

## **The Gwembe Valley—2001: The Local and the Global**

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The Gwembe Valley is the local name for the Middle Zambezi Valley, an area that lies along the Zambezi River after it plunges over the Victoria Falls and emerges from a series of steep gorges. The right bank belongs to Zimbabwe, but the left bank (where I have worked off and on since 1949) is within what is now Zambia, although it was the British colonial territory of Northern Rhodesia when I first visited Gwembe. In 1949 alluvial plains stretched along either side of the river for perhaps 200 miles as the Zambezi wound its way from the gorges below the Falls down to Kariba Gorge and then again for another hundred miles before it reached Mozambique. Low hills flanked the plains and above them rose eroded escarpments which isolated the densely populated river plain from the high plateaus of Zambia and Zimbabwe where European settlement had taken place.

In 1949, to reach villages along the Zambezi meant a three to four day walk over rough trails. There were no roads. The Valley had a bad reputation for malaria, heat, and hunger and few outsiders ever visited it. The one mission station open in 1901 had been closed in the 1930s. The very few schools sponsored by missions took children only through the first four years of school: hardly anybody had gone further. Few Gwembe Tonga were literate in any language. Colonial officials administered the area from stations on the Plateau and went on tour periodically to collect tax and hear what was going on. To raise money for that tax and for a few luxuries, the men went out to work, mostly in what is now Zimbabwe though a few went as far as South Africa. At any one time, about 41% of the able-bodied men were away at work. The women stayed home and saw to it that the fields were planted and stock cared for, and that children got some kind of training.

In the absence of shops, and with the difficulties of transport, people were largely self-sufficient except in years of bad hunger when they relied on the colonial government to provide them with grain. They had their own styles in dress, music, and dance, and chiefly wanted the outside world to leave them alone (Colson 1960; Scudder 1962).

In 1958 this all changed when the Kariba Gorge hydroelectric dam, financed in part by the World Bank, transformed much of Gwembe Valley into Kariba Lake, which in the 1960s was the world's largest artificial lake. It stretches for nearly 200 miles along the axis of the valley and at its widest is approximately 35 miles from shore to shore.

Building the dam displaced the majority of Gwembe Tonga who had lived along the river from perhaps the middle of the first millennium (though intermarriage with earlier inhabitants rooted them even more deeply). In 1958 they were moved

into the hills flanking the lake or downstream of the dam, into areas with poorer soils, water shortages during the dry season, and great risk of erosion when stands of mopani and other trees gave way to fields which needed regular fallowing. Incidentally, the resettlement areas did not have enough land to sustain an agricultural population indefinitely even at the time of the move, and the Gwembe Tonga had and have a high birth rate (Cliggett 2001; Colson 1971; Clark, et al. 1995).

In 1956 Thayer Scudder, whose background fitted him to concentrate on the ecology of the region, and I began what has become the longest longitudinal ethnographic study in Africa (Scudder and Colson 2002). Elsewhere it is matched only by the study of Tzintzuntzan begun by George and Mary Foster in 1948 (Foster 2002). The project called for us to record a way of life as it existed prior to the resettlement due to take place in 1958, and to return in 1962-63 to study the impact of uprooting and how people adapted to new environments. We have been going back ever since, returning to the villages where we lived in 1956-57, but also following their people who have moved on elsewhere. We have also tried to keep in touch with political and economic changes throughout Gwembe District as it has become more securely integrated into the Zambian polity and at the same time profoundly affected by international developments. My last visit was in April and May 2001.

I can point to eight or nine crucial developments that explain the enormous differences that exist between Gwembe in 2001 and Gwembe as I first knew it in 1949.

First, there was the valiant attempt during the final years of the colonial regime to provide Gwembe District with what was seen as basic infrastructure for economic development and better living conditions. By 1956 some roads had already been built. More schools had been opened and some now provided full primary education. Measures to control cattle sleeping sickness were in place. This meant that people could have cattle and shift from hoe to plough agriculture. Some agricultural extension work was being done to encourage the growing of cash crops. A district government was being staffed with the few Gwembe people who had more than a minimum of schooling.

