

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

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[NB I did not have time to write the full paper by the 31st May deadline, so this is just a collection of vignettes rather than a paper.]

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.

The case study from Melsetter District in the 1890s illustrates the rhetorical importance of scientific rationalism to the white state. The local white official, Llewellyn Meredith, depended heavily on scientific rationalism in his struggle with an important local rainmaker. Munotswa was a junior member of the chiefly house of Musikavanhu. This paramountcy had the power of rainmaking, and Munotswa claimed that power soon after the white occupation; implicitly, this also gave him a claim to the paramountcy. Another man, Neseneni, was recognised as paramount by the white administration, and Munotswa's claims clearly posed a threat to the white authority, especially as he was claiming homage (tax) from the local people.

In a letter Meredith notes that Munotswa 'has demanded homage in shape of women and girls from Mutema who though twice as powerful would submit because of the supposed supernatural influence of the usurper. It is a well known fact that Natives are extremely superstitious, and should

they continue any length of time under the influence of this madman, they may be influenced to do any amount of mischief.'

Meredith was instructed to resolve the situation. It is highly significant that he dealt with this threat not as a confrontation over the political authority of the white state, but as a battle between rationality and madness.

Meredith was not a fanatical rationalist. In an account of the history of the paramountcy, he recounted how, according to oral tradition, the Musikavanhu paramountcy came to have the power to make rain. There was no suggestion of madness in this account. Possession by the rain spirit was presented as a source of strength and legitimacy. Yet in the very same report Meredith went on to describe Munotswa's claim to the paramountcy and concluded, 'I then found it necessary to interfere and had all the Chiefs in the District present at an interview with the Magistrate and myself, and after the situation was thoroughly explained to them they agreed *that one who was mad during a portion of his time* could not be a chief so Neseneni was declared chief by them all.' [my emphasis].

The appeal to rationality was based on political concerns, not scientific ones. Meredith was happy to accept a 'traditional' claim to rainmaking powers, as long as that claim did not conflict with political interests. When it did, the rhetoric of science was brought in to counter it.

This blatantly political use of the opposition between 'rationality' and 'tradition' is given added irony by the fact that Meredith himself had no 'rational' explanation for Munotswa's apparent powers. He reported that, 'his screaming and howling really appeared to be more than acting . . . I was puzzled as to its reality.' The explanation by an American missionary that this was a case of 'demoniacal possession' seemed to satisfy Meredith, and it is the one he repeats in his memoirs.

Meredith's acceptance of a 'supernatural' explanation for the rainmaker's possession reveals that whites were not as 'rational' as their philosophy of science would suggest. White settlers may not have accepted the political claims based on the 'supernatural' powers of Africans, but they could certainly be frightened by those powers. It was not because they did not believe in the powers of local rainmakers, but because they did, that it became so important for the state to ally itself with scientific discourse. It is the legacy from struggles such as these which we see embedded in today's struggles between 'scientific' agricultural advisors and 'traditionalist' peasants.

A detailed examination of the 1930s demonstrates how the white state became 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.

In the early twentieth century, the white administration in Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) attempted to impose a rational, text-based system of order onto African communities. African societies in the territory depended on orality, and negotiable claims about what was known to be true. Textuality, on the other hand, conferred authority and a sense of fixity and certainty about what was known. Much of the early period of white administration may be viewed as an attempt to

make what was oral and negotiable into something that was textual and universal. The 1920s saw an explosion of 'scientific' investigators, attempting to impose a rational, scientifically-sanctioned account of African societies, for use by the administration. Only knowledge sanctioned by the state was deemed to be 'scientific'; the expertise of Africans and independent whites was suppressed and ignored. A boundary was established between the textual and the negotiable, which might also be described as the boundary between 'civilisation' and 'superstition'. As the vernacular languages became written languages in the hands of missionaries, ethnographers and linguists, much that was fundamental to the African societies became unwriteable and invisible. Ironically, in the course of trying to fix ethnographic knowledge in 'scientific' texts, the 'experts' put the epistemological foundations of that knowledge beyond the pale of what could be known.

