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ZIMBABWE: PRE-COLONIAL HISTORY, DEMOGRAPHIC DISASTER AND THE UNIVERSITY¹

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Abstract

Zimbabwe is on the brink of a major crisis. The university can play a crucial role in averting or at least rmodifying it. The very long-term perspective of pre-colonial history offers a view of the situation that involves every faculty and department in the university. Consequently, this lecture will take a rather different form from the usual. The first part summarizes a recent book that is itself a partial summary of my entire career's research. The second shows how the pre-colonial perspective highlights the coming crisis in Zimbabwe, that threatens every aspect of society. The third examines the university as an entity that ought to be able to play a major role in averting this crisis, and then goes on to show how it has itself taken a wrong course that makes such a role impossible, unless major changes occur on the campus.

PERSPECTIVES ON HISTORY

IN THIS LECTURE, I am addressing at least two audiences at once — historians and the non-specialists, whether academics or the general public. This is no new experience: in two recent publications I was writing for, on the one hand, academics who were not Africanists and Africanists who were not academics, while on the other I was writing for historians and the ordinary people of Zimbabwe.² But nor was this itself new. In the course of my career I have written at almost every level of education from primary to university, and have lectured to audiences at remote mission schools and on sandbanks on the Zambezi as well as in foreign universities. Being a professor in Africa is rather different from the popular image of a

1 Professor David Beach's inaugural lecture presented on 15 October 1998 at the University of Zimbabwe. This lecture was based on 'Can we escape the past, eh? Development and history in Mozambique and Zimbabwe', a seminar delivered at Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, on 6 March 1997. The lecture was delivered following the text given here almost exactly, but modifications made during its course and afterthoughts that reinforce the message are inserted as footnotes.

2 *The Shona and Their Neighbours* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1994.) 4. These were the aims given me by the publisher; *A Zimbabwean Past, Shona Dynamic Histories and Oral Traditions* (Mambo, Gweru, 1994.) xvii-xviii.

professor as a dreamy inhabitant of an ivory tower, innocent of such things as the value of money.³ Moreover, my own field of the pre-colonial history in Zimbabwe and central Mozambique involves a remarkable number of other disciplines, from archaeology to zoology, in which the historian is forced to become a jack of all trades, attempting to understand at least the basic problems while remaining reliant upon the specialists for guidance. Consequently, this lecture is going to try to relate pre-colonial history to nearly every discipline studied here at the University of Zimbabwe. If many of the specialists in these can fault my knowledge of their fields, I hope that, at least, they will appreciate the fact that somebody is trying to relate their work to a broader national and world picture.

Before I start, however, I must explain my own position regarding history itself. Being rather allergic to theory, I will not attempt to discuss the question of 'What is history?' in terms of the various theories in existence. Quite simply, for me history is the memory of humanity. Just as any human from childhood to second childhood has memories of its experiences of varying degrees of accuracy, so humanity retains by one method or another evidence about its past. This may be based on the discipline of history itself or upon archaeology, linguistics, sociology, political science, law, commerce and all the other fields in the humanities. Yet the sciences too relate to the memory of humanity: a basic principle of scientific research, that an experiment must be proven to be repeatable with the same results, depends upon a sense of the past. In fact, every human is a kind of historian, if not a specialist.⁴

Naturally, this very simple definition would not be accepted by historians more wedded to theory. For hard line Marxists, history is a process defined by the Founder in the last century, and some of these have been heard to state that economic and social history is the only real history. For some historians in Africa, history is essentially about race or ethnicity. For some old-time liberals, history was related to the belief that, given the right checks and balances, humanity would evolve towards an almost ideal society — at least, for them. (In this they had more in common with Marxists than either would care to admit.) But my view differs from all of these on a number of fundamental issues, which is why at different times I have been labelled as 'liberal', 'conservative', 'positivist',

3 Gestures at borrowed academic robes, and states: 'I wanted to wear jeans and a T-shirt, but they wouldn't let me!'

4 The following three paragraphs were almost entirely omitted from the lecture, but they were originally written in order to give future historians some idea of the background to my thinking. I considered cutting them from the published version as being self-indulgent, but decided to retain them for a very different reason. What follows often provokes strong reactions, but you, the reader, might well consider, if your reaction is a strong one, just why this is so. Just how did you acquire your own views?

and so forth.⁵ The difference lies in the facts that I do not see human society as necessarily evolving towards any kind of superior form, that I do not regard humans as being essentially 'good', and indeed that I do not think that humanity can even be proven to be important in any objective sense.

The influences behind these pessimistic views are as follows: As a teenager I was strongly influenced by reading, first fiction and then history, about the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, admittedly in its most extreme case, in Britain. To me, it was not automatic that 'developed' societies necessarily continued as such. If I was originally influenced by the doom-laden atmosphere of the late 1950s and early 1960s, when nuclear war seemed all too probable, early university reading showed me how the essential problem facing the Roman *oecumene* was internal, not to be blamed on foreign invaders alone. This was why I never had much trouble in seeing continuity between the glories of Great Zimbabwe and the much poorer Shona societies of the nineteenth century. Consequently, I found almost all schools of thought — liberal, Marxist and even conservative — essentially over-optimistic. Secondly, I had trouble accepting assumptions about the 'goodness' of humanity. When I began studying history, the Rhodesian community in which I lived was regarded by almost all outsiders (except among the extreme right) as more or less essentially evil. I could see their point, though I disagreed, but I could not accept the corollary, which was that 'goodness' was the main characteristic of the rest of humanity. I could see too many examples of human fallibility in myself, my contemporaries and the peoples of the past that I studied. This still shows in my work, where I am much more critical of pre-colonial Zimbabwean peoples and individuals than nearly any other historian. (Nor can I see anyone else in world history who deserves to escape censure.) This was why I could not believe in any political system, not even in the attractive dream of anarchism, as long as humans were as they were. Thirdly, originally influenced by the equally doom-laden science fiction of the 1950s-1960s, I came to believe that the total resources of the world are finite, and that if humans expand beyond certain limits then disaster is inevitable — and that even if they do not, external factors such as asteroid strikes or the sun going nova are still possible. This, it seemed to me, was more important than whether Zimbabwe was to be ruled by capitalists or socialists.

5 I. R. Phimister, 'Zimbabwean economic and social historiography since 1970', *African Affairs*, LXXVIII, (iii), 1979, 261; M. P. M. Horn, 'Chimurenga 1896-1897: A Revisionist Study' (Unpublished M.A. Dissertation, Rhodes University, 1986), 21; T. Wakaiki, in *Bunken Soran: Gendai no Africa* (Shinhyoron, Tokyo, 1984) 8.

So what do I believe in, you might wonder? Simply that, for good or ill, humans are essentially similar, but sufficiently different to be worth studying.⁶ By now, I am too committed to this to be able to stop studying them if I wanted to: having started my career writing about the Afrikaners of *Enkeldoorn*, I now find myself following the careers of Afro-Indo-Portuguese families on the Zambezi, and a host of other varied communities of all races and languages from Kariba to the mouth of the Save. Whether the University will leave me sufficient time to complete the three major projects that I have set myself before retirement is another matter. Moreover, even though I cannot believe that humans are important in themselves because I am one (after all, my cat was convinced that the world was created for cats), I cannot help hoping, in the teeth of experience, that just possibly humans may learn from the past in order to escape an unnecessarily unpleasant future. Hence this lecture. If I have strayed far into the realm of the personal, there is a reason: If my listeners haven't thought of these questions already, they certainly will have done so by the end of this lecture.

