 'n Social-Historiese Studie' (MA thesis, University of Pretoria, 1937), 62.
 13. Assistance for the reconstruction of the trajectory of rinderpest through the Cape Colony comes from reports in contemporary South African newspapers, and especially the *Agricultural Journal* for 1896, vols. 7 and 8.

the mountains of Lesotho. At a cost of a million sterling, the Cape government erected a barbed wire fence 1,000 yards on the southern side of the river. It ran from the southwest boundary of Bechuanaland, along the border of the Cape and Free State as far as Lesotho. From here, the fence continued along the boundary of Lesotho and the Cape up to the Natal border, and from there along the Natal and Cape border to the coast. Armed police cordons guarded the fence for a distance of about a thousand miles. They regulated all communication between the infected areas on the north of the line and the non-infected areas to the south.

This strategy kept the disease at bay for about four months. In late March 1897, however, the plague leapt over the strictly imposed cordons and broke out south of the Orange River. It now continued its relentless trajectory throughout the Cape Colony proper and moved toward the Free State and Lesotho. Henceforth, it would be almost impossible to predict where the disease would next appear, and from what source. By May of 1897 it had spread through the neighbouring Cape colonial districts of Aliwal North, Barkly East, Albert, Hay and Hope Town, sealing the fate for the entire Cape Colony. In June it raged through the southern Orange Free State and started its devastation of the Transkeian Territories.¹⁴ Natal followed in July, the disease appearing ‘almost simultaneously over two-thirds of the colony.’¹⁵ In August, it reached Swaziland.

***‘Zafa! Zafa! Zafa’*: Infection and mortality**

The first appearance of rinderpest in the Transkeian Territories occurred in the largest and richest district, Nqamakwe, in mid-June 1897. It simultaneously established a second centre of infection on the border of Elliot and Maclear. These outbreaks advanced on the rest of the territory in a flanking movement, travelling from south to north along the main road, laying destruction in its path. By the end of June, it had consolidated its hold in the districts of Cala, Mqanduli, Umtata, Xalanga, Tsomo, Idutywa and Engcobo. July ended with the disease ravaging Mt. Fletcher, Bizana, Tabankulu, Lusikisiki, Flagstaff, and Cofimvaba. By late August Matatiele, Umzimkhulu, Qumbu, Mt. Frere, Mt. Ayliff were in the thick of it. Port St. Johns bore the dubious fortune of being the last district where the outbreak occurred in the Transkeian Territories.¹⁶

On the eve of the outbreak of the rinderpest, there was neither known cure nor prophylactic. In the circumstances, the governments of South African Territories resorted to the only known methods of containing an animal epizootic. These were the immediate destruction of all infected animals and those exposed to infection; creating cordons through fencing along respective borders to

14. Cape Archives (C.A.), Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) 249, reports on the outbreak and progress of rinderpest in the Transkeian Territories, September 1897.

15. Natal Parliament, Departmental Reports, Annual Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture for the year 1897, H159; see also H160.

16. PMO 249, Reports on the outbreak and progress of rinderpest in the Transkeian Territories.



Figure 1: Map of the Transkeian Territories, 1897-8

restrict cattle from moving from infected areas; and disinfecting all persons and articles that came into contact with infected or dead cattle.¹⁷ In the Transkeian Territories, the colonial authorities tried to keep rinderpest at bay by sealing off the region. The border with the Cape Colony was closed to all animal traffic. The Natal government tried to finish erecting the fence separating the Territories from Natal. The border with Lesotho had been closed as early as December 1896. The entire Pondoland was closed and a cordon established along the northern border from the Umtata bridge to the Natal border. The Territories themselves were divided into sections, and guarded cordons established. These efforts, however, were foredoomed. Just as the disease had leapt from one cordon to the next on its southward trajectory, it defied cordons and hastily constructed borders and jumped fences when it streaked into the Transkeian Territories and then danced around the Territories in its inexorable sweep.

Colonial authorities avoided stamping out the disease by shooting infected cattle. They feared that it would ignite latent hostility and suspicions among Africans. Instead, they resorted to urging cattle-owners to protect their herds from infection through inoculation. Many Africans, however, were reluctant at first to inoculate their herds, believing that colonial officials who advocated inoculation intended using it to kill their cattle. The outcome of the negative reaction of Africans to the colonial proposal to inoculate their cattle was a mortality rate exceeding 70 per cent as the following chart shows:

17. Minutes of Rinderpest Conference held at Mafeking, 16 April 1896; G.82-97, Minutes of Rinderpest Conference held at Vryburg, August 1896; Report of the International Rinderpest Congress held at Pretoria, 2-13 August 1897..

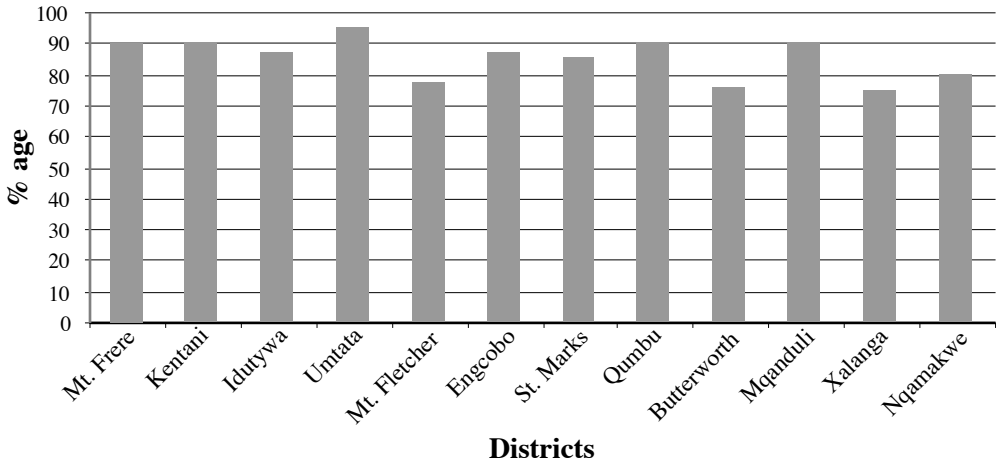


Figure 2: Mortality Rates by Districts - December 1897

This was a massive calamity on an unprecedented scale. These aggregate totals on a district scale mask local and individual losses. Some wards suffered more than others. We might expect the same pattern at the village and individual levels. Some villages, families or individuals escaped unscathed, while others were totally ruined. For example, in Qumbu, reports told of ‘many instances’ where ‘whole cattle-pens were swept clean, not a beast surviving.’ In Pondoland, many formerly wealthy men found themselves with ‘next to nothing left.’ In Libode, some of the large cattle owners failed ‘to save a beast’. In Elliotdale, ‘many wealthy men who possessed 140 head of cattle, [had] now not a single hoof left.’¹⁸ From Thembuland, a missionary reported that a local headman who had possessed 300 head of cattle some few weeks earlier ‘had not ten’ left. He observed that his fate was ‘typical of many’.¹⁹ This instant impoverishment of the larger cattle-owners was so ubiquitous that the poorer cattle-owners hailed rinderpest as ‘*masilingane*’ – ‘the great equalizer’. The epizootic earned itself this epithet throughout the Territories.²⁰

Contemporary observers only identified the fate of some wealthy owners, ignoring those lower down the scale. These suffered the most as they lost even the few herds they possessed. Commenting on the situation in East Griqualand, for example, Archdeacon Chamberlain remarked that ‘some poor people have lost everything.’²¹

18. Cape of Good Hope, Blue Book for Native Affairs (BBNA), G.42-’98, Annual report for Qumbu, 129; CMT 3/53, Report for Bizana; BBNA, G.42-’98, Annual reports for Libode, 1898, 109 and Elliotdale, 96.

19. *Missionary Chronicle of the Scottish Episcopal Church*, no. 5, January 1898, report from St. Alban’s by Rev. S.J. Wallis, 147.