[The following is all extracted from my book, *Law, Language & Science*]

When E.D. Alvord joined Mt Silinda mission in 1920, the introduction of ploughs became a major evangelical project. Ploughing was seen as a means of introducing straight lines, both mental and physical, and of banishing 'superstitious' notions about land and spirits. The use of the plough, the development of a new consumerism, and the belief in Christianity, were all inextricably entwined in Alvord's unpublished autobiography, *The Gospel of the Plow*. Alvord argued that agricultural innovation was actually a precondition for effective conversion. This thesis was based on the sound observation that African farming was closely linked with beliefs about fertility, ancestors and spirits:

No matter how well they may learn in Mission Stations to read the Bible, sing and pray, they cannot remain Christians if they return to an agricultural life which is filled with the degrading influences of lust and witch-craft, superstition and ignorance, and all the unspeakable customs and taboos of heathenism and spirit worship.

He therefore reasoned that only by changing the ways in which Africans farmed, was it possible to bring about a commensurate change in their spiritual beliefs. Moreover, argued Alvord, plough-based prosperity would also assist the acquisition of more and better possessions, which would make the old lifestyle seem even more inappropriate and unattractive: 'The African will have a better chance of the after life in the Kingdom if he is taught by the Gospel of the Plow how to live a better life here on earth...They cannot go forward while shackled down by poverty.' The adoption of ploughs was therefore assumed to entail new modes of thought as well as greater productivity.

Alvord's ideas resonated with a new initiative from the government, which, in the same year that Alvord arrived at Mt Silinda, had established the Department for Native Development. The new department had an overtly hegemonic agenda. It was intended to train and employ African men 'to be the agents for bringing about improvement in every occupation of the native in his home life'. The programme specifically targeted younger men. Their task was 'to penetrate kraal life and to bring about a better state of home conditions'. The DND's programme was partly intended to inculcate new gender norms, to persuade more men to take an interest in agricultural innovation, not only to develop the rural economy, but also so that they could take up skilled work on farms. The programme also encompassed new ideas about meritocracy and technocratic authority.

However, the slow introduction of ploughs and the development of market gardening during the 1910s and 1920s were not widely accompanied by the adoption of new ways of thinking about gender or land tenure. Nor did they have much impact on the spiritual aspects of agriculture. As with mechanics and carpentry, it turned out that Africans could adopt agricultural innovations without

abandoning their spiritual beliefs. Alvord's faith that scientific explanations for increased yields would result in the rejection of local beliefs about spirits was misplaced. His DND associate, Guy Taylor noted that 'The native does nothing (except "rain-making", "mixing ant-bear claws with his seed," etc) which cannot be explained scientifically'. Precisely because the ant-bear claws and the science were mutually independent, there was no need for African farmers to abandon the former when adopting the latter. Science and the spirits occupied different explanatory systems, which did not impede each other. The exiled charismatic claimant to the Musikavanhu chiefship was reinstalled in 1923 and the rainmaking powers of the Musikavanhu chiefs continue to be revered in Chimanimani district to this day.

So changes in economic conditions had influenced African perceptions of the world, but they did not, in themselves, require the adoption of white values. Africans could embrace new technologies, new crops and new standards of measurement, but still maintain their own ideas about contracts, fair exchange, and fertility.

Inspired by thinking about underlying structures, some NCs began to see their role as guiding Africans to rationalise, rather than to abandon, their 'traditions'. This interest in systematising indigenous culture was encouraged not in order to accelerate the pace of change, but to curb it. Accounts in NADA were designed to preserve a knowledge of 'native law and custom', to save Africans from the terrible disintegration of their culture. Ironically, during the years that the data had first been collected, this disintegration had been the goal that the NAD was aiming for. The interest in preservation was very different from the interests of the functionalist anthropologists such as Radcliffe-Brown and Winifred Hoernlé.

