

# MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

The African e-Journals Project has digitized full text of articles of eleven social science and humanities journals. This item is from the digital archive maintained by Michigan State University Library. Find more at:

<http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/africanjournals/>

Available through a partnership with



*Scroll down to read the article.*

# **ANIMAL DISEASES AND HUMAN POPULATIONS IN COLONIAL ZIMBABWE: THE RINDERPEST EPIDEMIC OF 1896-1898**

MAURICE K. K. MUTOWO<sup>1</sup>

*Publications Department, University of Zimbabwe*

## **Abstract**

*This article analyses the impact of the rinderpest animal disease outbreak on human populations in early colonial Zimbabwe. It is informed by the realisation that, while animal diseases may not infect human beings directly, they may cause untold damage to both the health and the economy of human beings and influence human institutions and policies in a variety of ways. By using the rinderpest pandemic as a case study, this article shows how the depredations of this disease brought severe difficulties to the White settler colonialists and the indigenous populations in colonial Zimbabwe and may have inspired the development of veterinary infrastructure and policies in colonial Zimbabwe. Starting with a brief review of the literature on the history of animal diseases in colonial Zimbabwe, the article briefly examines traditional veterinary medicine and practices and then proceeds to trace the origins and development of the rinderpest pandemic in the country. Thereafter, it analyses the colonial authorities' various attempts to contain and eradicate the disease before, finally, documenting and assessing the disease's impact on both the animal and human populations of Zimbabwe.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The history of the natural sciences is a relatively new area of historical enquiry. Consequently, it is not surprising that little has been written on early colonial Zimbabwean veterinary history even though this history is important for a full understanding of the forces that helped shape the country's experience. The study of veterinary history is important, not only as a tool for understanding aspects of human history, but also because veterinary medicine has often had very significant implications for human medicine, apart from playing a crucial role in the provision of food and other material human needs. As Schwabe points out,

---

<sup>1</sup> This article was developed as part of ongoing research into the history of bovine diseases in Zimbabwe. The author would like to thank Professor A. S. Mlambo for his comments and criticisms. However, all the errors of omission and commission that might appear in this article are mine.

veterinary medicine, like human medicine, is a *human* activity which was created by man mostly for its positive effects upon man's physical and mental well-being, that is, his own health.<sup>2</sup>

The emphasis on veterinary medicine's importance to human beings does not negate its concern for the well being of other animals, although it has sometimes been contended that money spent on animal diseases research could be better employed to investigate diseases that affect human beings. This argument misses the important fact that animal and human diseases are sometimes so closely related that they cannot always be studied in isolation from each other. As the Director of Veterinary Research in Southern Rhodesia correctly stated in 1924,

the study of sleeping sickness of man largely depends upon observations made in connection with trypanosomiasis of animals, and knowledge of the piroplasmoses of animals may contribute to the investigation of malaria fever of man.<sup>3</sup>

Thus new discoveries in veterinary medicine may provide important insights for researchers working in the field of human medicine and, for that reason, the two types of medicine are not as different as might appear at first glance. Moreover, veterinary medicine came into existence mainly because human beings had become dependent on several species of animals as a source of food and for their draught power as well as other uses. Thus this branch of science became essential for the protection and promotion of society's welfare and needs.<sup>4</sup>

The close relationship between the history of animal diseases and human welfare is evident in the history of the rinderpest outbreak in Zimbabwe at the turn of the twentieth century, which is the focus of this article. As will be shown, rinderpest not only decimated cattle in the country but also negatively affected the human population whose livelihood was closely dependent on the ownership of cattle.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite the importance of animal disease outbreaks in early colonial Zimbabwe, their history, and social and economic effects have not yet been subjected to scholarly analysis. In fact, very little usable literature on the history of cattle diseases such as rinderpest, East Coast Fever, and Foot and Mouth Disease exists with the exception of various unordered

2 C. W. Schwabe, *Veterinary Medicine and Human Health* (Baltimore/London, Williams and Wilkins, Third edition, 1984), 1.

3 Southern Rhodesia, *Report of the Director of Veterinary Research for the Year 1924* (Salisbury, Govt. Printer, 1925), 1.