THE PRE-COLONIAL HISTORY OF ZIMBABWE AND CENTRAL MOZAMBIQUE

I cannot summarise over 30 years of work on this in one lecture, and anyone interested in what I have been doing for all this time is referred to the appendix. Instead, I will use a book written in 1991 as the basis of my argument.⁷ This work has four main points:

- (i) in pre-colonial Zimbabwe, there was a preferred zone of human settlement, the 'Great Crescent' of population, that offered a relatively prosperous living to its inhabitants, provided that their numbers remained relatively low;
- (ii) in over 1 200 years of contact with external economies through inter-continental trade, there was never enough influx of capital to satisfy the needs of the people;
- (iii) although the thinking of the people was far from static, certain basic attitudes and ideas can be shown to have been firmly rooted in the last 500 years; and
- (iv) the increase in population in this century since 1920 is verging on catastrophe . . . and, in view of the previous points, how will the

6 I made an ambitious attempt to prove this point to Zimbabwean children who, I thought, were being taught in a dangerously parochial way by the schools in the 1980s: D. Beach, *Ventures History of the World, Volume One, Grade 7* (College Press, Harare, 1990.) It only just scraped through Ministerial censorship.

7 Beach, *Shona and Neighbours*.

people handle the situation? The fact that the book is written in a relatively readable style should not conceal the fact that its intent is deadly serious: it is the prologue to a tragedy.

The first point arose out of an interest in the demography of Zimbabwe and its relationship to geography. I still find it incredible that, after decades of argument about the land question in Zimbabwe, by 1990 nobody in either twentieth-century Zimbabwean history nor in any of the other disciplines involved should have bothered to find out exactly where the early twentieth-century population of this country was. Being interested in pre-colonial populations, I found myself forced to look at early colonial estimates, and to attempt to overcome my own innumeracy. The result was, including an extra 20 percent to allow for the undercounting of children for the most part, a 1920 rural population of about 881 000. This was rather lower than might have been expected, but it was the location of that population that was interesting: it was in an arc running from the Makonde-Gurube areas right round to the east, south and then south-west, apparently ending in Bullimamangwe — although I suspect that it ran on into Botswana. Now, this was not the result of any political developments in the pre-colonial history of the region, and it more or less correlated with known sites of settlements of ordinary villages revealed by archaeology up to 1984 for the period c.300-1300. In short, there appeared to have been a long-term preference for this 'Great Crescent'. The reasons for this preference seem to relate to the Crescent's very varied environment that followed long-term erosion over geological time, but it is quite clear that the past populations' preferences were not directly related to either altitude or to the much-cited Natural Regions I-V, except that in the lowest and driest areas population density was low for obvious reasons. Indeed, the Crescent makes nonsense, in terms of human settlement, of both the highveld-middleveld concept and of the Natural Regions.⁸

The argument about the shortage of capital input from the outside world, originally the Indian Ocean economy from around 700, depends upon archaeology until the early 1500s, and obviously fresh finds are still being made, but so far it still seems that during this time the impact of the world market for gold and ivory was remarkably uneven throughout the Zimbabwean plateau region. Moreover, from the very beginning the limited gold-bearing area meant that no more than about 20 percent of the population had gold to export in any case. The evidence of the Portuguese

8 Modern writers seem to forget that the Natural Regions were originally defined with White immigrants in mind, not the African people of the country. Nobody involved in the current land question will get much comfort from my research, as it requires a modification of practically all accepted views.

documents from 1505 onwards definitely confirms the point, and at no time did the Portuguese have anything like the trade goods they needed to expand their trade as they would have liked. However, a fascinating point is that the Zimbabwean region was one of the very few parts of Africa to have escaped the inter-continental slave trade. This links up with the demographic question, as it is clear that after about 1700 people had no objection to capturing each other, but they would not export them. Instead, the slave trade was largely confined to the Zambezi valley itself and also to modern Zambia and Malawi, and Mocambique north of Quelimane and south of the Save.

The question of the thinking of pre-colonial people on practically any issue is tricky, depending as it does on the evidence from Portuguese documents, oral traditions and modern ethnography. In addition, as in most if not all societies, there was obviously a difference between what the people thought that they ought to do in theory and what they actually did in practice. Furthermore, as humans are, after all, of the same species and have only developed a limited range of types of society, it follows that much of the thinking of people here was very similar to if not identical to that of other societies. Deciding just how far common human ideas existed here in a slightly exaggerated or reduced form is not easy. This being said, although most societies are prone to blame their troubles on others — the 'external' — it does appear that here, at least in theory, the tendency was unusually strong. One aspect of this was a keen interest in witchcraft and how to avoid it. Fortunately, this was not taken to extreme lengths. Another aspect was a remarkable tendency to offer exaggerated respect to rulers — *muzvambara*, flattery or hypocrisy — derived from the custom of making visitors to a ruler crawl before him, as was observed by the Portuguese. There was also a belief that in certain ways the ruler and his followers were above the law that applied to ordinary people. Yet there were limits to this, not least rebellion, and the assassination of rulers or their ritual strangulation. Moreover, in some eras and areas central government was so weak that in local society the strong could act in defiance of the accepted norms of society.⁹ One of the uses of history is to check on theories of this kind by reference to examples, and I'll be the first to admit that my research needs to be expanded, but it is of considerable importance in view of the importance that many Zimbabweans attach to 'tradition'.

9 D. N. Beach, *Mapondera, Heroism and History in Northern Zimbabwe, 1840-1904* (Mambo, Gweru, 1989.) and 'Oral tradition in eastern Zimbabwe: The work of Jason Takafa Machiwenyika C. 1889-1924', paper presented to 'Words and Voices: Critical Practices of Orality in Africa and in African Studies', Bellagio, 1997.

Finally, the demographic crisis. In 1920 the indigenous rural population was c. 881 000, and in 1992 the total population was c. 10 400 000 — a gigantic increase by anybody's standards, and one due largely to natural growth rather than to immigration. Why did the population increase and why was it apparently relatively low before 1920? There is no evidence that it had ever been any higher, and it seems to have been stable up to about 1911, apparent increases being due to increased efficiency in colonial tax assessment. However, from then onwards increasingly reliable — or decreasingly unreliable — figures begin to show a growth in population, very slow at first, that eventually developed into the explosive increase of recent times. This is radically different from the demographic picture available for Central and East Africa, which reminds us that a similar effect right through the tropical and sub-tropical zones of the world can have very different causes. Part of my current research is looking into the pre-colonial era for 'trigger' factors linked to the coming of colonial rule to explain the initial increase, and I outline my ideas here because they relate to whatever methods must be used if population is to stabilise at all in the future.