However, the ethnographers shared with the social anthropologists a belief that African thought could be an object of science, a discrete entity to be analysed. Academics, administrators and missionaries debated whether the mental processes of Africans were, in fact, fundamentally different from those of Europeans. Lucien Levy-Bruhl's recently published arguments about a 'Primitive Mentality' that underpinned 'How Natives Think' had proposed that African thought was determined by a mystical outlook, which overrode any objections founded on rational contradictions. Anthropologists such as J. D. Rheinallt Jones, who founded the journal *Bantu Studies* in 1921 and worked with Clement Doke at the University of the Witwatersrand, felt that this proposition had yet to be proved, and cautiously called for further research into mental difference. The missionary Alfred Burbridge, on the other hand, rode robustly to the attack, insisting that Africans reasoned in the same way as Europeans – but only some of the time, and only when they were making things in the approved 'traditional' manner:

The weakness of [How Natives Think] lies in its exclusion of the very facts which show the native mind freely applying the principles of normal causality, and subjecting itself to logical methods, much in the same way as any European might do in like circumstances. Such facts are native arts, crafts and industries.

Burbridge, then, did not look for evidence of African rationalism in modern contexts, but, instead, referred back to the past, where rationalism could safely be combined with what he agreed was 'evidence...of primitive mental activity – the "mystic" side.' He had nothing to say about the rationalism of modern industrial workers, and clearly agreed that there was a thing called 'the native mind'.

Other commentators, however, insisted very forcefully that Africans thought and behaved in ways that closely mirrored those of their European counterparts. Peter Nielsen, for example, in his 1922 book, 'The Black Man's Place in South Africa', carefully argued that there were no fundamental differences between the races based on biology, evolution, brain capacity or the concepts that could be communicated in their languages. He then went on to demonstrate that Africans could 'show a capacity for mental analysis and clear ratiocination equal to that of the educated European'. For example, he cited an aged hunter, applying the scientific reasoning underlying cladistics, that is, that members of a group share a common evolutionary history, based on evidence of key shared characteristics:

"Look at the elephant, the rhinoceros, the hippopotamus and the wild pig," he said, "they must at one time have been one kind; their teeth are alike, and none of them chew the cud. I think they must be cousins to one another, and, one time, perhaps, they were brothers."

Nielsen piled example upon example, each designed to demonstrate the parallels between logical arguments produced by Africans in discussions of science, law, religion and morality, and similar arguments produced by Europeans. He concluded:

Now I do not say that these instances show any remarkable intelligence or power of thinking, but I do say that they show sound level-headed reasoning just like the common sense reasoning from cause and effect which we find in the average European.

For Nielsen, if Africans did not have a 'primitive mentality', then it followed that they were equivalent to modern Europeans. There was no room in his argument for dialogia, for Africans to define themselves and their modes of reasoning.

Others, following Nielsen, similarly tried to shoehorn all local systems of thought into a European epistemology. As with Livingstone's conversation with the rainmaker, or Guy Taylor's comments on ant-bear claws in African agriculture, local beliefs were validated only insofar as they overlapped with European assumptions about truth, fact and science. So, for example, Denys Shropshire, in notable contrast to Burbridge, discussed the initiation of an indigenous healer solely in terms of outward ritual, referring to him as a doctor with a medical practice, and so marginalizing the fundamentally spiritual aspects of healing that Burbridge had correctly foregrounded, if only to attack. Similarly, Hugh Tracey, in a very informative and detailed account of the wooden *hakata* divining 'dice' (which we saw luridly translated as 'bones' in chapter seven), suggested that the purpose of throwing them was to set in motion a psychological experiment. The questioner's reactions to the fall of the dice were what was important, and the throwing no more than a device to stimulate these reactions. Such rationalisations appealed to those who wanted to argue that there was no difference between local and European epistemology.

These, however, were minority voices, based on the 'middleman' form of translation, which ascribed Africans as 'really' European in order to make sense of them. More common was the insistence on a mentality gap that defined the 'native mind'. At Morgenster mission, for example, the younger Rev Louw, intrigued by a study of animism in Nigeria, declared himself ready to accept that there might be an underlying 'science' to the idea of natural energy that motivated African animism: 'is not science in our day beginning to speak in the same terms...about atoms and molecules'. But he was not claiming that reason had brought Africans to this convergence with nuclear physics: 'science' was 'in our day', whereas Africans belonged to the past: 'So the master-mind of civilised man and

the primitive mind of the Bantu meet again on common ground.' This belief in a 'mentality gap' was widespread and unreflective. So, for example, the Rev Neville Jones commented with reference to SiNdebele proverbs, that it was 'difficult to arrive at an adequate comprehension ... but this is hardly surprising in view of the great difference in mentality existing between the white and black races', yet then went on to explain each of them lucidly and effectively.