4 Schwabe, *Veterinary Medicine and Human Health*, 3.

and undigested articles published by veterinarians in such journals as the *Rhodesia Agricultural Journal*. Specialist in approach, these highly detailed contributions are largely incomprehensible to the non-specialist and do not, therefore, present a coherent picture of the origins, nature, and development of disease outbreaks and their effects on both the human and animal populations of the country.

Where the rinderpest and other cattle disease outbreaks have been mentioned in scholarly studies, they have generally been treated as peripheral issues that had only a marginal impact on the socio-economic history of the country. For instance, Machingaidze has written briefly on the veterinary history of colonial Zimbabwe as it relates to the marketing of beef. He says that the advent of diseases like African Coast Fever and Foot and Mouth Disease hampered the marketing of beef during the pre-World War I period.<sup>5</sup> On his part, Crane field has briefly examined the outbreak of East Coast Fever, in Rhodesia and the Transvaal but does not analyse the disease's impact on the social and economic well-being of the populations in the two areas.<sup>6</sup> As Giblin correctly points out,

Crane field is primarily interested in the sociology of science and in exploring the complex array of political, economic, social, institutional and personal factors that shape scientific enquiry. The outbreak of African Coast Fever appears to have intrigued him partly because it involved conflicting theories and famous scientists and because it appeared to be a "rare event".<sup>7</sup>

In view of the above, this article seeks to fill this gap in the knowledge of the history of animal disease outbreaks and their impact on the human population by tracing the early history of rinderpest cattle disease and its impact on the social and economic history of the African population between 1896 and 1898. Like Van Onselen's study, this article contends that the loss of cattle during the rinderpest epidemic caused a lot of social and economic distress among the African people and contributed to their proletarianisation.<sup>8</sup>

Research for this article was constrained mainly by the unavailability of well-documented records on the outbreak, development and impact of

5 V. E. M. Machingaidze, "The Development of Settler Capitalist Agriculture with Particular Reference to the Role of the State: 1890-1939" (London, School of Oriental and African Studies, Ph.D. thesis, 1980).

6 P. F. Crane field, *Science and Empire: East Coast Fever in Rhodesia and the Transvaal* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991).

7 James Giblin, "Integrating the History of Land Use into Epidemiology: Settler Agriculture as a Cause of Disease in Zimbabwe" (Boston University, African Studies Centre Working Paper No. 176, Unpubl., 1984), 8.

8 C. Van Onselen, "Reactions to rinderpest in Southern Africa", in *Journal of African History* (1972), XIII, (III).

the disease. The absence of such information can easily be explained by the fact that the outbreak occurred at a time when the African uprising, known as *Chimurenga/Umvukela*, engaged the entire attention of the white settler community. This, therefore, meant, that the settlers did not have enough time to closely monitor and report on the disease and its effects. As the Secretary for Land Development admitted in 1898,

the country has been for some fifteen months ravaged by rinderpest, the stamping out of which was greatly impeded through the Native uprising which lasted during much the same period.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, it is hoped that the following account, pieced together from surviving private records and reminiscences of individual settlers, and other archival sources, provides a useful account of the rinderpest epidemic and its impact in early colonial Rhodesia.

### THE PRE-COLONIAL PERIOD

Little is known about the pre-colonial animal disease environment and the traditional African methods of combating disease outbreaks if and when they occurred. What is clear, however, is that the indigenous people did keep a variety of domestic animals which, by all early accounts, were in a fit and healthy condition. Testimony to this is the fact that, as early as 1560, Jesuit Missionaries who visited the region that was later to become Rhodesia reported in their letters from Inhambane that "there is much poultry, very many fine cows, but fewer goats and sheep" in the region.<sup>10</sup> Another example is de Faria's reference to Barreto's voyage to the Indian Ocean in 1569, in which he said of the land of Monomatapa: "This land bears rice and Indian wheat, has abundance of all sorts of cattle, fowls and gardening. Their chief care is pasturage and tillage".<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Father Silveira, the first missionary to be killed in Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia), was reported to have received cows and oxen as presents from "the King of Monomatapa" on various occasions.<sup>12</sup>

The "many fine cows" observed by the Jesuits may have been the result of the indigenous cattle's natural immunity to cattle diseases as seems to be suggested by the comment of one early settler that,

<sup>9</sup> LO4/1/2, "Report by the Secretary (Land Department) for the Year Ended 31st March 1898".