20. BBNA, G.42-’98, Annual report, Libode, 1898, 109.

21. *Mission Chronicle*, no. 6, April 1898, Archdeacon Chamberlain.

‘Kwahlwa!’: Impact and rural crisis

The Transkeian Territories had been battered by waves of unrelenting ecological, climatic, pestilential disasters that preceded rinderpest and were to follow it. This pattern was widespread and tended to occur annually. At worst, the rain did not come; at best it came late. When it did not come, the prevailing drought withered the crops and restricted cultivation. When the rain did come, usually late in the season, ploughing started late. This destroyed the yet maturing crops with the onset of winter frost. The pre-ploughing drought, the curse of South Africa, provided just the conducive environment for flying swarms of locusts, the scourge of the entire continent, to hatch. They devoured the sprouting crops when the seed struggled to come out, laid their eggs before departing, thus assuring a new horde of hopping locusts (voetgangers) in the next summer. Late rains also came in torrents, destroying the ripening wheat crops and the young mealies and sorghum crop.²²

1896 – the year immediately preceding rinderpest outbreak – was especially calamitous. It started with the worsening of an already protracted drought.²³ Credited as ‘one of the longest and severest experienced for many years’,²⁴ it was accompanied by a large invasion of locusts that devoured the young crops as they struggled to sprout and destroyed the mealie crop. What the drought spared of the sorghum crop was withered by the early autumnal frost as it had been planted late. Many district magistrates reported general starvation and distress resulting from the inability of peasants to reap enough crops. In Idutywa, for example, the 1896 crop failed totally. A general scarcity prevailed, broken only by a fair harvest of sorghum and maize in 1897. The same occurred in the neighbouring Butterworth district. The magistrate’s report painted a gloomy picture of the last two seasons: ‘the crops’, he repeated a familiar story, ‘were a complete failure.’²⁵

The rains came late in the 1896 ploughing season. Even so, there were good prospects for harvest in the 1897 winter.²⁶ It did turn out to be a fair one for the mealie and sorghum staples. But then rinderpest struck during the harvesting season, driving many bewildered peasants to despair and leading to a heavy consumption of millet-made alcohol. This ensured that most of the harvest found its way to the brewing pots. The prudent that stored their surpluses for the looming

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22. For a virtually year-by-year description of this pattern in the Territories, and the resulting starvation that fell short of a disastrous famine, see BBNA, G.33-’79, 1879, G.20-’81, 1881; Cape Archives, Archives of the Chief Magistrate of the Transkeian Territories (CMT), Cape Town, 1/UTA 5/1/1/3, Resident Magistrate, Umtata, to Rev. E.L. Coakes, St. John’s, 16 Sept. 1880; G.20-81, 1881; CMT, 1/UTA 5/1/1/6, colonial annual reports, 1885; Resident Magistrate, Umtata, to Chief Magistrate, 11 Dec. 1886; A. Mabin and B. Conradie, eds., *The Confidence of the Whole Country: Standard Bank Reports on Economic Conditions in Southern Africa, 1865-1902* (Johannesburg: Standard Bank Investment Corporation, 1987), 191, 219, 239-40; CMT 1/37, Chief Magistrate to Secretary for Native Affairs, 19 Jan. 1888, 30 April 1888; CMT1/UTA, 5/1/7, Resident Magistrate, Umtata, 15 May 1889.
 23. For the 1896 drought in the entire Cape Colony, Namaqualand, portions of the Transvaal and the Free State, see also Mabin and Conradie, eds., *The Confidence*, 390; for reports of the 1896 drought and the ensuing food shortages, see the unanimous annual reports of district magistrates in BBNA., G.5-’96.
 24. BBNA, G.5-’96, 6.
 25. CMT 3/100, Report for Idutywa, December 1896; CMT 3/59 RM, Butterworth, to CMT, 5 February 1896; also Annual Report, Butterworth, 1 January 1897.
 26. See frequent reports in *Agricultural Journal*, vol. 10, 1897, nos. 4-13, Jan.-June 1897.

hard times, suffered other fates. The stored grain soon rotted because there were no stampeding cattle in the cattle-pens to seal the storage pits.

Yet another rain failed in the 1897 ploughing season – the year rinderpest consolidated its hold on the Territories. Indeed, the 1897 drought was reckoned to be even worse than that of 1896. Without draft oxen to re-plant their fields, peasants had to resort to hoe-cultivation. This threatened to limit cultivated acreage. The insufficiency of food and the consequent incidence of deficiency diseases meant that human energy was at its lowest ebb just when cultivation demanded more intensive labour. Because of the prevailing drought, the ground was hard. Hoe cultivation was difficult and arduous. The drought also withered the few crops that had been planted with the hoe. It dried up the pastures, killing small stock to which peasants turned after their cattle were dead. The rinderpest crisis also restricted animal movements. This prevented peasants from taking their animals to water sources, almost the only places where grass was to be found during a drought. An army of locusts descended on the crops, devouring the few that had been planted with so much difficulty without draft animals. Bizana's magistrate captured the essence of this onslaught on the rural economy: 'At the present time, rinderpest is destroying their cattle, drought threatening their crops and straggling locusts, which may be the forerunners of large swarms, appearing all over the country.'²⁷

This gloomy picture continued in 1898. People were without draft oxen to plough their lands. The maize crop failed in most districts because the drought persisted. Only the millet could be harvested. Magistrates' reports bewailed the serious scarcity of food with tedious repetition and expected general starvation.²⁸ To crown it all, swarms of locusts devoured the few crops that survived the drought in the 1898 growing season. The *Agricultural Journal* of September and October 1898 carried unanimous reports of wholesale failure of crops throughout the Territories.²⁹ Peasants could only purchase food by selling their surviving herds to traders at enhanced prices. Prices of food, including all goods, skyrocketed because the rinderpest had killed the oxen on which the transportation system depended. Mealies, for example, fetched a record sum of thirty to forty shillings a bag.³⁰ Those that had lost all their herds, and had no security to get credit from local traders, had to survive on edible weeds, roots and the locusts.³¹ Nqamakwe, considered the best grain-producing district in the Transkeian Territories, reported unprecedented starvation.³² A typical example of the compounded woes appeared in a report from Willowvale:

Immediately rinderpest spread through the length and breadth of the country, the natives made a desperate effort to get their lands culti-

27. CMT 3/53, Report for Bizana, 31 December 1897.

28. BBNA, G.31-'99; also running commentaries in successive issues of *Agricultural Journal*, vol. 12, 1898.

29. *Agricultural Journal*, vol. 12, 1898, nos. 5, 6, 7 and 8.

30. *Ibid.*, 82; also report for Libode, 118.

31. *Ibid.*, 19.