The axiom that Africans had a separate mentality from Europeans had evident appeal to NAD officials. It helped to explain NCs' difficulties in understanding African legal decisions. Clearly, the problem was not poor translation or their inability to understand complex principles; the problem was just that Africans thought differently. Nothing could be done to change this: 'It is as fast in their minds, through countless generations, as is our belief in heaven'. Consequently, it was a problem that the NC could not be expected to solve. Like African men's 'laziness' or African women's 'immorality', references to difference in mentality provided an excuse for administrative failure, ascribing it to inherent characteristics over which the administration had no control.

Another important function of the belief in the 'mentality gap' for the Southern Rhodesian NAD was as a justification for direct rule. With the establishment of settler government in 1923, the Southern Rhodesian state became committed to segregation and 'development', that is, removing Africans from high-waged sectors of the economy and keeping them involved in agricultural work on low-productivity land as peasant producers. NADA's editorials consistently described changes in African society as a necessary evil, insisting that Africans were fundamentally different from whites, and had little chance of flourishing in a white-dominated culture. So, in his preface to the first edition of NADA, CNC Taylor observed that 'I do not think [the native] ever will be as productive as the white man...we should create a policy of deliberate development'. The Reserves policy posited Africans as irredeemably other, best left to administer themselves under NAD supervision, and tolerated only as migrants into the white world.

Moreover, the axiom of a 'mentality gap' allowed the Department to argue that it had a moral responsibility to protect Africans from their own backwardness, as well as from the corruptions of modernity. As H M G Jackson sardonically observed in 1929, 'Those who deplore what has been called the westernisation of our natives may derive some consolation from the fact that in Melsetter district...natives are still primitive enough to pursue and kill baboons with bows and arrows.' Burbridge and Jackson both hinted at the floodgates that would open if direct rule were lifted, with Burbridge indulging in particularly vivid fantasies:

Again would parents make bonfires of their children to condense the clouds. Again the rain-prophet would fashion his drum-heads from the skins of human victims. The time-honoured tragedies of the Sinoia caves would be re-enacted, and jet-black maidens once more be flung into the pool of Chirorodziva as a sacrifice to induce the sky-gods (vokudenga) to break the drought...This would they have to-morrow were their sighs not stifled by the righteous restraints imposed by civilised law.

Jackson argued passionately that, in view of the backwardness of African peoples, there should be no policy of indirect rule, and no decision to 'leave the natives to develop on their own lines'. Nielsen, by contrast, favoured indirect rule, and some years later made an approach to Lord Lugard, the architect of the indirect rule policy, to request assistance in the publication of his new book, 'The Colour Bar'.

So claims about scientific reasoning or a primitive mentality were not primarily about African modes of thought and consciousness, but about systems of government. The claims about a putative 'mentality gap' had credence in the 1920s, because, as we have seen, attempts to explain and understand African culture over the preceding decades had foundered when whites became anxious about developing too close a proximity to African ways of thinking. White translators had failed to harness the vernaculars to gain mastery over African modes of thought, and so had reinvented the vernaculars and retreated towards internal conversations. However, the claims of the 1920s about a 'mentality gap' were political, not 'scientific'. This, as we shall see, explained why there was not so great a welcome within the Southern Rhodesian state for anthropology, the 'science' of African societies, as there had been for linguistics, the science of African languages.

Despite their focus on general principles rather than policy specifics, the social anthropologists became closely associated with indirect rule policies. British anthropology had been steadily growing in influence in the 'native policy' of the British Empire, particularly during and after the 1914-18 war. Influential thinkers in government circles argued that colonial administrations, with their locally trained officials, were perpetuating misperceptions and errors about local people across generations, to the detriment of both the local people and the Empire. Expert outsiders, with a broad range of comparative knowledge to draw upon, were needed to remedy this problem. The British school of anthropology, with its functionalist approach to understanding other cultures, transformed 'native policy' within the Empire. It posed a direct challenge both to the 'on the job' expertise of local administrators, and to their ideas about evolutionary hierarchies, in which the job of the Native Commissioner was to nudge peoples at an 'earlier' stage of civilisation into a 'higher' evolutionary stage. By the 1920s, with the spread of indirect rule systems, the colonial officials of the British Empire were required to engage with functionalist ideas. At the least, they had to reassess the effectiveness of perceiving African cultures in evolutionary terms, as analogous to peoples of the past. In Southern Rhodesia, however, the NAD was answerable only to the Company, and, after 1923, to the white settlers. It was not part of the British colonial administration, and it did not use indirect rule methods.