<sup>10</sup> E. A. Nobbs, "The native cattle of Southern Rhodesia, *South African Journal of Science* (1927), XXIV, 329.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 330.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

native stock are, on the whole, more resistant to disease than European breeds . . . They seem to acquire immunity to introduced diseases more rapidly than do cross-breeds or foreign breeds.<sup>13</sup>

Conversely, the animals may have benefited from traditional African veterinary medicine practice, as the following settler colonial official's statement seemed to acknowledge:

The Mashona possess an intimate knowledge of the medicinal virtues of herbs, root and bark and use these for their cattle. Generally speaking, these drugs are similar in action to corresponding materials known to us, and in use are in more convenient form whether it be as purgatives, laxatives, diuretics, emollients, as stringers and so on.<sup>14</sup>

If this last statement is correct, then it can be assumed that Africans were already familiar with cattle diseases in the pre-colonial period and had developed appropriate remedies to combat them. It is also likely that, because people stayed very close to their domesticated animals, they could easily detect any diseases that affected their stock and take measures to cure them. Thus, when an animal became ill, the traditional healer would source the appropriate bark, leaves, roots or fruits and administer them to the affected animal. As Chavunduka argues, over time, traditional doctors became experts not only at treating human ailments but also in curing animal diseases.<sup>15</sup> Because of the traditional doctors' tendency to keep the specialist knowledge secret, however, knowledge of traditional veterinary medicine remained limited to a handful of the population.

According to Chavunduka, Africans used certain trees and plants for various protective and medicinal purposes. For instance, the roots of *Acacia macrothyrsa* (*Mutandahonye*) were used to prevent poisonous snakes from entering the homestead and kraals and to cure maggot-infested wounds.<sup>16</sup> The fruit of a monkey apple (*Mumuzi*) was an effective eye remedy, while the Bitter Apple (*Nhundurwa*) was good for the treatment of constipation. Similarly, the juice from the *Mutohwe* fruit was used to cure ear infections. Because of their knowledge of a wide range of traditional medicines, traditional doctors could switch from one remedy to another if the malady was not responding to treatment.

Medicine was prepared by various means. The commonest method consisted of soaking the appropriate plant or herb in water and

---

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 336.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 337.

<sup>15</sup> D. M. Chavunduka, *Cattle Production* (Gweru, Mambo Press, 1985), 7. I have relied extravagantly on Chavunduka for information in this section.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

administering the treated water to the animal orally. Juice from a plant could also be squeezed onto the affected part or the medicinal plant was crushed and applied to the wound. Although these traditional remedies have fallen into disuse because of the advancement of modern veterinary medicine, evidence testifies to the effectiveness of such traditional cures.

### EARLY COLONIAL DEVELOPMENTS

The hope of finding rich gold deposits attracted many settlers to Rhodesia in the early colonial years. Thus, compared to prospecting and mining, farming played a secondary role in the early years following the occupation. Desirous of settling as many people as possible, the British South Africa Company (BSA Co.) promised each of the "Pioneers" a grant of 1 500 morgen (about 3 000 acres) of land and prospecting rights.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, many settlers entered the country with the hope of striking it rich, mainly from mining. When the dream of a "Second Rand" failed to materialise, however, the early settlers decided to shift their attention to agriculture as an alternative source of livelihood.

When the "Pioneers" arrived in the country, they found it teeming with cattle that were, apparently, in good health and were immune to local diseases. This is shown by the fact that the Report of the British South Africa Company for 1892 to 1894 reported, "that this country is good for cattle is proved by the large herds which were owned by King Lobengula, and attention to breeding is what is required to improve the quality of the stock".<sup>18</sup> Having failed to locate sufficiently lucrative gold mines in the vast lands which had been allocated to them by the Company, individual settlers and the various Rhodesian mining and estate companies turned to ranching and began dispossessing Africans of their cattle in order to establish a pastoral industry. Thus, European settlers appropriated many African cattle after the defeat of Lobengula in 1893. Cattle belonging to Africans were registered and branded and were claimed by the BSA Co.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, settlers who fought in the war against Lobengula were rewarded by "half the loot" of cattle captured from the Ndebele; amounting to about 30 000 cattle.<sup>20</sup>

In addition, on the recommendations of the Land Commission set up by the 'Matabeleland Order in Council, 1894', "the ownership of all cattle in the possession of natives in Matabeleland on or before 31st December

17 H. Weinmann, *Agricultural Research and Development in Southern Rhodesia, 1890-1923*, Occasional Paper No. 4 (Salisbury, University of Rhodesia, 1972), 142.

