

## **Science, Ancestors and Rhetoric: Contested Development Discourses in Zimbabwe 1890-1990**

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The concept of 'development' was closely linked in the post-war era to 'modernisation'. Subsequent critiques proposed that 'traditional' knowledge was more valuable: development workers have external agendas linked to multinational agribusiness; peasants just want the best for the soil & their communities. This picture is, of course, a romanticisation of peasant production, and a distortion of the complex interests of extension services.

But equally simplistic is the opposition between 'scientific'/inappropriate knowledge & 'traditional'/more appropriate knowledge. We associate 'science' with those issuing directives, and 'tradition' with those working the land. Yet, when we look at how people actually live, we see they are much more flexible in their thinking than this. Peasants can use research findings to support their case; government officials can appeal to ancestral spirits to support theirs.

What interests me, as an historian, is why this opposition, 'science' vs 'tradition', came to have purchase in the first place. Rhetoric is shaped historically, both through interactions with & within the state, and through local struggles. The rhetorics mobilized to support various positions have developed to serve specific purposes.

This paper focuses on three moments from Zimbabwe's past to highlight how colonial development discourse related to dynamic systems of knowledge. It examines 'science' as a rhetorical device; spiritual power as a way of controlling fertile resources; and how 'knowledge' acquires authority. An initial vignette from the 1890s shows how discourses of 'superstition' and 'rationality' validated political decisions about local chiefships; this masked a more uncomfortable fear of African spiritual power in local communities.

A detailed examination of the 1930s demonstrates how the white state become hostile to agricultural practices rooted in African knowledge. Officials in charge of 'Native Development' found it useful to ascribe western rational-scientific motivations to African agricultural practices; conversely, officials in charge of 'Native Administration' came to insist upon the irrationality of 'the Native Mind' in order to protect their own positions.

Finally, a vignette from the 1980s demonstrates how discourses of 'rational-scientific' and 'traditional' knowledge were reinvented in ongoing struggles over rural development.