Then in 1958 came the second major force for change: the formation of Kariba Lake and the resettlement of the Gwembe Tonga. One thing big engineering projects always do is bind the affected area more securely into the national, and for that matter international, structure. This happened as Gwembe District came into closer contact with other Zamibans and with foreigners who used the roads built for the resettlement to move easily throughout the district in search of trade and wage employment. For the first time women as well as men knew and interacted with strangers from the outside world. The government undertook to provide more schools, including a secondary school, to put down wells or boreholes since people could no longer draw water from the Zambezi, and to establish local health centers. It also agreed that any economic development within the Lake area was to be for the

benefit of Gwembe residents whether this be in agriculture, tourism, or fishing in the newly formed lake (Colson 1971).

The third great event is linked to the decolonization that occurred throughout Africa in the 1950s and 1960s. The independent country of Zambia came into existence in 1964, under an elected African government which promised that Zambian resources would be used to improve the lot of all Zambians rather than be siphoned off to benefit European settlers and foreign investors. This incidentally meant the end of the agreement that the Gwembe Tonga should be the sole beneficiaries of developments along the Zambian shore of Kariba Lake.

With its copper mines, Zambia in 1964 was one of the richest countries in Africa, with a national budget which underwrote promises of free education for all children, the provision of free health care, and the encouragement of economic growth through loans to individuals and cooperative societies created throughout the country. For Gwembe District, as in all of Zambia, this was a time of great euphoria—the characteristic exhilaration that followed independence everywhere in the world before practice overshadowed promise. And indeed, it was a time when youngsters could dream of an exciting future. For the first time many began to go to secondary schools or technical schools (Scudder and Colson 1980). Government and industry initiated crash programs to Zambianize jobs. This meant that even those with only a junior secondary education could hope for a job which would underwrite a middle-class lifestyle for themselves and still leave enough to help younger siblings follow in their footsteps and to cushion life in the rural areas for parents and other senior relatives. Many small boys who in 1956 looked forward to lives as cultivators along the Zambezi interrupted by spells as labor migrants grew up to very different careers. I can think of several who became pilots in the Zambian airforce, another who became an airplane mechanic trained in Italy, many who became school teachers, and some who became university professors. One, for instance, holds a Ph.D. in biochemistry from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Another has a Ph.D. in history from Cambridge University. There are doctors, lawyers, agricultural extension workers, fishery experts, computer specialists. Some have been cabinet ministers. And yes, some are beggars or thieves. Girls too grew up to follow new careers. One is now a medical doctor in New York City. Probably every village has produced children who grew up to travel far beyond the old terrain of their labor migrant fathers—to schools throughout Africa or in Asia, Europe, or the Americas. Some work in the United States, Britain or elsewhere in Europe, in Australia, or even in Japan.

Independence thus brought an opening of the world, and of the world of opportunity that was greater than the opening associated with the building of the great dam at Kariba Gorge that transformed the Gwembe landscape. But as has been characteristic throughout the former colonial world, the window of opportunity was narrow. Independence came in 1964 and the next eight years were glorious years for Zambia and indeed throughout much of Africa, where the Viet Nam war had something to do with the demand for copper and other raw materials. Then came

1973. This meant long lines at gas stations throughout the United States and a rapid rise in the price of gasoline, heating oil, and products dependent upon oil. That had a major impact on the United States economy. It hit Zambia doubly hard given that it was entirely dependent upon foreign oil and this was also the time when copper prices plummeted. From being a rich country, Zambia suddenly became a poor country.

Industrial expansion stopped, just at the point when for the first time a great number of Zambian youngsters were graduating from secondary school with high expectations, their own and that of their parents and other sponsors, for well-paying prestigious jobs. In 1956, anyone with a primary education could get a clerical job, and after 1964 one could be promoted well beyond that level. In 1973, suddenly, even those with a secondary education might have to settle for a job as a security guard unless they had done very well indeed and could go on to university or other schools of higher education. Some Gwembe graduates refused to take the manual jobs available and returned to home villages to try their luck at farming, where at least there was some possibility of earning money by selling cash crops, especially now that the government was sponsoring cotton as a crop eminently suitable to Gwembe conditions.

In 1956 few villages had any literate residents other than the school teachers, if the neighborhood had a school. After 1973 they began to have a cadre of younger men and women with at least some years at secondary school, and the number of residents with such education has continued to increase over the years. In some areas, educated men and women who have held good jobs are retiring back to Gwembe villages where they play an increasing role in local politics. They see themselves as able to keep an eye on teachers, health workers, and other professionals who hold jobs at the village level. But they also want a standard of living that in some ways is equivalent to that enjoyed by the town elite.