18 Quoted in *Ibid.*, 104.

19 S138/205, African Coast Fever in Matabeleland, 1926-1927, CNC to Secretary to the Premier, 4 January 1927.

20 Weinmann, *Agricultural Research and Development*, 104.

1893, as well as its offspring, was vested in the Company".<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, according to Government Notice No. 104 of 10 December 1895, the BSA Co. disposed of cattle to 'bona fide' settlers on the following terms:

The purchase price is fixed at 50/- per head, irrespective of class, payable in instalments. The first instalment is payable at the time of sale and the three further instalments at intervals of six, twelve and eighteen months from the date of sale.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, African cattle passed into the hands of the settlers and the looted cattle provided the foundation for the colonial cattle industry.

### THE RINDERPEST OUTBREAK

Rinderpest (cattle plague) is an epidemic that is fatal to cattle and other domestic and wild animals. Though its virus does not cause disease in man, it is very closely related to both human measles and canine distemper viruses and was probably their parent.<sup>23</sup> According C. E. Gray, the Government Veterinary Surgeon, symptoms of rinderpest infection include:

Extreme depression, arching of the back, disinclination to move and frequent grinding of the teeth, the eyes appear swollen and very red; there is a discharge of mucus from the eyes and nose and sometimes from the vagina with frequently marked dripping of saliva from the mouth . . . As the disease progresses diarrhoea generally appears, the discharges are seamy greenish-yellow in colour . . . there is a slight cough, appetite and rumination are suspended in the later stages, and sometimes twitching of the muscles will be noticed. A rise of temperature is one of the early indications of the disease, duration from 24 hours or even less to seven days, average duration of five days.<sup>24</sup>

Although it was unknown in Rhodesia until the 1890s, this devastating scourge had plagued human beings and their stock since ancient times. From the 9th century to the Napoleonic era, epizootics swept Europe every 40 or 50 years, decimating stock populations.<sup>25</sup> The human losses from starvation following the decimation of cattle have been computed in millions over the centuries. Because of the colossal losses of stock from this disease in the European epizootic that ended in 1750, the first veterinary school was founded by public subscription at Lyons, France,

---

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> DV1/7/1 Government Notice No. 104 of 1895.

<sup>23</sup> C. W. Schwabe, *Veterinary Medicine and Human Health* (Baltimore/London, Williams and Wilkins, Third edition, 1984), 17.

<sup>24</sup> "Report from the Government Veterinary Surgeon" in *Rhodesia Advertiser*, 27 March, 1896.

<sup>25</sup> T. Lees-May, "Rinderpest" *CSC News* (Dec. 1965), I, 2.



in 1762.<sup>26</sup> Rinderpest entered the lower Nile Valley of Egypt from Asia and spread as far south as Khartoum during British campaigns in the Sudan in 1884-1885, but the eastern extension of the Sahara desert effectively barred further spread of the virus southward into the vast Savannah grasslands.<sup>27</sup> However, disaster struck when, as part of the European subjugation and division of Africa, the Italian army invaded Eritrea in 1889 and introduced provisioning cattle from India. With these came rinderpest. The effects upon the Ethiopian economy were so sudden and catastrophic that the belief spread that the Italians had deliberately introduced the disease.<sup>28</sup> One result of this scourge was the greatest famine in recorded Ethiopian history. According to one source,

The populace was driven not only to the eating of traditionally forbidden food (but was also led to) the abandonment or sale of children . . . self-enslavement, suicide, murder, and cannibalism. The Emperor Menelik tied himself to a plough as a way of example and wept disconsolately, "Oh! How my country has fallen in ruins! My people are finished!"<sup>29</sup>