32. *Ibid.*, vol. 12, no. 13, June 1898.

vated, many of the poor animals dying in the yoke, and after the loss of their cattle the natives took to the hoe, but owing to drought only two-thirds of the land has been cultivated, and to add to the misfortune myriads of locusts have now bred out, and the lands nearest the coast are, I fear, doomed, and the prospect for the coming year is not a bright one ...³³

As drought, locusts and rinderpest combined to cause dire shortages of food, many took to subsisting on irregular foods. They ate wild roots and the meat from infected cattle. Hunger and starvation, coupled with strategies to ward off destitution, weakened resistance to disease. This exposed people to famine-related diseases and those that resulted from drinking water polluted by germs from carcasses of rinderpest-infested cattle - diarrhoea, dysentery, measles, malaria, meningitis, pneumonia, scurvy, typhoid and venereal disease.³⁴

The available evidence is too generalised to enable us to explore more deeply the differential impact of these crises across various sections of the community, even in the family. Yet, as Sen has famously argued, such crises worsened the unequal access to resources that existed in normal times. This pattern varied according to the ownership structure of society and position of each class, gender, and generation, and even individuals.³⁵ So, the disadvantaged and more vulnerable and marginalized sections of the community - children, women, the poor, the old and the disabled - must have suffered more than the advantaged and 'entitled' sections.³⁶ The evidence does offer a glimpse at the fate of babies and weaned children. They hovered between life and death. The weaned children suffered the most in the absence of the essential milk. They were exposed to anaemia, osteoporosis and avitaminoses. They contracted diarrhoea, dysentery, pulmonary disorders and famine oedema, and many died.³⁷

What was the rinderpest's impact on social relations and institutions that were established and sustained by cattle - relations and institutions of marriage, kinship, lineages, status, gender and generation? The available sources are irritatingly silent on this important aspect. This is perplexing, considering the fact that the social roles of cattle were the prime targets in the colonial and missionary onslaught in restructuring African societies. Remarkably, even the questions that

33. BBNA, G.42-'98, Annual Report, Willowvale, 1898, 88.

34. For example, BBNA, G.42-'98, Annual Reports, 1898, Chief Magistrate of Griqualand East, 121, Qumbu, 128, Matatiele, 133, Umzimkhulu, 136, Mount Ayliff, 139.

35. For a discussion on how different sections of the community obtain their 'entitlement' to resources, especially food, both in normal times and at periods of critical food shortages, see A.K. Sen, *Poverty and Famine: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981); Sen, 'The Battle to get Food', *New Society*, 13 Oct. 1983; for a successful, albeit critical, use of Sen's theory of 'entitlement' in an actual historical situation, see M. Vaughan, 'Famine and Family Relations: 1949 in Nyasaland', *Past and Present*, vol. 108 (Aug. 1985), 177-205.

36. For studies of how famine and food shortages reveal patterns of distribution within the family and the degree to which such crises affect family solidarity, see, among others, D.B. Jelliffe and P. Jelliffe, 'The Effects of Starvation on the Functions of the Family and of Society' in G. Blix, Y. Hofvander, Bo Valghist, eds., *Famine: A Symposium dealing with Nutrition and Relief Operations in Times of Disaster* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1971); D.J. Campbell and D.D. Treanter, 'Strategies for Coping with Food Consumption Shortages in the Mandara Mountain Region of North Cameroon', *Social Science and Medicine*, vol. 16, 1982, 2117-27.

37. BBNA, G.42-'98, Annual Reports, 1898, Bizana, 116, Mount Fletcher, 125, Matatiele, 133, Umzimkhulu, 136, Mount Ayliff, 139; BBNA, G.31-'99, reports for Bizana, 104; Umtata, 83, Mqanduli, 86, Elliotdale, 88, Lusikisiki, 102, Flagstaff, 103, Mount Curry, 114, Mount Ayliff; Umtata, 83, Elliotdale, 88.

were posed by commissioners of the South African Native Affairs Commission five years after the rinderpest outbreak, excluded the likely effects of the epizootic on these vital institutions that were widely regarded as the main impediments to an adequate supply of African labour. This lacuna is ubiquitous throughout the various provinces that the Commission visited. The single exception is the colony of Natal. Here the commissioners sought evidence on the impact of the rinderpest on gender and generational relations, and especially on the changing patterns of 'lobola payments'.³⁸

Comparison with Natal suggests a possible answer to the lack of comment on this issue elsewhere, including the Transkeian Territories. In Natal colonial legislation had thoroughly distorted 'customary' conventions in favour of the traditional wielders of power. It did this by a code that specified that all lobola be paid before the marriage was consummated. The code also fixed an admissible amount of lobola. With cattle decimated by rinderpest, these inflexible conditions for fulfilling lobola commitments offered an opportunity for young women and men to exploit crucial contradictions in 'customary' and colonial law. They merely cohabited and started clandestine families. To stem the tide, some elders of would-be-brides consented to marry their daughters off on instalment or on a mere promise of future payment. Colonial officials and missionaries bewailed forms of 'moral decay' - excessive adultery, premarital pregnancies and rampant single parenthood.³⁹

Instead, in the Transkeian Territories, the colonial project of restructuring 'customary' conventions had not been pursued with the same thoroughness. Chiefs and homestead heads could thus adapt the pliant social institutions. There were, however, some reports of difficulties. For example, one magistrate stated that there was 'much unhappiness' between men and women, and ascribed this to the rinderpest's 'interference with status'. He complained that he was inundated by people seeking his counsel.⁴⁰

Moreover, the impact of the rinderpest on social institutions and relations was contributory rather than causative. The rising trend of women and the younger generation to seek independence from patriarchal and gerontocratic control had been an ongoing process and the effects of the rinderpest probably only aggravated it.⁴¹ For example, an informant at the South African Native Affairs Commission hearing in the Territories in 1905 commented on 'a distinct desire on the part the young people to leave the old people, and go away and be married without their knowledge and consent, and thus burke the old people getting the dowry.'⁴²

38. See South African Native Affairs Commission, 1903-5 (SANAC), vol. 3, Minutes of Evidence, Colony of Natal (Cape Town: Government Printer, 1904), for example, questions: 18,448, 18,576, 20,795, 20,805, 21,022, 25,691, 26, 008, 26,011, 26,509, 26,872, 28,098.

39. Natal Departmental Reports, 1898, reports for Nqutu, BB. 16, Escort, BB. 32; SANAC, Questions: 18,448, 18,576, 20,795, 20,805, 21,022, 25,691, 26, 008, 26,011, 26,509, 26,872, 28,098; also B. Carton, 'The Forgotten Compass of Death: Apocalypse Then and Now in the Social History of South Africa - New Topics and Historians', *Journal of Social History*, vol. 37(1), 2003, 199-218.

40. BBNA, G.52-'1900, 36.

41. See, for example, J. Lewis, 'Materialism and Idealism in the Historiography of the Xhosa Cattle-killing Movement, 1856-7', *South African Historical Journal*, vol. 25(2), 1991, 244-68.

42. SANAC, Question 13,877.

It is difficult to explore the human tragedy that the impact of the epizootic visited upon the Transkeian people. From scattered, yet tantalising, contemporary colonial reports, however, we can identify with the deep sense of hopelessness and depression that descended on the villages scattered around the Transkeian landscape. So valued were cattle that they were objects of intense emotional attachment. Besides their economic, political, religious and social value, cattle had a central place in the lives of Transkeian people, indeed to the life of the individual. A man was socialized into the activities surrounding cattle from an early age. He started herding calves early, soon graduating into a cattle herder. When he returned home with the cattle, he stayed with them at the cattle kraal and had his meals there. The cattle kraal was a central arena for engendering boys into men. Here, boys were taught responsibility and hardiness, and were praised for masculine escapades about cattle husbandry. From the cattle kraal herd-boys retired to communal sleeping quarters designated especially and exclusively for them, and a boy who slept at his home was castigated. Conversation often centred on cattle husbandry. Brave action to protect cattle was a common topic of conversation. Boys also taught one another riddles, proverbs and tales about cattle. Male circumcision centred on cattle and initiates were instructed in cattle husbandry. When a boy started initiation to manhood, a beast was slaughtered, and after initiation, boys returned to herding awhile, soon signifying their intention to marry and start new homesteads. Marriage, itself, was contracted through cattle. When a man died, a beast was slaughtered.