In the 1970s Zambia's economic situation was also worsened by the fact that in adjacent Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, a war for independence was going on. Zambia backed the African challenge to white settler rule in Rhodesia, as it did throughout southern Africa, at considerable cost to itself. Gwembe Valley bore some of the impact, for it lay along the border with Rhodesia, whose commandos crossed Kariba Lake and the Zembezi below Kariba dam to lay land mines, burn fishing boats, kidnap local people, and pursue the "freedom fighters" who had bases in the area. The war ended in 1980, but some of the land mines still remain. In 1982 and 1992 I heard the sound of distant explosions as I sat in Siameja Village in the far south, and people would comment that an elephant must have set off a land mine. In 1999 a land mine demolished several vehicles driving just off the road not far from Siameja, and killed a number of people including a Norwegian development worker who was looking at the possibilities for rehabilitating the road. In 1963 this ran the length of the valley but its present state is that of a car-killer. The rehabilitation project has been put on hold indefinitely until Gwembe Valley is cleared of land mines.

Wars also have other consequences besides the continued lurking presence of land mines. In Gwembe as elsewhere in Zambia, and for that matter anywhere when a war is declared over, demobilized soldiers disposed of their guns. With high powered automatic rifles easily available, life in both urban and rural areas became more dangerous. Through the 1970s I had no fears about living in Gwembe villages, but just as life is now more hazardous in Lusaka, the capital of the country, and in the towns and farms along the railway line, so is life in Gwembe Valley. This is especially true of Gwembe North villages that lie close to the tarred road leading to Siavonga, a Zambian lakeside resort and to Kariba, a Zimbabwean tourist center. Armed gangs in cahoots with local men use the region as a staging area for poaching in the game parks of Zimbabwe, and also used their guns to attack stores, mission stations, and the villagers' cattle herds. They drive cattle into the bush, shoot and butcher them, then load the meat on vehicles for transport to the capital which is about 90 minutes away by road. Elsewhere, the state of the roads discourage such raids, and guns are less in evidence, but cattle are still stolen to be driven to the railway line for sale to butchers who do not ask too many questions. The head of the homestead in which I live when in Gwembe Central, where the road is now so bad that lorry drivers will not deliver to the village, sees cattle theft as serious enough that he plans the purchase of a shotgun as soon as he has resources. He instances a kinsman, living some miles away, who has had no trouble with thieves since he shot and killed a cattle-thief.

The building of a dam, political independence, a world crash in copper prices, inflated oil prices, and wars for independence—none of these was initiated in Gwembe District but each plays itself out there, as alien impacts always do when they affect localities whose people must live with the repercussions of decisions made elsewhere without reference to their wishes and often enough without their knowledge.

A sixth development is again an alien influence that has had enormous impact upon Gwembe and throughout the world. This is the emergence in the last fifty years or so of the flotilla of international agencies whose mission is relief and/or development (Barrow and Jennings 2001). Until 1973 they had little role in Zambia, if you ignore the Christian missions which in those years were beginning to minimize their activities. Zambia had the resources to pay for its own social development and for food if drought struck and grain needed to be imported. It did not need external assistance nor did it particularly welcome it. The Peace Corps worked elsewhere in Africa, including in neighboring Malawi, but not in Zambia. After 1973 this changed.

As the government's ability to fund services throughout the country progressively diminished, international agencies increasingly encroached upon what had been government functions and became crucial political forces affecting policy decisions at all levels. They now provide funds for the repair and upkeep of schools and health centers, fund extension work of all kinds, sponsor community projects including work with women and children, and instruct recipients of aid on how to

organize themselves to administer funds and carry out projects and to write proposals to obtain funding for new projects. Through sponsored projects, local people provide much of the labor that builds schools, health centers, and housing for teachers and health workers, and maintains roads. Some of this is done through Food-for-Work programs initiated in hunger years with international funding but administered through a foreign Non-Government Organization (NGO) active locally. Such programs provide a minimal safety-net that allows for survival in times when starvation is a very real threat, as it is in 2002. They also can have a profound effect on village size and organization. When Food-for-Work projects dictated that only so many people might work from each village, irregardless of its size, large villages proceeded to split. In these circumstances, small is better than big.