As far as sources are concerned, archaeology can, at least for the specific sites known, indicate factors such as relative wealth in cattle in different areas at different times by showing percentages of cattle remains, or even occasionally the relative ages of human deaths in a community where a large number of burials has been located. The documents, both Portuguese from 1505 and recent colonial from 1890 in Zimbabwe, can supply insights absent from archaeology, but they are scanty and often contradictory. This is hardly surprising, as the conception of children and the factors that might have limited childbirth were and are intimate, private and, in the case of termination of pregnancy and infanticide, sometimes illegal. Looking at population growth from conception onwards, we have a number of possible factors.

First, we have conception itself. Historical sources, whether documentary or oral, stress the desire of ruling-class polygynous lineages to have as many children as possible, and it is clear that many male members of ruling families had very many descendants. Indeed, early colonial figures, still undergoing analysis, suggest that in 1904 in Mashonaland as many as 70 to 80 percent of married *women* were in polygynous marriages. If this was so, it would have led to fewer actual births per woman. As the equivalent figures for 1921 were around 50 percent, and as we know that cattle herds increased dramatically during the same period presumably because colonial rule allowed grazing in areas far from traditional strongholds and places of refuge from local cattle-raiders — it is possible that in the pre-colonial era ruling elites had been able to appropriate for themselves an undue proportion of fertile

women by their control of limited cattle herds. This would have increased the numbers of ruling-class *men's* descendants but at the same time have restricted the overall birth rate per *woman* and have left a considerable number of long term bachelors. However, increased cattle herds in the 1904-21 period, linked to increased wealth from peasant sales and to a certain extent from migrant labour, could well have enabled men outside the ruling dynasties to accumulate the necessary brideprice, which is what the increased percentages of monogynous marriages by 1921 suggest. This would have led to increased births per married woman, and thus supplied the very first 'trigger' factor that led to the modern population increase.

There is also evidence for voluntary reductions of births: sexual abstinence during the period of breast-feeding of babies, the taking of medicines to prevent conception, abortion, and in the case of births of twins or albinos — infanticide. Even this evidence varies over time, twins and albinos being written of as commonplace in the 1580s,¹⁰ while twin-killing in the 1790s was restricted to only one of a pair¹¹ — and yet it was general a century later. So on the one hand we have restriction of human numbers by communities, yet we also have inter-village raiding for women and children and a *tiny* import slave-trade from the Zambezi valley and beyond onto the Zimbabwean plateau in the late nineteenth century. Add to all of this the questions of involuntary population control mechanisms such as infant mortality, which of the available scanty evidence was around 50 percent; famine, which so far seems not to have been a major factor except in catastrophic periods such as in 1823-31; infectious diseases such as smallpox, which on the whole seem to have been rare; warfare, which in the best-known long-term case of the raids of the much-maligned Ndebele on the southern Shona seems to have had no serious effect at all, and a host of other possibilities, and we have a remarkably complex picture that promises to keep me and anybody else I can attract into the field busy for the next decade.

To return to the question of the population increase of this century: looking at the figures I have already given for the increase from 1920 to 1992, I do not think that it can be denied that the demographic factor has

10 João dos Santos, *Ethiopia Oriental* (Convento de São Domingos, Évora, 1609), I, 23.

11 Carlos José dos Reis e Gama, 'Resposta das questoens sobre os cafres', 7 de julho de 1796, (ed.) G. J. Liesegang, *Estudos de Antropologia Cultural, No. 2, Junta de Investigações do Ultramar, Centro de Estudos de Antropologia Cultural, Lisboa, 1966, 18. Just how good the few documents that deal with such intimate matters can be, can be seen in Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, Lisboa, Moçambique Caixa 34 (ex 17), Doc^o 91, Anónimo, 'Discripção Corográfica do Reino da Manica seus Costumes e Leis', I,9, which refers to the following traditional medicines used to ease childbirth and the expulsion of the afterbirth: the nest of an insect called *psoto*, the bark of a tree called *vungute* and the leaves of another tree called *tono*.*

to be seen as *the* most important element in modern Zimbabwe. This is not a popular view, and it hits against the beliefs not just of other historians with their own special interests, but also against one of the basic biological urges of humanity, reproduction. At this point, however, I wish to take a look at the question of humans' attitudes to long-range planning, with special reference to Zimbabwean history.

LONG-TERM PLANNING AND HUMAN FRAILTY

I believe that from 1890 humans in Zimbabwe have suffered from a refusal of their rulers to think ahead, and that most of our troubles stem from this — but also, that in many ways the rulers have simply been reflecting a more general human reluctance to do the same. A few examples will suffice. One of the most serious problems facing us, obviously, is the land question. Part of the problem is that the commercial farms of the country are relatively large compared with their possible productivity. Yet the decision to make the original basic 'Pioneer' farm one of 1 270 ha., doubled for Matabeleland in 1893 and some other areas, was hastily made in 1890 and never seriously rethought. But it was demographically insane; if the object of the 'White farming' policy of the British South Africa Company was, eventually, to have a large White farming community, then even if half the country was taken for such farms on such a regional basis, disregarding local environmental conditions, and if only one family held one farm with an average of five members, then the maximum White farming community that could have been anticipated without *extensive* sub-division would have been about 57 000. If the Rhodesians wanted a large White population and were prepared to subdivide in the end, why in the name of Heaven did they not start with smaller farms? The entire plan for a large White population in the face of an African majority was also insane: although as late as 1970 there were still dreams of major White immigration, the fact was that there was a limited supply of White immigrants from anywhere, especially if English-speakers were preferred, and that supply was competed for by other areas of 'White settlement' in North America, Australasia and even South Africa. A third rural example of demographic insanity was the 1951 Native Land Husbandry Act: very simply, whether its framers realised it or not, it was trying to cram into a decade the same process of the so-called Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions in Britain, which had been accomplished with unparalleled industrial expansion *and* considerable emigration over at least two centuries. *Yet* the Huggins government undertook this without bothering to take a proper census of the entire population, and only did so in the end after the failure of the Act!

Even urban planning was atrociously bad. Leaving aside the lack of thinking that left only a 45' segment of Salisbury for the African population, the very siting of the city was and is incompetent. It is well known that in 1890 the site was chosen at very short notice, but what is not generally known is that in 1891 the Company did think of resisting it, considering Norton, Mvurwi, Darwendale and even Rusape. The proposal to move the town was rejected, allegedly because the other sites were a few metres lower and thus less healthy, but actually because six brick buildings had already been put up, and the property developers did not want to lose their investments.¹² Consequently, the town remained where the city is, *upstream* of its main water supply, and thus we are condemned to drink our own recycled waste!

Unfortunately, when it comes to long-term planning *Homo sapiens zimbabweensis* is not significantly different from *H. sapiens rhodesiensis*. Indeed, the two are far more alike than many would care to concede. Eighteen years after Independence, the government has been deluged by reports on economic and social problems. We have shortages of agricultural land for the mass of the population, shortages of jobs and housing, shortages of water and power and, increasingly, shortages of money. We also have a host of indications of the desperate moral condition of the people: gambling, drinking, sexual abuse of minors, abandoned street children, rumoured or real *muti* killings, financial corruption, nepotism or tribalism, confidence trickery, increased attachment to churches making more extreme claims than others, increased xenophobia, and so forth. Yet the government has never really tried to look at these factors as a whole, and consequently has no real overall policy to offer people. Perhaps it is unfair to blame ZANU(PF) for its lack of forethought; it is in many ways a prisoner of its own past, having evolved as an organisation devoted to the acquisition of power from the Rhodesian Front and its predecessors.