Throughout his life, therefore, a man's companion, literally, was a cow. It is hardly surprising that relations between humans and cattle were so close. Human relations with domestic animals, especially cattle, were characteristically African. They contrasted sharply with western notions at a similar stage of development that cultivated a more distanced view of domestic animals.⁴³ With Transkeian peasants, relations with cattle were more intimate. They displayed this attitude in several important ways. Cattle were not regarded as ordinary livestock, but assumed personality, even superhuman characteristics. Perception of them gave rise to a poetic and complex naming practice. Each animal was given a special and distinctive name. Many of these names were descriptive terms, referring to colour, bearing, physical characteristics, or temperament. Others, however, were anthropomorphic. Cattle imagery abounded in Xhosa poetry, in tales, proverbs, riddles and the praises of individual beasts celebrating their fertility, their vigour, and their character. All these were inspired by deep affection for the animals. Cattle terminology formed part of the way in which people envisioned their world. For these people, the well-being of the herds and humans were so closely connected that cattle became a part of their spiritual and aesthetic lives. Cattle

43. See, for example, K. Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England, 1500-1800* (London, 1983). For literature on the 'warming-up' of human-animal relations in western society, see S.R. Kellert and J.K. Berry, *A Bibliography of Human/Animal Relations* (Lanham, 1985); also the special issue on 'The Role of Animals in Human Society', *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 49(1), 1993. For a characteristically African view of domestic animals, see C. Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago, 1966), especially 205. For a discussion of the clash between Western and African notions of domestic animals, and how these differences influenced white attitudes of Africans, see P.D. Morgan, 'Slaves and Livestock in Eighteenth-Century Jamaica: Vineyard Pen, 1750-51', *William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. 52(1), 1995, 47-76.

linked the material economy of things and a moral economy of persons.⁴⁴

The special place held by cattle is illustrated perhaps most strikingly by their perception of colour. Although isiXhosa language struggles to distinguish intermediate shades of colour and colour patches and patterns, this difficulty does not exist when describing complicated colour combinations in cattle hides. Therefore, besides original words for basic colours like white, brown, black, and yellow, all other words in the language describing colour combinations derive from those used for colours of cattle hides.⁴⁵

It is only when outsiders comprehend the intensely intimate relations between humans and cattle that they may begin to appreciate the dread and despondency that descended on the populace as they saw and watched their cattle wither and die before them. When a cow sickened, its owner suffered with it. With the rinderpest, the animal breathed heavily and groaned at intervals, evidently in great pain. The symptoms of the disease were horrifying. Every minute, they worsened rapidly. The sick animal wasted visibly. It displayed sunken eyes and stood with a lowered head and an arched back. Cattle lingered on before dying. Often, some appeared to recover, only suddenly to succumb. The appearance of the victim was pathetic. By the time it died, the animal was dehydrated, emaciated, fetid and soiled, the sufferer having shrunk into a wizened caricature of its former self.

As the death toll mounted, the sight of many carcasses strewn all over the countryside was gruesome and heartbreaking. To avoid the arduous task of carrying and burying carcasses, people drove their dying cattle to a common spot where dead cattle already lay, away from the habited section of the village – there to die. One magistrate movingly described the procession to the graveyard:

Day by day, hour by hour, the mournful procession would wend, with the slowness of a funeral, to this ghastly spot, where the swollen carcasses festered over the ground ... The effluvium became so bad that it was found impossible to approach this bovine Golgotha except when the wind was favourable. When the breeze blew down the valley towards the kraal, the dwellers would be seized with violent sickness.⁴⁶

Then after the holocaust, the eerie silence surrounding their villages and the unfamiliar sight of empty meadows haunted the people. Lifelessness hung over the countryside. Men had lost not only their herds, but also the legacy of accumulated cattle-keeping over generations. In a way, the family biography, lived out through the stock, was abruptly terminated.

44. J. and J. Comaroff, *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1992), 148; J.G. Galaty, 'Cultural Perspectives on Nomadic Pastoral Societies', *Nomadic Peoples*, vol. 16, 1984, 15-30.

45. For an important study of the intimate and all-encompassing relationship between humans and cattle among the Nguni, see M. Poland, D. Hammond-Tooke and L. Voigt, *The Abundant Herds: A Celebration of the Nguni Cattle of the Zulu People* (Cape Town: Fernwood Press, 2003); also Poland's unpublished doctoral thesis, Poland, 'Uchibidolo: The Abundant Herds - A Descriptive Study of the Sanga-Nguni Cattle of the Zulu People' (Ph.D thesis, University of Natal, 1977).

46. W.C. Scully, *Between Sun and Sand: A Tale of an African Desert* (London: Methuen & Co., 1898), 289.

Some cattle owners were reported to have lost their minds, while others took their lives in utter despondency.⁴⁷ On visiting a village in Nqamakwe, Magistrate Scully heard ‘some peculiar murmuring going in a hut.’ Upon entering he saw ‘the head of the kraal fondling a young calf. He had his arms around its neck and was rubbing his face against its soft skin. “All the others are dead,” he said, but if I can only keep this little heifer alive, she will again fill my kraal.’ When passing another group of huts, he heard a yell:

Looking around I saw a man rushing towards me with uplifted club. To escape, I had to put my horse to a sharp canter. Some people ran after the lunatic, but he easily distanced them ... For nearly three miles he kept up the pursuit, yelling horrible threats and abuse all the time. The man had got it into his demented brain that I was responsible for the dying of the cattle.⁴⁸

Scully’s own mental health deteriorated markedly in the aftermath of the calamity. His sleep ‘diminished almost to vanishing point’, and his nerves became ‘so worn down that any sudden noise made me jump.’ He had to go to Europe to consult a specialist and recuperate.⁴⁹ The same fate befell veterinarian J.F. Soga, and he was forced to resign.⁵⁰ The mental state of African-bereaved cattle-owners must have been terrible and traumatic.

***Kwasa!* Survival and recovery**

Amid the despair, however, Transkian peasants rose above adversity by displaying remarkable resourcefulness in adapting to the crisis and recovering from it. The mental and physical resilience of African peasants amidst perhaps their worst disaster in living memory baffled contemporary European observers. They deployed creative strategies to recover from the impact of the calamity. Restocking itself occurred at an impressive rate. This resulted from internal regeneration and cattle imports from outside the Territories. Not all the cattle died. Some districts managed to save at least twenty percent of their cattle. These formed a nucleus of later regeneration. Calves were more prone to escape infection. This was probably because most infection occurred through communal grazing where calves were absent as they remained at home when older cows went out to graze. Cattle-owners, with their eyes to future regeneration, exercised great caution to isolate the calves.

Most cattle replenishments, however, came from without, acquired through purchasing young heifers from colonial farmers. Districts bordering the Cape Colony benefited most from this.⁵¹ Those near Lesotho purchased cattle from

47. *Christian Express*, no. 27, 328, 1 October 1897.

48. Scully, *Further Reminiscences*, 332.

49. *Ibid.*, 343.

50. PMO 249, Rinderpest report by R.M., Nqamakwe, 24 December 1897.

51. See, for example, Report for St. Marks, *Agricultural Journal*, vol. 14, 10-11 May 1898, 690.

their kinsmen across the border, for most of Lesotho had escaped the disaster with mortality rates of lower than fifty percent.⁵² This was because the colonial administration mounted an extensive and successful inoculation campaign in the country. To replenish their cattle-pens, Africans avoided selling their surviving breeding stock. A report from Libode, for example, noted that ‘except under very great pressure, very few, if any, cattle are being removed from the district.’⁵³

Cattle purchases rose during the South African War, 1899-1901. The war created an insatiable labour market for military workers at inflated wages. Africans engaged themselves at remunerative wages in nearly every department of the military, including guarding borders, scouting and combat. They also sold their produce and tobacco to British troops garrisoned in the Territories at inflated wartime prices. With the cash thus earned, they purchased large herds of cattle cheaply from Afrikaner and English farmers in the Aliwal and Barkly districts, who feared having their cattle requisitioned by the British military. Those that could not acquire stock by honest means exploited the confusion of war by stealing from neighbouring farmers.⁵⁴ When the war ended, colonial officials were amazed at the rate of restocking. ‘It has been surprising’, wrote Flagstaff’s magistrate, ‘how fast the country has become restocked.’ Bizana’s magistrate echoed his impression, wondering how there had been ‘a marvellous increase in the cattle since rinderpest.’ He observed that ‘herds of 40 to 50 are now to be seen where three years ago the cattle were counted by fours and fives. The few cattle that were left have done very well and increased fast.’⁵⁵