Despite the influx of foreign aid from the 1970s on, and in part because of it, Zambia has built up an enormous foreign dept. Some of this is for projects which were demonstrably unwise or unsustainable when encouraged by foreign donors, and often paid for with money loaned with full knowledge that much of it would be siphoned off by corrupt government officials. Dept left the Zambian government vulnerable to the insistence of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund that it adopt so-called “structural adjustment programs” similar to those which have proved disastrous wherever applied. These did little to control corruption. They were more successful in insisting on the downsizing of government, at a time when unemployment was already high; on free-trade agreements that led to the flooding of the Zambian market with cheaper subsidized imports from South Africa, and to the demise of much of Zambia’s newly established industries; and on the privatization of mines and other enterprises, which has led to massive unemployment and further poverty among former workers and their dependents. Few these days, including university graduates, think of the future optimistically. I have been told “My life is harder now than it was twenty years ago and my children aren’t going to have as good a life as I have had.”

Throughout Zambia services have been hit. Perhaps the hardest hit have been the schools and other services in the rural areas. Although many Gwembe neighborhoods now have what are called Basic Schools, that take children at least through the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, and the area has five secondary schools, I find those who finish basic school or even full secondary school often seem less well prepared than those who finished the old primary schools. Some of the causes are much the same as those that haunt the United States’ public school systems. Once a teaching job was about as good a job as one could hope to get and the most able people became teachers. When it became possible to aspire to other positions, the most able went elsewhere, and usually the best of those who remain try to get jobs in urban schools where they have slightly more amenities and a better chance of being paid on a regular basis. The Zambian government relies on NGOs and local people to meet much of the cost of building, maintaining, and supplying schools, but it is supposed to pay the teachers. It does so sporadically so that it is no surprise that teachers lose interest in teaching, especially since there is also a shortage of supplies and no guarantee that good

teaching will be rewarded. Nor is it surprising that underpaid or unpaid teachers embezzle funds available from NGOs for school improvement, or from the fees paid by parents. In one neighborhood, the headmaster conspired with the head of the PTA and the local headman to embezzle about \$1,000 allocated by the government for the building of a new school plant as well as all that could be realized from donations toward the school made by local men and women. They compounded their crime by selling the bricks that villagers had laboriously made for the new building.

Most neighborhoods now have health centers, but these often lack even basic medicines and sometimes staff. Again staff may go unpaid for months on end. In consequence malaria and tuberculosis, which once seemed to be under control, are again major problems. In 2000 Gwembe suffered from a measles epidemic for the first time in several decades. This time it primarily affected adults indicating that child immunization programs still work. These programs, funded by NGOs, immunize children under five against measles, whooping cough, etc. Polio immunization, again internationally funded, has covered those of all ages. The NGOs have also managed to link health centers to hospitals though radio communication and, when transport is available and roads are passable, some cases may be transferred from health centers to hospitals on the line of rail. But health centers in rural areas such as Gwembe have difficulty in retaining staff. Those who come may well spend their time working to be transferred elsewhere. Certainly the health centers have difficulty dealing with new threats such as cholera which has become endemic. It first attacked in cities when sanitation systems began to break down with the neglect of city infrastructure in the 1980s. By the late 1980s it had found a home in Gwembe and reemerges with the rains each year.

In the 1980s Zambians, including those in Gwembe Valley, became aware of another intrusion from outside: AIDS. It was in 1987 that I first heard of the AIDS related death of someone from the villages we were following. He was working as a security guard in Lusaka where he was diagnosed at the University Teaching Hospital. By 1992 such deaths were becoming common. In 1996 a medical doctor based in Lusaka told me that from now on mortality due to AIDS would increase rapidly. He knew what he was saying. Zambia was infected early with a strain of HIV similar to that which had already devastated Uganda, Rwanda, and the Congo. It recently has been invaded by a more virulent strain moving up from South Africa, Botswana, and Zimbabwe. Many of the younger people in our village censuses, especially the best educated who were also urban based, have died of AIDS or have symptoms associated with AIDS. In May 2001 I spent ten days in Siameja Village in Gwembe South. During that time there were three deaths in the village, two certainly and probably all three AIDS related.