In defending their direct rule policies, the higher echelons of the NAD gave short shrift to the functionalist interpretation of African societies. Jackson, with heavy sarcasm, suggested that the limitations placed on 'native law and custom' by his staff should perhaps be challenged, because, 'it cannot be positively and scientifically asserted that there is an underlying truth supporting the dogma of twin-destruction of which we are unaware'. The members of the NAD who attended the vacation courses expressed appreciation for some of the comparative insights, but, perhaps unsurprisingly, were not impressed by C. T. Loram's lectures investigating the relative merits of different forms of administration: 'I see no good reason, either from the European viewpoint, or that of the Native, for wishing that the Southern Rhodesian Natives were otherwise controlled.' Simply by opening up the possibility that the founding assumptions of the NAD could be the object of critical reappraisal, the social anthropologists made themselves unpopular in Southern Rhodesia.

Social anthropology was also associated with the argument for a common human psychology. As Saul Dubow has observed, this was one of its significant contributions to policy debates in South Africa in the 1930s: 'it was the pluralism and relativism characteristic of anthropological thought which offered a way out of the evolutionist constraints of biological determinism.' This characteristic was deemed novel enough by NAD students to be worthy of particular comment in

their reports. So the CNC learned that, in the UCT lectures attended by officials from Southern Rhodesia in 1930, W G Bennie, who had been chief inspector of Native Education in the Cape, argued that 'the spirit domination experienced by the native is very much against scientific training and that the backwardness of the child is due to its environment and upbringing and not to its mentality.' His colleague, Prof J S Marais, who lectured on history in 1935, 'was, as were the other lecturers, convinced of the ability of the native to rise within a very short space of time to the level of western cultures, and the subsequent equality of black and white in Africa.' Social anthropology analysed African societies as contemporary and internally rational, providing the framework for policies that could, at best, integrate European and African culture into a common modernity, and at the least, ensure the successful operation of indirect rule.

And yet, having rejected Africans' own knowledge of themselves as a source of authority, the NAD then found itself threatened by the applied anthropologists, who offered a rival source of authority. 'Social science' solutions to 'native problem' involved a shift in the nature of effective knowledge. Research to inform Southern Rhodesian policy matters had relied upon the anecdotal 'commissions-and-informants' model of data gathering; this model gave particular authority to the missionaries and NCs who had day-to-day dealings with Africans. The method was directly challenged by the social science research model in South Africa. During the 1930s, the authority of Native Commissioners and missionaries seemed threatened by the outside consultants with anthropological training, who were beginning to formulate responses to industrialisation north of the Zambezi as well as south of the Limpopo.

However, the 'native experts' of Southern Rhodesia were divided over the role of 'science' in formulating policy. Romanticised ways of perceiving Africans were rejected by some within the state, including Nielsen and Alvord, who saw Africans as contemporaries, in a process of change. They wanted Africans to join in the modernising project, even while they were casting them as in urgent need of practical education. On the other hand, many missionaries and Native Commissioners did not wish to confront the suggestion that their hard-won secrets about African modes of thought and production were of no lasting use to the state.

Their concerns were linked to resentment, particularly within the missions, that social survey methods had the effect of excluding ethical/moral interests, in favour simply of what worked. Similar tensions were coming to the fore in South Africa at the end of the 1920s, where the state began to pilot social science surveys as a means of developing educational policy for Africans. Sue Krige has argued that in 1933, the social survey researchers, Rheinallt Jones and E G Malherbe, brought in Bronislaw Malinowski from London precisely in order to reduce the influence of missionaries.