Some individual families restocked through exchanging their daughters for cattle. Though it respected no social gradation, the rinderpest beggared the poor but only impoverished the affluent – thus its epithet: *masilingane* (‘the great leveller’). The formerly wealthy cattle-owners saved some of their cattle, while the less affluent lost all they held. Formerly richer cattle owners also had at least the capacity and a wider range of strategies to recoup. But a poor family that lost all its herds could always pin its hopes on acquiring cattle when its daughters were married off to sons of rich families that had saved a few herds. With herds depleted, the value of surviving animals rose, with the resultant rise in lobola rates. Just over five years after the rinderpest calamity, observers marvelled at how poorer families’ cattle-pens had been re-filled. They numbered amongst the wealthiest because ‘the sons of the few rich natives, that had saved cattle, married these men’s daughters, and paid large dowries for them.’⁵⁶

Fragmentary evidence suggests that a tendency to invest in small stock – sheep, goats, pigs and poultry emerged.⁵⁷ Since no one knew if the rinderpest would return, this was a sensible response. With slaughter cattle depleted, mushrooming urban centres turned to other stock, especially slaughter sheep

52. For full details, see Phoofole, ‘Face to Face with Famine’, 523-5.

53. BBNA, G.31-’99, Report of Chief Magistrate, 1898, 71; Report for Idutywa, 73; *Agricultural Journal*, vol. 12, 811.

54. For more detailed discussion, see P. Warwick, *Black People and the South African War, 1899-1902* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); W. Nasson, ‘Moving Lord Kitchener: Black Military Transport and Supply Work in the South African War, 1899-1902’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 11(1), 1984.

55. BBNA, G25-’1902, 58.

56. SANAC, 1905, Evidence of R.M. Liefeldt, Willowvale’s resident magistrate, Questions: 13,197, 961.

57. See, for example, Mqanduli, *Agricultural Journal*, vol. 12(6), 23 October 1897, 499.

and fowls. The new demand led to an escalation in the price of sheep and fowls. Even the wool industry would not escape the ripple effects of the devastating cattle disease. With cattle dead, the demand for mutton put a high premium on slaughter sheep. To reap the advantages of the high prices paid for these animals, African and European farmers rushed to cross thoroughbred merino ewes with woollen slaughter rams. Nine to ten months later, they could sell the progeny at the enhanced price of upwards of 20/- each. The price of fowls rocketed from 1s.6d to 8s.6d 'over night'.⁵⁸ With so many cattle and wild game dead, pressure on the available grazing was reduced, enabling the pastures to recover. Small stock thus thrived exceptionally well, sustaining good calving. 'Never within the memory of any farmer in East Griqualand,' cheered the chief magistrate, 'have sheep thrived as they have done during the past year. The lambing too has been exceptionally good.'⁵⁹

Africans also adopted creative alternative production strategies. Learning from the historical lessons of the past, they avoided the tragic mistake of their forebears in the cattle-killing calamity of 1856-7. On that occasion, they had destroyed their grain stocks and their instruments of cultivation and decided not to re-plough their fields in the next ploughing season.⁶⁰ This time they rushed to plough their fields before their cattle died; some ploughed by moonlight to finish the work before their cattle collapsed in their yokes.⁶¹ Enterprising African peasants used every contraption to turn over the soil. Those, whose herds were already infected, used sick oxen to plough while keeping spare ones nearby. From this team, a farmer would drive in an ox and yoke it to replace the one that '[had] sunk in the yoke.' Others used mixed teams of assorted animals. The sight of a pony and a 'venerable cow that had only one eye' yoked together regaled the Nqamakwe's magistrate. Butterworth's magistrate graphically described another sight, finding it 'ridiculous in the extreme':⁶²

In one case, I saw a man trying to yoke a team of four, three cows and an ox. The ox stood stolidly besides the plough with yoke hanging from his neck, while the three cows each at the end of a long rim danced madly around bellowing and at intervals casting themselves on the ground, and as for the poor teamster – well, his language, to quote one of the minor poets, 'was frequent and painful and free', and much of it in English and some of it in Dutch.

Nearly everyone resorted to the traditional hoe to cultivate their fields. Reports from Flagstaff noted large purchases of hoes from trading stores. Even the Mpondo, who colonial officials and Europeans missionaries stereotyped as

58. Mabin and Conradie, *The Confidence*, 43; *Cape Times*, 24 September 1896.

59. BBNA, G.42-'98, Annual report, CMT, Griqualand East, 122.

60. J.B. Peires, *Dead Will Arise: Nongqause and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7* (Johannesburg: Raven Press, 1989).

61. CMT 3/100, Report for Idutywa, 7 November 1897; also *Agricultural Journal*, vol. 11(2), 25 November 1897, 606; also BBNA, G.42-'98, Report for Willowvale.

62. P.M.O 249, Report for Nqamakwe; BBNA, G.42-'98, Report for Butterworth, 79, respectively.

indolent, were commended for 'avoiding wasting time in vain regrets at the loss of their oxen' and ploughing with the hoe.⁶³

So, despite difficulties with cultivating fields in the 1898 ploughing season, many magistrates echoed Willowvale magistrate's observation that he failed to find that the dearth of draft oxen had reduced cultivated acreage. At Engcobo, for example, the magistrate reported that 'more land was brought under cultivation than during any previous year since my appointment to the district in 1894.' Similarly, Butterworth's magistrate reported that an old resident of the district had told him that 'more cultivation was completed this year in September than has been done in that month during the past thirty years.' From Bizana, the magistrate wrote that despite the scarcity of draught oxen, farmers had managed to cultivate 'as much if not more land than usual.'⁶⁴

The hoe encouraged intensive ploughing, and a higher value was attached to the product. This was probably because farmers were more familiar with the hoe than with the newly introduced heavy American plough. Hoe cultivation also encouraged more adult participation in agriculture instead of the current practice of younger boys holding the plough.⁶⁵

Africans also tapped into what remained of the network of reciprocal relationships after decades of European social restructuring. Many whose animals had survived loaned or hired out their ploughing oxen to those who had lost all. The Umzimkhulu magistrate observed that 'the fortunate possessors of draught oxen [were] hiring them out to others destitute in that respect, at very paying rates.' In Ngqeleni, people paid as much as 10/- a day for four oxen to plough their fields. Others practised communal cultivation. For example, Butterworth's magistrate reported that it was 'common' for a man with a span to 'send his team the round of his friends and relatives' after finishing his own ploughing. The family networks of reciprocity reached farther than the extended family and other local households. It extended to neighbouring European farmers, who, having lost fewer cattle, hired their draught oxen to Africans.⁶⁶

Astute African peasants intensified their energy, growing multipurpose and drought resistant crops. Without their milk-producing cows, they cultivated the sweet potato, maize and the sorghum vulgare. The sweet potato had several advantages. It was less vulnerable to locusts. It could be crushed into a juice that resembled and almost tasted like milk. The juice could feed babies and weaned children who were deprived of the all-essential milk. From maize, peasants could prepare porridge. This fed weaned children, whose salvation depended on a diet of sweet potato gruel and fermented maize porridge. Maize could also be prepared in various forms of food - whole, crushed, stamped, or ground. It could also be eaten while green - this convenience helped to tide peasants over until the sorghum harvest. Even those who cultivated late, because of the prevail-

63. *Agricultural Journal*, vol. 12(9), 23 October 1898, 497; BBNA, G.31-'99, Report for Bizana, 105, respectively.