Yet the government is, in the last analysis a product of the people, and they themselves have no alternative policies to offer, as their failure to evolve any convincing opposition party shows. It is not difficult to see what the people want, as they air their views in the media regularly: land, jobs and houses for all, tarred roads to every village; convenient, efficient and cheap hospitals and schools; fast, cheap and safe buses; low prices and taxes, and much else. But the big question is, is this possible and, if not, why not?

¹² National Archives of Zimbabwe, LO 5/2/16 Vol. 1. H. M. Hole to Acting Secretary Cape Town, Salisbury, 24 November, 1891.

DISASTER APPROACHETH

Meph. Why this is hell, nor am I out of it.¹³ Mephistophilis was making a comment, true for humans as well as devils, on the fact that disaster is not always fully apparent but that it remains disaster nevertheless. The Eurasian 'Black Death' pandemic was a terrible disaster. In 1347-9 at least one third of the population of a continent died.¹⁴ Yet the sun shone and the birds sang just as brightly in these years as in any other, and even the Anglo-French Hundred Years' War was not seriously impeded. The centuries-long fall of the Roman *oecumene* was also, on balance, a disaster. Rigid and extortionate as it had become, its end led not only to increased disorder and violence but also to a serious decline in the quality of life, whether urban or intellectual. It took nearly a thousand years for the downward trend to be reversed, yet the olives and vines continued to be tended throughout all of this.

Although the coming disaster in Zimbabwe may not turn out to be a Hollywoodesque scenario of blood, flame and pillage, I doubt that the happy future hoped for by Zimbabweans is possible, for the simple reason that population growth has already outstripped Zimbabwe's resources. For a start, the increase from 1920 to 1992 was on such a scale that, if an equivalent increase had taken place during the same period in Britain, with which uninformed comparisons are often made, Britain would now have a population of 473 000 000. A similar increase in the USA would have led to a population of 1 236 000 000. I do not think that even the latter economy could have supported such an increase. Is it any wonder that the far less developed economy of Zimbabwe cannot do so either? (In other words, we have the grim possibility that the vast majority of the young Zimbabweans of the next century will never have proper employment). But let's consider the current and near future situation here: in 1990 our population was thought to be doubling every 22 years, which would give us 20 800 000 people by 2014. Granted, projections allowing for the AIDS epidemic give us a mere 16 000 000 by 2010, but even if they turn out to be correct this is cold comfort.¹⁵ Moreover, neither figure is necessarily thought to represent a final, stable population figure.

My conclusion is pessimistic, and there are two main factors behind my pessimism. One is the land question. Looking at the 1982 population

13 Christopher Marlowe, *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*, Scene III, 80.

14 C. McEvedy, *The New Penguin Atlas of Medieval History* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1992), 90-1.

15 *The Herald*, 27 February 1997. A later report in *The Herald*, 14 July 1998, increases the doubling period to 23 years, with a current population of 12 300 000.

map (when the total population was only about 7 500 000) — as far as I know the 1992 Census has been neither officially reported upon nor mapped — we have overcrowding in the Communal Lands that would have staggered the imagination of earlier generations, who were already complaining of overcrowding by 1900! Given even the increases projected in the light of the AIDS epidemic, the land question is not primarily one of the dispossession of White commercial farmers. Rather, it is one where at first all commercial farmers — and here I include the ZANU(PF) Politburo — will be pushed off the land by uncontrollable waves of land-hungry people from the Communal Lands¹⁶ and then, when population densities have filled up the former commercial farm lands to the densities that led towards the Second Chimurenga, the population will continue to rise. This could lead to struggles between the people to dispossess each other, and it is hard to avoid the conclusion that these would be violent.¹⁷

The standard response of Zimbabweans presented with this scenario is to turn to the possibility of major urbanisation and industrialisation, just like the Huggins government in the late 1940s. (It is also odd how often they refer to the British equivalent of two centuries ago.) Frankly, I do not think that this will work. The crucial factor is water, with power following. Since the cities are likely to increase in population at a rate faster than the national average, they are going to run short of water relatively quickly. The Bulawayo problem that is supposed to be solved by the Zambezi pipeline scheme (*when* that is completed) is in fact not likely to be solved thus because if Bulawayo's population continues to double at *any* rate, what will be needed will be 2,4,8,16 Zambezi pipelines over time. Harare is no better off. With its population increasing faster than Bulawayo's, the Manyame dams are not going to be sufficient, as is already known. However, whereas the pure water of the Nyaguwe-Kunzvi scheme will be welcome, the fact remains that its catchment area is less than a third of that of the Manyame system, and whatever the theoretical capacity of the dam I suspect that it will be a relative disappointment. A search for more and more dam sites at increasing distances is thus likely, but with diminishing results. Moreover, the water supplies of many rural areas are problematic, and likely to become worse in droughts as the

16 This was written before the events of June and July 1998. I predicted exactly these in 1977, when I argued for the pre-emptive redistribution of *all* unoccupied and underused commercial farms by the end of 1978 as a means of defusing the growth of the war: D. N. Beach, 'A Framework for Extension, A Commentary on The First Day of Work at the Rhodesian Institute of Agricultural Extension Workshop', 6 June 1977.

17 What Zimbabwe badly needs is a modern Domesday Book — pun only partly intended — in more than 50 volumes in which lists and maps show precisely who owns which farms and what they are doing with them. Only thus can we know how much land can be resettled without affecting exports, not all of which can necessarily be supplied by the peasant sector.

rural population increases. Obviously, the rural people will tend to move into the cities looking for water, thus speeding up the strangulation and death of urban industrial development.¹⁸

Power may also be a problem: hydro-electric power in southern Africa is approaching its limits even if every major flowing river is dammed along its entire length, and will be bought by those with the most money, which means the South Africans and not us. Thermal power, once thought to be on its way out because of hydro-electric power, is once again seen as the answer. In 1986 the total mineable coal resources of Zimbabwe were estimated at 26 650 million tonnes,¹⁹ though obviously there could be problems in exploiting these and getting the coal translated into power. Another problem is that these resources are finite whereas the demands of a doubling population are not, until stability is reached. Given these, I do not see a prosperous future for Zimbabwean cities or industry if the population continues to rise.