By the mid-1930s, the NAD in Southern Rhodesia had firmly decided to reject the scientific authority of anthropology, in favour of the scientific authority of ethnography, rooted in practical administrative experience. However, its members had decreasing experience of 'traditional' Africans, and, with a few exceptions such as Nielsen, resisted the prospect of learning from 'modern' Africans. So, in the pages of NADA, which was the closest that Southern Rhodesia came to having an anthropological journal, they largely just read each other's memoirs. African culture was no longer to be translated, or analysed as a contemporary and changing phenomenon; it was to be remembered and recorded.

'The Native Mind', then, was never closely defined or analysed by the 'native experts' of Southern Rhodesia. Its point, as a concept, was to be discursive and normative, not descriptive or explanatory. Social scientists to the South engaged seriously with research programmes to assess whether there were differences in mentality between whites and Africans; Peter Nielsen argued carefully that 'the Native Mind' was no different from the European one. But the official line in Southern Rhodesia was that 'common sense' should decide. 'Common sense' decreed that 'the Native Mind' was an esoteric thing, to which only NCs and a few missionaries (but not academic theoreticians) had any insight.

White administrators and missionaries had found that they could not make sense of African consciousness in European terms, without shaking some of their own fundamental beliefs. However, they could at least define it as an object of study, in which qualifications could be gained. Claims about 'the Native Mind' substituted for attempts to translate and interact with African ways of ordering knowledge, and imposed order on a messy reality. It cordoned off the things that could not be controlled, such as thought, speech and human relationships, under the umbrella of 'the Native Mind', and replaced them with standardized rules, such as grammar, legal procedures and kinship structures. Africans were appreciated best, not when they reflected white modes of thought, but when they behaved like the Africans defined in the Natives Law, Customs and Administration examinations. And so translation projects could be abandoned in favour of linguistics; the impact of modernity could be ignored; African expertise in their own languages and culture could be discounted; and failures to control the political and economic choices of Africans could be explained by Africans' very inexplicability.

Finally, a vignette from studies of Mazvihwa District carried out by Billy Mukamuri and Ken Wilson in the 1980s demonstrates how discourses of 'rational-scientific' and 'traditional' knowledge were reinvented in ongoing struggles over rural development.

Mukamuri & Wilson provide a vivid vignette of a dispute over a proposed water programme, where the state official uses the language of the ancestors, and the 'traditional' local opponent uses the language of scientific geology.

Campaigners for the rights of people in the poor nations of the world often suggest that peasants have a better ecological understanding of the soil than those who advise them on agricultural 'development'.

Although advisors, in this account, have benefited from government-funded education in agricultural science, peasants have actually lived on the land. Advisors have their own agendas and work for multinational chemical companies; but peasants just want the best for the soil and their communities.

This picture is, of course, an oversimplification and romanticisation of the life of peasants. There are bitter struggles over resources within peasant communities, and different ideas about how to use the land depending on who stands to benefit: landed against landless, men against women, old against young, those with livestock against those without.

But equally simplistic is the representation of the dispute as an opposition between those with 'scientific', but inappropriate, knowledge and those with 'traditional', but perhaps more appropriate, knowledge.

We think of 'science' as the preserve of those issuing directives, and 'tradition' as the preserve of those working the land. Yet, when we look at how people actually argue their case, we see that they are much more flexible in their thinking than this. Peasants can use research findings to support their case; government officials can appeal to tradition to support theirs.

For state employees in contemporary Zimbabwe, central government intervention is justified by claims of scientific improvement. However, when people actually debate the relative merits of state intervention policies, they do not fall into simple state/peasant, science/tradition oppositions. They use a range of arguments, depending on their politics and their vested interests.

Rhetoric can reflect strategic political choices. An appeal to ancestral spirits, for example, is not likely to move a hard-bitten technocrat to a change of heart, but may be effective in mobilizing a local community. Rhetoric can also reflect simple personal interest. A state worker in fear of losing her job will be inspired to propose and defend the government's 'scientific' programmes just as passionately and eloquently as a farmer in fear of losing her grazing rights may oppose them on the grounds of 'traditional' practice. They do not muster their arguments to suit their audiences or to build alliances, but because their material interests encourage them to adopt these positions. In this case, their rhetorics reflect, not political strategies, but a genuine commitment.