64. BBNA, G.31-'99, Reports for Engcobo, 88; BBNA, G.42-'98, Butterworth, 79, Bizana, 105, respectively.

65. BBNA, G.42-'98, Report for Willowvale, Report for Mount Fletcher, 109.

66. *Agricultural Journal*, vol. 13(9), 27 October 1898, 499; CMT 3/59, for example, Report for Kentani, *Agricultural Journal*, vol. 13(12), 22 December 1898, 811, Report for Butterworth.

ing drought, could still use the green mealies before the crop was destroyed by the onset of the early autumnal frost.⁶⁷ Mass cultivation of maize was reported throughout the Territories. For example, in January 1899, long past the ploughing season, Mt. Frere farmers were ‘still sowing mealies despite their having already cultivated more land than they have done for many years.’⁶⁸ Peasants sold their maize surpluses for cash and bought cattle with the proceeds.⁶⁹

Despite its advantages, maize was more vulnerable to drought than the sorghum. Amid the raging drought, sorghum cultivation competed favourably with maize. Its porridge fed suckling mothers and improved lactation to feed their babies. It was also more resistant to drought and less vulnerable to locusts. Mass harvests of sorghum were reported throughout the Territories, even beyond.⁷⁰

We hear little about women’s roles in these multifaceted strategies to survive crisis. This is mainly because of the gendered sources of patriarchal colonial officials. They must have dominated these post-rinderpest survival and reconstruction strategies. They were bastions of rural production even when circumstances were normal. Just a year before the rinderpest, Nqeleni’s magistrate had celebrated women’s contribution to homestead production in a rare reference to them: ‘Their (Mpondo) crops are ... sown by the women and small boys, the men are doing nothing to earn a livelihood or to support their families.’⁷¹

We are justified, therefore, to add ‘women’ to every reference to ‘native’ that appears in the contemporary sources about post-rinderpest agricultural activities. Women must have borne the greater burden of these multifarious survival and recovery strategies. Attesting to this was the general trend to resort to hoe ploughing as we have seen. The hoe was used exclusively by women before the ox-drawn plough replaced it. Some contemporary observers did specifically mention women’s roles in the enhanced productive activities designed to stem the tide of the crisis. ‘This duty [of hoe cultivation] is dedicated to the women,’ testified one contemporary. ‘The men, young and old’, he continued, ‘prefer the beer and meat pots. It is seldom that any of their sex are to be seen at work in the gardens.’ He continued to observe that ‘more ground could have been got under had the men gone to the assistance of the women folk on whom the duty devolved.’⁷² The trend towards rearing small stock – sheep, goats, pigs and poultry – also enhanced women’s roles in pastoral production, as they dominated this branch of production.

67. *Agricultural Journal*, vol. 12(3), 1898.

68. *Agricultural Journal*, vol. 14(1), 5 January 1899, 5.

69. For example, Report for Kentani, *Agricultural Journal*, vol. 12(23), 23 June 1898, 731.

70. For Natal and Zululand, see *Natal Agricultural Journal*, vol. 2(5), 26, May; vol. 2(7), 19 June; vol. 2(8), 23 June; vol. 2(9), 9 July; vol. 2(10), 22 July 1898; for Basutoland, see Letter of Rev. I. Pascal, 14 August 1897, *Journal des Missions*, 1897, 600.

71. CMT 3/116, Annual report, Nqeleni, 1896.

72. BBNA, G.42-’98, Report for Qumbu, 110.

Murrain and migrancy

Labour migrancy was not a popular strategy for post-rinderpest recovery, as those who stood to benefit from it had expected. As the epizootic devastated the countryside, those that were involved in various ways with the supply of African labour hailed it as a Godsend. They predicted that its effects would reverse the chronic shortage of African labour in the various labour centres, especially on the Reef gold mines. Colonial officials in the Transkeian Territories took the lead. Their official reports teem with predictions such as the following:

Never would a scheme such as opening up railways come at a more opportune time, for I feel, in their present state of mind, if something by which they could enrich themselves were to present it to them, it would be a great boom.

The loss of their (Mpondo) cattle from rinderpest may bring about a change and force them out of their locations to seek employment. I hope it will do so.

These circumstances need not necessarily be regarded as an unmixed evil. It will probably have the effect of compelling hundreds of able-bodied young men ... to go out and earn an honest livelihood by hard work.

It is hoped that the losses sustained by the natives will ultimately awaken the men to the necessity there exists for developing habits of industry.⁷³

The Chief Magistrate of the Transkeian Territories was certain that the loss of stock 'undoubtedly has given an enormous impetus to labour.'⁷⁴ Even missionaries, who we might expect to have shown more compassion for the plight of the Africans they ministered to, hailed the impending devastation as a 'blessing-in-disguise'. For them, the rinderpest would teach Africans the lesson that 'by the sweat of thy brow shall you live.' 'God never made a lazier set than the Bechuanas,' claimed Rev. Willoughby of the London Missionary Society in the Bechuanaland Protectorate, 'and if this hard year will compel some of them to work, it will be good.' Later, he would strongly oppose his Society's humanitarian aid to the BaTswana, who were hit hard by the combined onslaught of drought, locusts and rinderpest. Humanitarianism, he argued, would militate against the timely lesson that the Almighty had dispatched the rinderpest to do: 'The able-bodied should work or starve. They are the laziest set on earth, especially the men.'⁷⁵

73. BBNA, G.42-'98, Reports for Elliotdale, 96; Umsikaba, 111; Griqualand East, 122; Willowvale, 82.

74. CMT 3/280, CMT to Superintendent of Native Affairs, 1 April 1898.

75. LMS, In-letters, Box 53, Willoughby to Cousins, 29 June 1896; Willoughby to Cousins, 9 June 1897.

His brethren voiced similar sentiments. The Secretary-General of his Society welcomed the rinderpest among the BaTswana, for it would 'drive the natives into the labour market.'⁷⁶ From the Transkeian and Ciskeian Territories, missionaries saw the rinderpest as the 'ill wind, which after all brings some good.' An Anglican priest, the Rev. Turpin, wished that the rinderpest would 'crowd the towns with natives and flood the labour market.'⁷⁷ A typical report in the *Christian Express* predicted that 'undoubtedly the plague will act as a species of compulsion to the other acts and motives that are tending to drive native labour from the fields into the mines, the stores, the railways and the wharves.'⁷⁸

Mining agents, especially, firmly trusted the rinderpest to solve the perennial labour shortage on the mines. In anticipation, they ended the persistent agitation to cut the wages of mine workers drastically and to raise their working hours. The labour-starved Chamber of Mines implemented this decision in September 1896.⁷⁹ The timing was deliberate and was influenced directly by expectations of the impoverishment of Africans by rinderpest. The decision was carried out as rinderpest was sweeping through the Transvaal, accompanied by drought and devastation of crops brought by locusts. Delighted by this bleak picture and its expected consequences, J.H. Johns, the manager of the Ferreira Gold Mining Company and president of the Mine Managers' Association, asked mining management to carry out the decision to cut wages immediately. 'At the present moment,' he cheered, 'the natives have to work because they cannot obtain food otherwise, and therefore I think we have a splendid opportunity to bring this change into operation.'⁸⁰

Yet evidence from the important labour-supplying region of the Transkeian Territories firmly suggests that few migrants went to work in distant labour centres. A conspicuous feature of magisterial reports prepared in December 1897, six months after rinderpest had run its course in the Territories, is the absence of detailed comment on the influence of rinderpest on the labour supply. Of the twenty-five district reports, thirteen merely tabulated statistics of passes issued to Africans seeking distant labour in the present year as they had done before, without comparing them with the preceding year's figures and commenting on the pattern. These numbers included a mere 2,160 migrants out of a population of 31,000 from Umzimkhulu, 1,405 out of 20,600 from Matatiele, 805 out of 25,000 from Mt. Frere, 73 out of 23,000 from Flagstaff, 182 out of 30,000 from Libode, and a paltry four out of 16,000 from Port St. John's.⁸¹

Four reports gave no statistics on the topic of labour supply that had become a permanent feature of the annual reports' template. The only eight reports that did contain some details, expressed disappointment at the pattern that was unfolding – there was no dramatic exodus of labour. For example, amid starvation in Mqanduli, the district's magistrate complained that 'the natives are

76. *African Review*, vol. 9, 19 December 1896, 555.