All of this is an unpleasant scenario, not least for me because I expect to be living in the middle of it. Naturally I would love to turn out to be wrong. But this is a case where in the end all the clever argument in the world will not *directly* alter the population of Zimbabwe, its land, water or power by a single baby, hectare, litre or kilowatt. On the other hand, the one thing that we cannot afford to do is to avoid the issue. Very many of my fellow citizens and foreign colleagues would like to. Some take the view that resources are in fact infinite, arguing on the optimistic grounds that 'science' will somehow find substitutes for the materials that are or will be in short supply. They can point to the possibility of growing ever more crops on the same land area, of using techniques adopted by the drought-prone Cabo Verde islands, of adopting nuclear power, and so on. Others argue that my predictions are 'Malthusian' and therefore will not happen because they have not come true so far, between Malthus's day and now. Still others feel that 'the Lord will provide' and that He commanded His people to 'go forth and multiply'. My response to this is that even scientific technology has certain limitations; that the fact that Malthus has not been right so far does not mean that he never can be; and that the Lord's advice might have been appropriate for Iraq in about

18 Those fond of looking at Britain's industrialisation for comfort should realise that if Britain had a rainfall profile like ours, it would never have become a major industrial power in the first place, as there were insufficient dam sites.

19 K. B. Duguid, 'Coal resources of Zimbabwe', in C. R. Anheuser and S. Maske (eds.) *Mineral Deposits of Southern Africa* (Geological Society of South Africa, Johannesburg, 1986), 2 Vols., 2097. Thanks to the Institute of Mining Research, University of Zimbabwe, for directing me to this source. (Under the proposed new University Code of Conduct, it might have been an offence to visit the Institute!).

4000 BC but that He probably expected humanity to know which of His commands were appropriate for which occasions.

The more common response I have received to my scenario is that of St. Augustine: 'Give me chastity and continency, but not yet'. In other words, my views may be right, but nothing should be done about them until some later date. With respect, that is faulty logic. It may be prideful to assume with the Jehovah's Witnesses that one is so important that a cataclysmic event *must* occur in one's own lifetime, but on the other hand if it is coming then it must occur in somebody's. Moreover, supposing that Zimbabwe's population growth can be stabilised, the quality of life that Zimbabweans will experience when it does will depend greatly on when, how and at what level it takes place.

I suspect that the real reasons for these reactions lie in human biology and psychology: humans have a major difference from their fellow-mammals in their oestrus cycle, and thus can and do reproduce at very high rates. Moreover, they can employ methods not available to other mammals to push the reluctant members of their species into breeding more than they want to. As sociologists of many different peoples can confirm, the mother-in-law of a married woman can bully her into reproduction in order to avoid the threat of replacement. But there is an ethical side, too: humans are programmed to reproduce, partly in order to ensure their own survival in old age, yet they are also programmed to love their children. The idea that by having conceived children the parents have also condemned them to a miserable existence and a squalid death in the kind of situation that I envisage is an unpleasant one, so therefore some consider that the idea that Zimbabwe faces a demographic disaster must necessarily be wrong.

This theory can be tested against the methods used by pre-colonial Zimbabwean societies, or by the external factors that limited their growth. Look at what modern Zimbabweans think about the following options: the response is confusing. Sexual self-restraint? Mainly popular among the Roman Catholic clergy, but anathema to the members of many independent churches, and highly unpopular in society at large. Contraception? Relatively popular with women, but not to the same extent with men, especially some clerics. Sterilisation? Misunderstood, and unpopular. Abortion and infanticide? Illegal. But the external options are worse, if anything. Infant mortality? The whole policy of society is to see every child born, and live to its puberty, and beyond. Death by the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse — Conquest, Famine, War and Death itself — is also unattractive as a method of population control. Oddly, the spectre of disease, often misattributed to the Horsemen, provokes different reactions among Zimbabweans: some argue that AIDS will limit population

without any effort on their part, at the same time that others seek a cure so that they can continue to reproduce unchecked — or, at least, go through the preliminaries to reproduction without fear. Other scenarios invoke emigration and/or sustained aid from the developed world. These forget that we are not the only people undergoing population pressures, and that just as capital input was always insufficient in the pre-colonial world it is unlikely to be sufficient in the future. Indeed, it looks as though the developed world is growing heartily sick of the Third World.

This raises another point: just whose advice should Zimbabweans heed? For some, my pessimistic view will be discredited by my colour, although they might wonder why, if I meant them harm, I do not simply remain silent and watch disaster ensue. Here, the element of over-stress of the 'external' in pre-colonial Zimbabwean thought, exaggerated into modern xenophobia, surfaces again.²⁰ Yet foreign sympathisers can be equally suspect. If some offer quite sincere advice, others are noted for recommending to Africa courses that they would not dream of seeing applied in their home countries. The one-party state, scientific socialism and even corruption in a country's civil service have been winked at in the past.²¹ If foreign advisers should offer reassurance that a Malthusian crisis is not here, then they will not be living with the consequences if they are wrong. We will be. (It was noteworthy that when the Ugandan historian Phares Mutibwa proposed that his country's troubles were primarily the work of Ugandans themselves, it was a British scholar who slightly weakened his message, though not with the intention of destroying his point.²² But not all foreign commentators are as honest as Christopher Wrigley, and many are very reluctant indeed to criticise anything that Africans have done. This can be deadly dangerous, because how can any humans learn without criticism?) But the question remains, if there is a crisis coming or already here, what are Zimbabweans to do about it?

Part of the problem lies in the fact that very long-held beliefs of the people, dating from pre-colonial days, have to be challenged. The fact is

20 'If I am right, the Germans will say that I was a German, and the French will say that I was a Jew. If I am wrong, the Germans will say that I was a Jew, and the French will say that I was a German', Albert Einstein, attributed. In other words, if you don't like the message, you shoot the messenger! 'But if you be afar'd to hear the worst, then let the worst, unheard, fall on your head' (W. Shakespeare, *King John*, Act IV, Scene 2, 135-6).

21 C. Leys, 'The non-existent political theory of Africa', *Contact*, I, May 1960, cited in T. O. Ranger, 'Some attitudes to African nationalism', *Historians in Tropical Africa. Proceedings of the Leverhulme Inter-collegiate History Conference, held at the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, September 1960* (University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, Salisbury, 1962), 335 n.2.

22 Phares Mutibwa, *Uganda Since Independence. A Story of Unfulfilled Hopes* (Fountain, Kampala, 1992), xii-xiii; review by C. C. Wrigley, *The Journal of African History* (1994), XXXV, (i), 159.

that, even though there were some land shortages then, the idea that there was no serious limit to resources had taken root, with good reason. The possibility of moving to a different part of the 'Great Crescent' and starting a new agricultural settlement was always there, as the many local migrations recorded by oral traditions show. Nor is there any real evidence for environmental damage done by humanity. Even the extended family and nepotism made sense: in a relatively unspecialised economy, numbers meant strength. For a ruling dynasty, extra numbers meant military strength in local wars, while even in a relatively specialised family iron-working group, even the least talented member was of use in collecting timber, if he could not be trusted with a furnace or forge. But that was then, this is now. Although the people can justifiably point to commercial farms or state land on which nothing appears to be happening, now the country really is running out of land. Similarly, if many individuals do benefit from financial corruption or nepotism in state or private business, the fact remains that this is not good for the country as a whole. Moreover, on one issue the people have a definite point: although many of them do in fact concede that their numbers are too great, just how are they to survive as peasant farmers with only two children per married couple, the numbers required for population stability? There is no obvious answer, though obviously one must be found.