The fact that people have a genuine commitment to the position they defend does not, however, necessarily mean that they believe in that position. This is an important, if subtle, point to understand. Representatives of the state may be ambivalent about what they are doing, and may not themselves be wholly convinced by the 'scientific' evidence. Nonetheless, they will defend the policy vigorously in order to protect their own positions.

This gap between passionately-held argument and actual belief is not confined to technocrats. Studies of Mazvihwa District carried out by Billy Mukamuri and Ken Wilson in the 1980s looked at the arguments of local people that the government had not shown enough respect for the spirits of the land. They found that a genuine commitment to the argument that the spiritual health of the land must be maintained does not always entail a total faith that land degradation is the outcome of poor relationships with the shrines. People will claim with utter commitment that the problem arises from continual disrespect for the spirits by representatives of the state. At the same time, they will be amusingly cynical about the actual efficacy of rain-making ceremonies or the claims made by spiritual leaders.

In blaming land degradation on lack of respect for the spirits, people in Mazvihwa are making accusations about who is responsible (i.e., the government) rather than betraying an excessive spirituality. It is the subtext of the argument that has force, and attracts a passionate partisan commitment, rather than its overt content. Subtexts in arguments do not arise randomly. Rhetoric is shaped historically, both through interactions with and within the state, and through local struggles. The rhetorics mobilized to support various positions have developed to serve specific purposes. In Mazvihwa, for example, the rhetoric connected with guarding the spiritual health of the land arose out of local struggles but then found application in a struggle with the state.

The rhetoric adopted by the state policy-makers carries as many hidden agendas, and is as much the product of previous struggles, as the rhetoric adopted by the executors and enemies of those policies. As we have demonstrated, the umbrella rhetorics of civilization and modernization could carry a huge range of implications, while broadly representing a commitment to importing elements of European society into Africa. Jeater has shown how the concept of civilization in Southern Rhodesia in the first decades of the century included a commitment to introducing European models of gender relationships. However, the aspect of relations between African men and women which was deemed to be at fault and in need of civilizing varied from time to time, and depended as much upon gender struggles in the UK as upon anything directly under the administrators' noses. Similarly, JoAnn McGregor has shown how the state's rigorous conservation policies, and panic about wood fuel shortages, which began in Southern Rhodesia in the 1920s but continue in contemporary Zimbabwe, were part of an Empire-wide panic. The fear that resources were about to disappear was not based on any close observation of actual wood resource management in Southern Rhodesia's communal areas. Rather, it was connected with a desire to apply 'modern' land-management policies, developed in completely different circumstances in the exhausted cotton regions of the USA. In both cases, the rhetorics used by the state policy-makers were deeply rooted, in both form and content, in struggles that were taking place elsewhere.

Rhetoric and reality interact in complex ways. Words and arguments have particular resonances in particular contexts. Rhetoric can be used to make claims that can have multiple meanings. One of the things that our interest in perspective revealed was that the surface content of rhetorical messages could have different meanings for the various participants in struggles over state intervention programmes, and describe different realities.

Mukamuri & Wilson's examination of arguments over the sacred rules of the local mountain demonstrate a situation where a universalist claim actually disguises a sectional interest. The spirits of the mountain are presented as having an interest in the entire local community. However, it is clear that this claim has historically served the interests of a sector of the community, and that the details of the claim itself have varied in furtherance of sectional struggles. The bit of the mountain which is actually sacred has been redefined on a number of occasions, for political reasons, but the claim that all parts of the community have an equal investment in respecting the spirits remains central to the rhetoric. As a result, opposition to state intervention phrased in terms of respecting the spirits of the mountain appears as community-wide opposition; the rhetoric embraces the entire community even while the specific historic struggles associated with the rhetoric may have been sectarian.

The rhetoric of modernization, then, should not be understood simply as a commitment to state policies of change and improvement, based on scientific and technical principles. The rhetorical force of an appeal to modernization will depend on the historical and socio-political context in which the appeal is made. We cannot assume, from a person's socio-political position, that we know what kind of rhetorical arguments they will use to defend their interests.