77. USPG, E. Mss, Rev. Charles Taber, 32 December 1898; Wikin Turpin, 27 September 1897.

78. *Christian Express*, vol. 27, 323, 1 May 1897, 71.

79. Report of the Chamber of Mines, *South African Mining Journal and Financial News*, 7 Nov. 1896.

80. Interview between *Star* representative and J.H. Johns, *Star*, 1 July 1896.

81. BBNA, G.42-'98, Reports from Umzimkhulu, 135, Matatiele, 133, Mt. Frere, 131, Ngqeleni, 110, Flagstaff, 113, Libode, 109, Port St. John's, 106 respectively.

habitually so lazy that only now and then will they leave the district.’ The report for the Mpondoland district of Lusikisiki is the most detailed. ‘At present’, the magistrate fumed,

the men dawdle about their own and neighbours’ cattle-pens day after day, drinking beer and practicing the worst of the heathen customs. When urged by officials and others to proceed to Johannesburg and other labour centres where wages are high and there take service, they generally reply: ‘why should we work; is not the country ours, and have we not lots of land and many women and children to cultivate it? We prefer to remain as we are.’

The magistrate for Saint Marks bewailed the failure of Europeans to impart to Africans the philosophy ‘thou shalt work’. He concluded by observing that the ‘very unusual and unfortunate events of the past year’ had tended to ‘keep the [natives] at home [and had] combined to abate considerably their exodus to seek work.’⁸²

The following year brought sustained hopes. The ‘captains of labour’ predicted that a bonanza of African labour would be unleashed as the effects of rinderpest and the accompanying drought impacted. An army of labour recruiters and touts invaded the countryside to gather the expected fruits of rinderpest - desperate migrants.⁸³ The pattern that unfolded, however, dashed these expectations. One more district magistrate joined the other twelve, who, in the preceding year, had offered merely cold statistics of migrants, refraining from commenting further.

Admittedly, these statistics are not entirely accurate as successive labour commissions that used them found out.⁸⁴ But when read along with qualitative types of sources, they suggest that the numbers of migrants did not surge as the following graph shows:

This evidence suggests that while numbers of migrants did rise, only two districts - Engcobo and Nqamakwe - witnessed a significant increase. For reasons that must await further investigation, both districts had always experienced higher rates of labour migrancy even before rinderpest. Otherwise, all other districts evinced no more than a normal annual rise in numbers of migrants. In fact, numbers declined in three districts in 1898: Butterworth, Umsikaba and Lusikisiki. While three district magistrates (for Mqanduli, Libode and Mt. Fletcher) applauded the rise in the numbers of migrants from their region, an equal number fretted about the absence of change (Ngqeleni, Umsikaba, Umzimkhulu). ‘Only a few left the district in search of employment during the past year,’ vexed Ngqeleni’s magistrate. The Umzimkhulu magistrate perceived a general pattern: the death of cattle should be producing a dire need to seek employment, yet ‘it really [did] not appear to be so.’ Only 2,695 out of an estimated population of 32,500 people in the district left to seek work during the

82. BBNA, G.42-’98, Reports for Mqanduli, 1897, 95, Umsikaba, 111, Saint Marks, 99.

83. CMT 3/280, CMT to SNA, 1 April 1898.

84. SANAC.

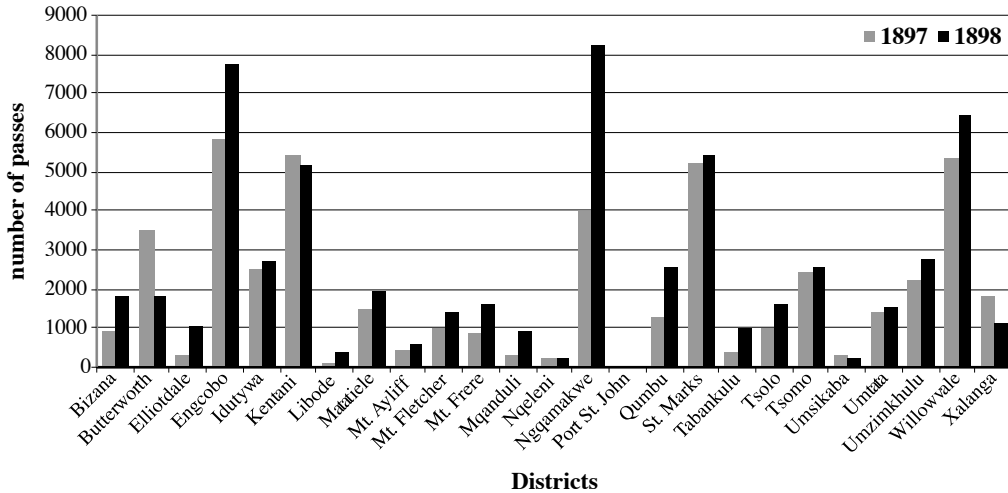


Figure 3: Numbers of Passes Issued, 1897 and 1898

year. This was ‘instead of what might be expected under the circumstances, say three times that number.’⁸⁵

This disappointment was widespread and was aired in the local press. For example, the Transvaal newspaper, the *Star*, in its June edition, devoted a long editorial to the perennial shortage of African labour despite the rinderpest calamity. ‘One of the most startling and perplexing of South African paradoxes,’ it bewailed, ‘is the simultaneous existence of an enormous native population and a miserably meagre supply of native labour.’ It continued: ‘Even the prevalence among the natives of acute poverty and starvation, as is the case at the present, has little, if any, apparent effect on the labour market.’⁸⁶

An examination of the pattern of labour migrancy to the Transvaal mines reveals that the rinderpest failed to force Africans to go to this notorious labour centre. The Reef mines had always been unpopular among African migrants. This was the result of a number of factors, including their remoteness from the homes of migrant labourers, the hazardous nature of the trip there and back, the ignominious strategies of mass recruitment, stringent contract terms and the unscrupulous competition over labour recruitment among the various mining companies. This competition led to employers reneging on their promises once workers arrived at the work place. The Reef mines were also notorious for defrauding workers of their wages, abysmal living conditions in the mine compounds and general ill-treatment.⁸⁷

85. BBNA, G.42-'98, Report for Ngqeleni, 101. BBNA, G.42-'98, Report for Umzimkhulu, 1897, 114.

86. Editorial, *Star*, 29 June 1897, 4.

87. For the unpopularity of the Reef mines among African workers generally, and the reasons for it, see especially P. Harris, *Work, Culture, and Identity: Migrant Labourers in Mozambique and South Africa, c.1886-1914* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1994); P. Richardson and J.J. van Helten, ‘Labour in the South African Gold Mining Industry, 1886-1914’ in S. Marks and R. Rathbone, eds., *Industrialization and Social Change in South Africa: African Class Formation, Culture and Consciousness, 1870-1930* (London and New York: Longman, 1982), 77-98; A. Jeeves, *Migrant Labour in South Africa's Mining Economy: The Struggle for the Gold Mines' Labour Supply, 1890-1920* (Kingston and Montreal, 1985). See also the evidence to the SANAC and the Report of the Transvaal Labour Commission.