To begin with, I do not think that matters can be left to the politicians, at least not alone. In so far as a politician is in fact elected fairly, he or she does not usually succeed by telling the electorate that it simply cannot have what it wants, which is one of the corollaries of recognising the demographic crisis. (Yet we already know what happens to undemocratic leaders, in the long run). ZANU(PF) in particular, having started as a very human reaction to racist minority rule, has degenerated sharply in the last few years into an equally human blind instrument for the maintenance of itself and its hangers-on. It also has most of the more unpleasant characteristics of pre-colonial states, as I warned the Minister responsible for presenting the case for the executive presidency as far back as 1987.²³ But, looking at the available alternatives, the main case for preserving ZANU(PF) is the fear that something worse might follow.

Obviously, if Zimbabwe's people are to limit their population to match Zimbabwe's resources, the necessary action must come from the people themselves. It cannot be done by compulsion. Zimbabweans do not have the long experience of the Chinese in bowing to Imperial

²³ Zimbabwe, *Parliamentary Debates; House of Assembly*, XIV, 31, Tuesday 27 October 1987, 1575-1580; D. Beach, 'Precedents and presidents', *Prize Africa*, December 1987, 24-5. Minister E. Zvobgo was then arguing for the strengthening of the Presidency. How times change.

authority. On the contrary, they may be rigidly unbending where things that do not affect them directly are concerned, such as the granting of temporary employment permits, but when it comes to things that really matter, such as streambank cultivation, then the almost anarchistic streak visible in pre-colonial society comes very much to the fore. In such an intimate and personal matter as what a couple does in bed, they themselves must decide.

But how are they to make such a decision, without being in possession of the facts, whatever they might be? The government is unlikely to tell them, as things are. Nor, gallant as are the efforts of many non-governmental organisations, are they going to learn the whole picture from these, primarily because NGOs tend to confine themselves to specific aspects of the overall problem. Where is there a Zimbabwean institution that has access to all of the data required and that is capable of carrying out the necessary research, arguing over its meaning and presenting the results to the people?

I hope that by now the answer is obvious. It must be the University of Zimbabwe first and foremost. By now I have dragged in, one way or another, almost every Faculty and Department in the University into my argument. I admit that in the past the University tried to play a major role in a coming crisis, and failed miserably: from the late 1950s to 1980 the Humanities departments in particular warned the Rhodesian Front and its predecessors that they were leading the country into disaster. They were ignored, and we all know what followed: democracy turned out to be only achievable by war. Yet this is no reason why the University should give up now. Too much is at stake. The University should take up the task of analysing the crisis and presenting its findings to the people. However, can it do so as it stands at present?

THE DECLINE BUT NOT THE FALL OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ZIMBABWE

The essential starting point is to decide what a University is and should be. Clearly the people and government do not know, and I suspect that many of my colleagues do not know either. Basically, a University is an *association of free scholars* for the purposes of *study, research and teaching*. All these components are essential, and if any one of them should grow at the expense of the others, or if any of them should fall away, then a University ceases to deserve the name. By looking at the history of universities, this point becomes clear.

Although there were universities in the classical Eurasian world, the real origin of modern universities lies in the later medieval period of European history, when Europe was beginning to climb out of the thousand-year economic and political depression that began with the

decline of the Roman *oecumene*. As Europe became richer, it was possible for funds to be invested in the support of scholars for the purpose of study, and at the same time to finance the copying of the books surviving from the classical era, often through Islamic scholars' efforts. Such scholars were often at first part of the Church, which is why clerical terms such as 'Doctor' and 'Dean' still survive, along with academic robes. The scholars were not to be burdened by ordinary clerical duties, but were allowed to study, to read the books and absorb their data. The very word 'college' comes from the Latin term for 'reading together'. The books were at first what we would now call 'core texts' with commentaries, and early university work was for a long time remarkably sterile as a consequence of few new ideas being generated. Yet, in time, the principle of research developed: the questioning of old assumptions and their testing by experiment. Research led to new fields, and very slowly towards the technological 'revolution' that is still with us. Teaching was a natural by-product of all this, though limited to certain fields such as medicine, law and theology for a long time.²⁴

The vastly increased wealth generated in the nineteenth century led to a great expansion of libraries, laboratories, fields of study and of teaching. Increasingly, a degree became regarded as essential for advancement in fields undreamt of before. Nevertheless, certain principles remained essential for the success of the system: the professors and lecturers had to have their books and time to read them, and they had to have funding for research and time to carry it out. Teaching was not to become the overriding aim of the institutions. Moreover, although research and study became ever more expensive and thus required far more finance from the state and the private sector, it was not always wise that the funding bodies should dictate the terms of research. If the Prussian Academy of Science had bowed to the needs of the German state or economy in 1913 and had controlled Einstein's research, he might have ended up doing work towards the production of superior dreadnoughts. To its credit it gave him a free hand, and the Theory of Relativity was the result.²⁵ Here, we should understand one basic difference between the Sciences and the Humanities, although they have much in common. The Sciences, whether they deal with neutrons or mountains, bacteria or elephants, are dealing with the *physical*. If they proceed carefully, they can obtain funding more easily than the Humanities. The Humanities deal with the ways in which humans think, communicate, and function in societies over time and space. Their work is essential, and neither the

24 H. Daniel-Rops, *Cathedral and Crusade* (Dent, London, 1957), 301-346

25 C. P. Snow, *Variety of Men* (Macmillan, London, 1967), 86-9.

Sciences or society can do without it, any more than humans can afford to do without a sense of balance. Yet, essential as it is, their work does not command a market price as readily as that of the Sciences. But not all of human activity is for profit: justice and the military are obvious cases, but so in the end is the University. A world without true universities is a sterile one, as the interregnum between the fall of Rome and the Renaissance proved.

I won't pursue First World university history any further, except to note two disquieting trends: one is the increasing tendency of funding bodies to assume that they and not the academics know what needs to be researched. There was a fine example of this kind of thinking in the crucial years of the 1930s.

both the army and the air force were concerned with the problem of detecting enemy aircraft at a greater distance than the existing searchlights and sound rangers could do. The army said they wanted searchlights and sound rangers that could pick up an aircraft at 30 000 feet and 20 miles instead of the then limit of 20 000 feet and 10 miles. In due course they got what they had asked for — better searchlights, better sound rangers. The air force defined their object more accurately: *to detect and track aircraft from as great a distance as possible*. They got radar.²⁶

In other words, by giving the scientists freedom to approach the problem in their own way, they obtained an invention of vast use to humanity in both the civil and military spheres. Another is the devaluation of the term 'university' by its being used for low-grade centres that are really no better than training colleges, with little real research and limited study linked to a massive demand for teaching towards rather limited degrees. So far this has not seriously impeded the technological development of North American or European societies, primarily because their populations are so large that enough good scholars survive this system to ensure that there is still a superior core of scholarship. But these trends are deadly when applied to Africa.