Economic and social malaise in conjunction with the fears inspired by AIDS has evoked various responses. Accusations of witchcraft have greatly increased. These continue to be focused upon kin and neighbors who are near at hand, rather than on the political leaders who are responsible for at least some of Zambia's

problems. The political situation would probably be more explosive than it is if witchfinders did not divert suspicion onto local men, and increasingly women, who are said to hold medicines that suck the life force from their kin to the enrichment of the charm holder (Colson 2000). The malaise has also encouraged the rapid spread of Christian fundamentalism. In the last two decades, churches have become omnipresent and those which seem to have the most appeal are the 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventist and various pentecostal and apostolic churches. Many of these have links to fundamentalist churches and outreach organizations in the United States. Today I am faced with questions about my church membership, especially from young people who dominate the leadership of such churches. They call much of the ritual that in the past made village life interesting and enduring, demonology and ask about the existence of the church of Satan in Europe and America. Their questions reflect the preaching of American evangelists and evangelists from other parts of Africa who have learned to make effective use of the camp meeting, the radio (now present in every village), and television, which has been acquired by a very few Gwembe residents.

Their questions also reflect the fears people have of victimization by anonymous and powerful others, which are personified as forces of Satan. Tales circulate describing the work of gangs of Africans employed by Europeans or Indians to obtain control of bodily substances. Such tales were common elsewhere in this region of Africa from the 1920s (White 2000) but began to circulate in Gwembe only recently. In the 1980s victims were said to be drained of life force or turned into zombies who worked for the European or Indian employer of the gang. In the 1990s the stories supplied a different rationale as people learned of organ transplants and associated their feelings of victimization with rumors that gangs roam the countryside removing body parts for sale on the transplant market.

Gwembe people see themselves as having little power in comparison with people of the west and the elite of their own country who control unlimited supplies of money and flaunt their technological superiority, who live well no matter who goes hungry. In the tales, as in some of the religious rhetoric, this world of power and privilege, which is also seen as a world of rapacious greed and malice, finds a personification in Satan, a concept also borrowed from the West. But Satan is only one metaphor through which the Gwembe people represent the global world within which they operate.

In many ways Gwembe Tonga vocabulary reflects their involvement in a world economy controlled by outsiders. Whereas in the 1950s I met many women who did not know the value of the few coins that came their way, today people talk of forex (foreign exchange) and many know the value of the Zambian kwacha as against the United States dollar. They name their children for world figures as well as for the ancestors. I know of Imeldas, Saddams, Kennedys, and Nixons, and expect to find Bin Ladens on my next return.

They judge highly desirable much that they identify with the West, and this includes more than food, clothing, cars, radio cassettes, and videos. Gwembe people, like other Zambians, increasingly use Western forms of organization in village life, forming themselves into committees with chairs, secretaries, and treasurers, with agendas and minutes. They experiment with new varieties of maize, sorghums, and millets introduced by agricultural agents and apply for agricultural loans to buy pesticides for their cotton crop. They have begun to accept a reordering of their inheritance system to give greater equity to spouses and children who are the labor force for family enterprises. Their hearts are given to soccer, and soccer matches have replaced the old display of neighborhood Drum teams as symbols of neighborhood identity.

All this I think is evoking a second personification of the West in the person of the donor who seems to have some of the attributes of the Christian god. Increasingly people seek salvation in almost cargo-cult fashion through establishing a relationship with a person or an agency with resources who will provide them with the good things of life if they only learn to ask in an appropriate fashion. Once they associated obtaining the good things of life, which included much we would regard as normal amenities, with the struggle for African independence. In the 1960s and early 1970s they saw themselves empowered to make the world as they desired it through their own efforts and their control of government. They now approach possible foreign donors in prayerful fashion: "You are my only hope." "I have no one to help me except you." "You are my mother and my father."

In 1956 few people in Gwembe knew or cared what America was or where it was, though some asked me if it were a city as large as Bulawayo. England, they thought, was a city somewhere to the south. Today the world is very much present in Gwembe, though if you paid a quick visit you might not realize this. People know and care about the rest of the world and especially the West, and we are seen both as threatening, in our guise as Satan or at least as followers of Satan, and as life-giving in our role as donors. But even in the latter role we are seen as problematic, for donors come and go and have their own agendas.

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