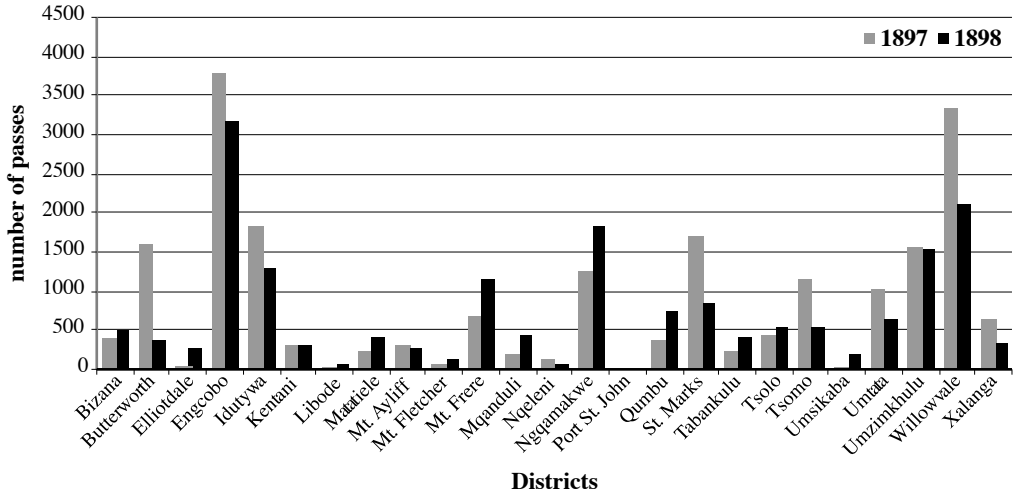


Figure 4: Numbers of Migrants to the Transvaal Labour Centres, 1897 and 1898

In the aftermath of the rinderpest, African migrants continued to avoid working there. Nqamakwe district registered ‘quite an unprecedented numbers of natives leaving the district to seek employment.’ Yet even here, the magistrate lamented that ‘a fact worthy of note is that it is almost, if not quite, impossible to get natives to go to Johannesburg ... During the past few months hardly any have gone there.’⁸⁸ Of the 8,149 passes issued in 1898, only one-eighth were for migrants going to the Transvaal mines. The data graphically represented below indicates that labour migration to the Transvaal did not rise significantly in the aftermath of the rinderpest.⁸⁹

Further evidence suggests that rather than a dramatic rise in African migrancy to the reef mines, the reverse occurred. The mines experienced unprecedented desertions in this period. As we have seen, mining management had been debating strategies of reducing labour costs and improving the labour supply in the decades before the outbreak of the rinderpest. The touted solution for these was to cut the wages of mineworkers and to raise their working hours significantly. Rinderpest and allied ecological traumas offered a compelling argument to act on these intentions. Not all mining stakeholders, however, agreed. The ensuing controversy alone caused anxiety and uncertainty among African mine workers. It kept prospective labourers away from the mines, while spurring those already there to desert. A month before mining officials cut the wages, a reporter for a Transvaal newspaper interviewed the compound manager of the City and Suburbs Mine, a man reputed to have ‘a knowledge of the native character second to that of no other man on the Rand’: ‘How did your boys take the notice of the reduction,’ he asked. ‘The police boys tell me numbers of them say that they intend to return home as soon as the reduction is enforced,’ was the

88. BBNA, G.42-’98, Report for Nqamakwe, 77.

89. BBNA, G.42-’98, Annual district reports, 1898.

answer.⁹⁰ When these decisions were finally put into effect, the result was that a trickle of desertions became a flood. By mid-1897 a Transkeian newspaper was reporting ‘a heavy exodus of native boys from the Rand, while the arrivals are very few.’⁹¹ The *Star* confirmed this observation, noting that ‘the proportion of kaffirs leaving the Rand as compared with the numbers arriving is daily increasing.’⁹² A Free State newspaper editorial on ‘The State of the Country’ wrote that ‘the cry of labour in the mines is so great owing to the large numbers of natives leaving for their homes ...’⁹³

African migrants also continued to bypass labour recruiters. They preferred to seek work themselves and on their terms. They also chose employers who offered more wages and better conditions of work. Migrants, reports averred, had ‘an absolute horror of contracts.’ Five years after the rinderpest calamity, the chief magistrate of the Transkeian Territories could still vex that:

Natives have a fixed aversion to putting their names down to any form of contract. No matter how advantageous to them the conditions may be, they prefer going out, seeking their own labour and making their own conditions as to wages, nature of work and period of engagement.⁹⁴

The bulk of the evidence suggests, therefore, that rinderpest and accompanying ecological and pestilential calamities of the turn of the nineteenth century failed to unleash African labour from the Transkeian Territories. Additional evidence indicates that this was the pattern among African communities throughout South Africa. Even Africans living near the labour centres continued to evade recruitment. For example, the civil commissioner of the Kimberley division continued to complain that ‘the labour market is not so well supplied as it might be.’ Those living near the gold mines in the Transvaal were said to be living ‘idle lives rather than going to Johannesburg to work in the mines that almost had to close because of the lack of black labour.’ This pattern continued for some years after the rinderpest. By 1904 mine labour was still unpopular. It took until 1906 for a perceptible surge of labour migration from the Transkeian Territories to occur.⁹⁵

The reasons are not hard to find. Besides the appalling working conditions in the labour centres that had discouraged African labour migrancy before the rinderpest crisis, as we have seen, there was an urgent and immediate reason – the labour of Africans was needed in rebuilding the rural economy. Rather than rushing to distant labour centres as an alternative to farming, therefore, Africans tended to remain working within the homestead economy. Those who sold their labour did so with a specific target – to restock. Distant labour centres,

90. *Star*, 4 September 1896, 6.

91. *Umtata Herald*, 15 June 1897.

92. *Star*, 25 May 1897, 5.

93. *Friend*, 30 July 1897.

94.

BBNA, G.31-'99, Report for Nqamakwe, 77, Mqanduli, 86.

95. BBNA, G.31-'99, Report for Kimberley, 31; Johannesburg Public Library, S.Store 920, Letters of Sir Arnold Theiler, Emma Theiler, 11 December 1896; CMT 3/173, Resident Magistrate, Umtata, to Chief Magistrate, 6 January 1904.

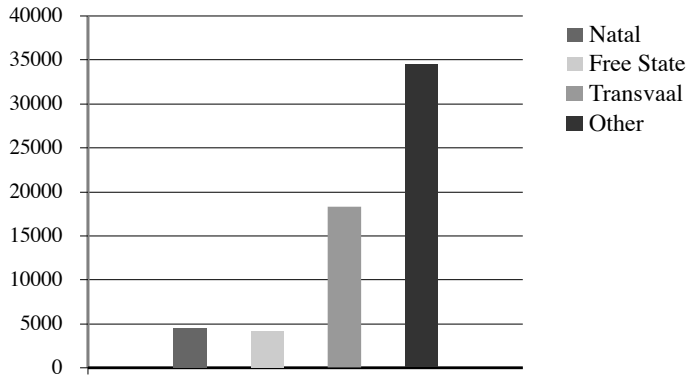


Figure 5: Transkeian African Migrants to Various Labour Centres, 1898

especially the mines, were, therefore, less preferred to local or neighbourhood places of work. When Africans did venture long distances to seek work, it was for jobs sufficiently remunerative to outweigh the inconvenience. The figures for migrants leaving the Territories for various work centres in 1898 confirm this pattern. Most migrants went to work at labour centres where wages were higher than those on the Reef mines - to the docks in Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, East London and on public works within the Cape Colony. The following chart illustrates the pattern:

Conclusion

The rinderpest epizootic of 1897-8 was the second occasion, after the tragic events of the cattle-killing of 1856-7, that the Transkeian people had lost cattle in such large numbers. But as I have argued above, African communities in the area displayed remarkable resilience in adapting to the crisis. This story of adaptation and resilience provides the key to understanding why it was that the rinderpest epizootic failed to fulfil the hopes of those who stood to gain from it. It did not force Africans into migrancy, as white officials predicted. Rather the vast majority of Africans chose to remain working within the homestead economy. Those men who did seek work as migrants did so not on the Reef mines, where labour hungry recruiters awaited them, but in other centres which offered better wages and the chance to generate capital to plough back into the homestead economy.