Here in Zimbabwe we are suffering from a blind expansion of teaching at the expense of study and research, and at this University — which is still the senior education body in the country — this policy has had very serious effects over the last decade or even longer. The root cause lies in the population expansion. As Zimbabweans increase in numbers, they have become desperate for money, and one of their demands is for increasing numbers of graduates with some sort of 'degree' that will enable them to obtain a job that is at least better paid than the average. This need makes itself felt in political pressure exerted by the electorate,

26 J. Masters, *Pilgrim Son* (Michael Joseph, London, 1971), 48.

and the politicians have thus far bowed to the demand for university expansion regardless of its effects on scholarship. To a politician, a thousand low-grade BA or BSc graduates are worth far more than good postgraduate degrees in electoral terms. Moreover, the country simply cannot afford to give the university and all of its swarming numbers of students the financial support they need. The results are such that the University may already no longer deserve the name.

The physical resources of the university are already insufficient for the student and staff numbers that we have. The buildings are worn out, especially in the Arts block, which simply was not designed for the numbers experienced now. Offices and lecture theatres are overcrowded, and teaching in them is becoming increasingly difficult. The Library is a shameful sight. Journals have not been obtained, and the acquisition of new books appears to be haphazard. Of the books upon which we rely, most are showing signs of being worn out where they have not been mutilated, defaced or stolen. Even the valuable holdings built up in the early years of the University are being slowly destroyed, with lovely books a century old that are still essential for researchers being damaged by students desperate for something to read. Even assuming that the needed resources can be obtained through computers, computer access is inadequate for thousands of readers. Assuming that students need only eight hours of study daily and that they can work throughout the night, 9 000 students would need 3 000 computers! More to the point, much crucial scholarship is not available through computers and will never be. As a place of study of the accumulated scholarship of the world, this University can no longer claim to qualify as such.

Equally worrying is the quality of human resources. The students suffer from having gone through a school system that has exactly the same problem as the University, stemming from the attempt by a government under electoral pressure from an expanding population to supply too many school places with inadequate funding. What appears to have happened in the schools is that overloaded teachers have been dictating notes, allowing plagiarised essays to the point where students do not understand what is wrong with plagiarism, 'spotting' examination questions and allowing model answers to be prepared. This evidently fools the A Level examiners, but the students who pass on to the University have had almost every trace of initiative suppressed, which is fatal to reading for university degrees. Nor do I think that every University lecturer tries to remedy these faults. The University, even in the 1970s, was very reluctant indeed to fail students, but at least those who barely scraped a pass then had some knowledge. Nowadays, some students are obtaining their degrees on an absolute minimum of actual study, and I have seen entire course papers where almost every student has relied upon a

memorised model answer, presumably the work of only one or two out of more than fifty. Yet these pass, going out to the schools as teachers to continue the process of decline. One solution, devaluing the marking system, is counterproductive: not only is it an insult to those who obtained genuinely high marks in the past, but also in the long run a devalued First or Upper Second is not a real First or Upper Second, and eventually other universities and employers will realise the fact.²⁷

Furthermore, the system used means that students can pass examinations for course work where the lecturers have done most of the thinking for them, but they are fatally handicapped when it comes to individual research for postgraduate degrees. No supervisor can do all the thinking for a dissertation. Only those who have such strong minds that they can survive practically any educational system have much chance of obtaining a doctorate, and these are few indeed. Funding for postgraduate research is almost impossible to obtain, and the University is having trouble training replacement staff. For example, historians must use documents or interviews in order to obtain doctorates, but in Zimbabwe we have only sources for Zimbabwean history. Our ideal of a balanced degree in history, with African courses balanced by non-African courses on the Americas, Europe, or Asia, is in jeopardy because an establishment of lecturers with postgraduate research only in Zimbabwean or southern African history will not be able to teach the non-African courses to university level. Yet to send our promising graduates to the archives of other continents is becoming ever more expensive.

Unfortunately, foreign universities do not help much. They have their own priorities, and care little or nothing about ours. Indeed, the British still treat us like a colony, the South Africans think of us as a Bantustan and even the North Americans are not always prepared to help in a way useful to us. If we send a graduate to them, that student tends to be diverted into yet another dissertation topic related to Zimbabwean history, which is the one field where we are relatively strong. The continental Europeans are indeed more helpful, but here we have the language problem: like the Rhodesians, modern Zimbabweans are not usually keen to learn new languages after leaving school.

The picture is depressing, but it shows every sign of getting worse.²⁸ It appears that society and the government are still obsessed with cramming yet more students into the University regardless of the quality

27 Nevertheless, it must be stressed that, *at its best* — in History at least — this University always did and still does set an extremely high standard of undergraduate degree, far superior to that set by North American and South African universities.

28 Here I must stress that this lecture was written before June this year, since when the situation has become still more complex.

of the end product, and here the attitude of the Administration and the University's leadership has taken a turn for the worse. Instead of defending the University against these demands, it shows every sign of going along with them. Indeed, one can see a growing trend towards an arrogant, bullying attitude towards the lecturers that began when the red brick Kremlin, the Administration block, was erected in a dominant position in the early 1970s. In fact, the concept of a university as an *association* of scholars has been eroded: from the medieval universities down to the Second World War, scholars chose their own registrars, bursars and librarians from among their own ranks, and these tasks were carried out by scholars working in addition to their own study, research and teaching.²⁹ Obviously, the vastly more complex universities of the past half-century require professionals in these fields, but here many of these appear to have delusions not merely of adequacy but of superiority, especially where the academics are concerned. It should be a basic principle that even the most junior scholar outranks the most senior professional administrator — provided, of course, that the law is obeyed. I admit that even now many of my colleagues are still all too ready to bow down to a bullying posture from those higher up, an inheritance from pre-colonial *muzvambarara* subservience compounded by the habits acquired under colonial rule.

Unfortunately, there are other traces of the historical past in this, our African university. Earlier in this century, migrant mineworkers who were driven by the colonial states from rural poverty into appalling conditions on the mines developed their own very clever means of survival.³⁰ Too many lecturers tend to take the same course as the migrant mineworkers, responding to ever longer teaching hours and ever higher mountains of essays by moonlighting or avoiding extra work because if they do more they know that yet more loads will be piled upon them. Moreover, while patronage is as old as the hills in First World universities, with the danger that the preferred mediocre will promote the mediocre, in Africa there are other overtones. Is it a coincidence that in a Department, an overwhelming number of staff come from one particular part of the country? Both yes and no, I would judge. But is it a coincidence that our three Pro Vice-Chancellors come from the one Faculty in which the Minister of Higher Education once served? Probably not, though of course there may be an explanation that is academically acceptable.

A further point concerns research. Without research, study and teaching become sterile. Moreover, we have to be able to co-operate with

29 C. P. Snow, *The Masters* (Macmillan, London, 1951), 385.

30 van Onselen, *Chibaro, African Mine Labour in Southern Rhodesia 1900-1933* (Pluto, London, 1976).

foreign scholars who come here: we ourselves cannot do all that is required. Yet the Zimbabwean government, possibly influenced by the Stalinist dream of controlling thought that led to Lysenkoism, possibly by xenophobia or simply hunger for foreign currency, has instituted a Research Act that has done us nothing but harm. It makes things very difficult indeed for foreign researchers, and has done nothing but antagonise them while adding yet more to our workloads. 'All this bureaucracy dishonours the name of our land.'³¹ The Act should be scrapped and not replaced, in the name of academic freedom.

But the ultimate constraint is not in buildings, books or in human frailty. The ultimate limitation is time, and not even unlimited and thus impossible — funding can solve that. It takes time to teach, time to mark essays and examination papers, and if the increase in the student body goes on as promised then in the end the work will not be done because there will not be time enough in which to do it. Not even the Administration Kremlin nor its bosses in the Ministry of Higher Education can increase the number of hours or days in the year. This even the Kremlin will discover, as its hamfisted changes in the academic year reach fruition in the second half of 1999, and when it finds that its beloved course unit system means that Humanities students simply will not have time enough to read enough in a semester to pass anything resembling a university examination. However, we do know from recent history that not even Kremllins are invincible!

TOWARDS A NEW UNIVERSITY AND A LESS DISASTROUS FUTURE

I argued earlier that the University is the only national body that has a chance of studying the national demographic crisis and coming up with any kind of solution. I also argued that it must make its findings clear to the people of Zimbabwe, if they are to decide what must be done. Yet how can the university do this if it is in the dreadful condition that I have outlined above — and in an understated way, I might add?

At first, what you have heard may sound like yet another appeal for more and yet more money, the same cry that can be heard across the entire country. Not entirely. Obviously, more money would be useful, but I seriously doubt if there is much more money in the country in any case.

In my view, we have to try to make better use of what we have, and this has radical implications. Look at these in the same order in which I raised the original problems. If the buildings are overcrowded and there are neither the funds to build new ones nor the room in which to build

31 D. Beach, 'Fontes para a história de Manica e Sofala no Arquivo Nacional do Zimbabwe', *Arquivo, Boletim do Arquivo Histórico de Moçambique*, 6, outubro de 1989, 366.

them, if even an efficient library will not have enough books and journals, if the A Level students need an extra year of remedial teaching by university staff before they are fit to enter First Year, if we cannot find more money to send postgraduate students overseas so that they can become lecturers, then we have to face the fact that we are *already* trying to do too much with too little. In other words, if we had too few students in 1980, we now have too many. To state such a thing is likely to be immensely unpopular with the electorate, the government and many of my colleagues on the campus, but I can see no alternative, much though I would like to be able to do so.

Somehow, we have to be able to calculate exactly how much money we can realistically expect to get. We then have to calculate just how much we can allocate to the very best students so that they are properly supported, through scholarships for the deserving and not grants to the masses, to a build-up of library holdings to educate them and to paying their lecturers to teach them and to fund research and research students. Obviously, economies must be made, not least in non-teaching university posts, but the money available must be spent on academic excellence. Only then can the University become once again a true centre for study, research and teaching in the face of the coming demographic crisis. In other words, it will become a deliberately smaller-scale higher academic centre, not a factory for turning out increasingly unconvincing degree diplomas. However, we must retain a strong emphasis on excellent undergraduate teaching. Only thus can we be sure of having a good intake into higher studies. I have my doubts about the new provincial universities. If they can create and build up major Libraries, as was done here until the 1980s, they may be centres of *study*, but at least in the case of the Humanities, whose national research bases are concentrated in Harare, they will find *research* expensive in terms of time and money if they are to be true Universities. Simply calling them 'Universities' will not make them so until they have proven themselves. Until then, we have to rely on our own graduates.

Here we run into the problem of the electorate and the politicians. Obviously the electorate will not like this, for it will mean that fewer of their children will gain degrees from us. Very definitely the politicians will not like it as they see every extra graduate in terms of extra votes. But the politicians are going to have to face other unpleasant facts soon, not least the limited amount of land and water in the country. Is there any hope of convincing them that it will be to their advantage to turn against the will of the electorate? Just possibly. Politicians have one weakness: they worry terribly about their historical image. Why else do they worry so much about where and how they are to be buried in sacred burial

grounds like those of pre-colonial rulers?³² It is just possible that we could appeal to this, to point out to them that they need not be remembered as the government that saw so many thousand students graduate with sub-standard degrees but as, if they so choose, the government that stopped the rot in Zimbabwe's higher education system and allowed the academics to play their real role as scholars, researchers and teachers in identifying Zimbabwe's problems and finding solutions to them.³³ But first of all, again obviously, we ourselves as academics must rediscover our position as inhabitants of a true University, defy the Kremlin and force it to obey our orders. And, to do that, we must decide what the actual situation is.

In this lecture, I have tried to offer something new, not just another learned inaugural on a specialised subject but an all-embracing one that contains something to which not just the academics but every other Zimbabwean can relate. In fact, it is not simply concerned with the University or Zimbabwe but with the whole world. Latin America, Africa and Asia are bulging at the seams with people, who are beating on the gates of the already overcrowded North American and European continents. If in Zimbabwe we can solve the problem of stabilising tropical populations we can do much to avert not just a national but a world disaster. To speak of a world disaster has not been a pleasant task, which is why I have put it off for six years. I have spent most of my academic life telling unpleasant truths to my fellow-Zimbabweans, and I intend to go on doing so whenever necessary for the ten years that I have left here. But I believe that this is my academic duty.³⁴

APPENDIX

Here I supply a list of my publications, which are the basis of the lecture. I do not suggest that their number is exceptional by some world standards. Indeed, they include some translations and some reworking of older material. The total of 63 published under my own name between 1970 and

32 N. Kriger, 'The politics of creating national heroes: The search for political legitimacy and national identity', in N. Bhebe and T. Ranger, (eds.) *Soldiers in Zimbabwe's Liberation War Volume One* (University of Zimbabwe Publications, Harare, 1995), 139-62.

33 However, in the last resort the issue must go to the people: if they are, as I believe, sufficiently responsible to make the hard decisions that must be made about childbirth, then they are also sufficiently responsible to understand what the University really needs, even if this hits against their immediate interests.

34 Finally, this analysis is pessimistic but not defeatist! An optimist is usually doomed to almost perpetual disappointment, whereas a pessimist is rarely surprised by disaster, faces the facts as they are and proceeds to deal with them: 'My centre is giving way, my right is in retreat: situation excellent. I am attacking!' (General Foch, Battle of the Marne, 8 September 1914).

1998 is far fewer than the 102 for the period 1957-1996 noted in T. Moidram, 'Terence Ranger's works: A preliminary bibliography', *Journal of Southern African Studies* (1997), XXIII, (ii), 353-61, and is dwarfed by the outstanding — in depth and coverage as well as in number — output of Professor Jan Vansina between 1954 and 1994 (189!) — listed in D. Henige, 'The writings of Jan Vansina', in R. W. Harms, J. C. Miller, D. S. Newbury and M. E. D. Wagner (eds.) *Paths Toward the Past: African Historical Essays in Honor of Jan Vansina* (University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1994), 473-80. Numbers of publications, in any case, take no account of the actual amount and complexity of the research that led to them. I supply this list because, for reasons outside my control, I have become almost the only remaining academic historian of four centuries of pre-colonial Zimbabwean history. Not only is this an unhealthy situation in itself but it seems to have led to a situation where few academics in the fields that surround mine are fully aware of what I have been doing.

- 1970** 'Afrikaner and Shona settlement in the Enkeldoorn area, 1890-1900', *Zambezia*, I, (1), 25-34.
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