By the end of 1890, the virus had spread as far southwest as Lake Tanganyika. The Masai of northern Tanzania and southern Kenya were hard hit. They were on the verge of starvation and "some made faint attempts to engage in farming".<sup>30</sup> The Italian, German, and British colonial conquest in East Africa and other parts of Africa was made much easier because of this great plague. Although in 1893, Lord Lugard lamented the loss of cattle in Kenya by stating, "never before in the memory of man, or by the voice of tradition, have the cattle died in such numbers",<sup>31</sup> he was happy to report that the disease had put paid to the Masai resistance to colonisation. He celebrated the fact that "these powerful and warlike . . . pastoral tribes [had] their pride . . . humbled and our progress [in conquest was] facilitated by this awful visitation [of rinderpest]".<sup>32</sup>

The Zambezi River temporarily halted rinderpest's march south from Tanganyika. In the early part of February 1896, one R. T. Coryndon returned from a visit to the Luangwa River, north of the Zambezi, and reported that rinderpest, which for several years "had been steadily working its ravaging course of destruction southwards through Central

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Schwabe, *Veterinary Medicine and Human Health*, 17.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Lees-May, "Rinderpest" 2.

<sup>32</sup> Schwabe, *Veterinary Medicine and Human Health*, 18.

Africa, annihilating vast herds of native cattle and wild game, had crossed the Zambezi River".<sup>33</sup>

Little notice was taken of this announcement as it seemed to be the general opinion that the plague would be confined to the low, sickly belts of the country and would not affect the healthy plateau. Then in 1896 a herd of missionary cattle crossed the Zambezi River and were driven down through the Mafungabusi District before being brought into Bulawayo and sold to a number of purchasers. The disease was first identified in cattle in the Bulawayo area on 3 March 1896 from where it spread with great rapidity. This is not surprising because ox-wagons were almost the sole means of transport in this area. For the first ten years following the occupation of Rhodesia, settlers were dependent on ox-transport for their supplies.

Wildebeest and buffalo also played a major part in the spread of the disease:

wildebeest from their intimate mixing with domestic stock and their habit of herding near human habitation at night to avoid predators; buffalo from their propensity, when infected, to become aggressive and disperse for long distances from their normal grazing grounds, carrying the infection far afield.<sup>34</sup>

Other small game often carried the infection in a sub-clinical form, not being visibly ill and yet being highly infective. Such animals spread the disease to new centres as soon as they contacted domestic stock or buffaloes in particular at watering holes.<sup>35</sup> In addition, the gross contamination of the veldt with decomposing carcasses led to many shifts in the game population. Thus, the sustained close link between bovines and free living wildlife became an important factor in keeping the infection alive.

The disease reached Tuli on the southern border of Rhodesia on 16 March 1896 and Maleking three weeks later.<sup>36</sup> It threatened to become endemic and therefore a permanent barrier to development of any sort because, at that time, the ox was the only means of transporting supplies of all kinds into and about the country. In his reminiscences, J. Bland, a transport rider, demonstrated the difficulties and cost of transport in the 1890s by stating:

---

33 J. M. Sinclair, "A short history of the infective diseases among domestic animals of Southern Rhodesia since the occupation", *Rhodesia Agricultural Journal* (1922), XIX, 168.

34 Lees-May, "Rinderpest", 2.

35 *Ibid.*

36 D. A. Lawrence, "The history of veterinary services in Rhodesia: Earliest veterinary developments, 1890-1899", in *Rhodesia Veterinary Journal* (1970), I, 29.

The cost of transport in those days was from \$60 to \$70 for a four-tonne wagonload, and it took from five to six weeks to railhead and back. Then there was the wet season of at least three months when all transport had to be hung up. There were no made roads and it took little rain to make the roads impassable; merchants had to be careful to import enough to carry them over the wet season.<sup>37</sup>

Because of the prevalence of rinderpest in the country, a Controller of Cattle was appointed and given powers to order the isolation and destruction of infected cattle.<sup>38</sup> On 10 March 1896, John Blakinston of the African Transcontinental Telegraph Line reported:

News have lately arrived of a frightful disease that has broken out among the cattle in Matabeleland and Mashonaland, and if this assumes the proportions they fear and against which they are stringently legislating, it will be very serious. Already they have suspended the greater part of the transport and I expect that everything will shortly be raised to famine prices, though they might well be described as that now.<sup>39</sup>

Elias Gray was the first surgeon to be appointed in a civil capacity in 1896. He had previously served with the Postal Telegraphs in Edinburgh, Scotland, and had been seconded for six months special rinderpest duty in the Transkei after which he returned to Salisbury as Government Veterinary Surgeon.<sup>40</sup> At that time, Mashonaland and Matabeleland were administered separately. Before his appointment, lay members of the administration, particularly the Native Commissioners, dealt with matters relating to animals and animal health. Gray, who was then a post office official at Victoria, although a fully qualified Veterinary Surgeon, was called upon to form a Veterinary Department and arrest the disease.

### ATTEMPTS TO CHECK THE SPREAD OF THE DISEASE

The Administration at Bulawayo attempted to check the southward spread of the disease by shooting all cattle in a certain area, but was unsuccessful. One of the early settlers, Stuttaford, recalled how,

we children used to walk out on what is now the golf links in Bulawayo, and the whole of that area was covered with mounds. Great numbers of

37 Hist. Ms. Collect., BL6/1/1, Reminiscences, "Difficulties and the Cost of Transport in the Early Days of Rhodesia".

38 Lawrence, "The history of veterinary services in Rhodesia", 29.

39 Hist. Ms. Collect., BL1/1, J. Blakinston to Herbert, 10 March 1896. John Blakinston was employed by the African Transcontinental Telegraph Line. It was controlled administratively by the Post Master General of the Cape Colony.

40 Colony of Southern Rhodesia, *Official Year Book of Southern Rhodesia, No. 1, 1924*, (Salisbury, Art Printing and Publishing Works, 1924), 159.

cattle were simply shot and where they fell chloride of lime was sprinkled on the carcass and loosened earth from round them was thrown over them. The whole area along the Matsheumhlope was strewn with the dead animals.<sup>41</sup>

The Government Veterinary Surgeon issued instructions on the precautions to be taken wherever it was found impossible, owing to scarcity of labour, to bury the carcasses of all animals destroyed. He ordered that,

in the case of transport oxen, a spot at least 200 yards from the road should be selected . . . care should be taken that such a spot does not drain into any neighbouring watercourse.<sup>42</sup>

Meanwhile, the rinderpest disaster brought home to the authorities the urgent need for more veterinary workers and better facilities for research work.

In an effort to curb the disease outbreak, in March 1896, the Rhodesian authorities adopted the Animals Diseases Act No. 2 of 1881 of the Cape. This was augmented later by instructions that all infected cattle should be immediately destroyed.<sup>43</sup> Government Notice No. 53 of 1896, issued by H. M. Taberer, *Controller of Cattle*, required all Cattle Inspectors to inform the public, in cases where rinderpest broke out amongst cattle, that it was optional for the owners either to shoot the infected cattle or to try to cure them.<sup>44</sup> The Government Notice, however, prohibited the destruction of apparently clean-although-in-contact stock because

clean cattle which have been treated by washing their mouths with a mixture of paraffin and salt and an aperient given to them has resulted up to the present in cattle so treated being preserved from infection.<sup>45</sup>

Notwithstanding the imperfections in knowledge disclosed by such a notice, the Administration continued with the stringent control of the movement of stock within the territory, destruction of sick animals, establishment of stations at the border for quarantine and the inoculation of all imported stock.

---

41 NAZ, ORAL/ST, Interview held by D. Hartridge with R. P. Stuttaford at Coronation Cottages, Queens Road, North End, Bulawayo, 12 Nov. 1969, 16.

42 "Report from the Government Veterinary Surgeon", in *Rhodesia Advertiser*, March 27, 1896.

43 DE1/1/2, H. H. Castens (Public Prosecutor) to the Undersecretary, 7 Feb. 1898.

44 *Rhodesia Advertiser*, 27 March, 1896.

45 *Government Gazette*, 1896. According to the notice, H. M. Taberer was Controller of Cattle and not the incorrect designation of Controller of Stock as intimated by Lawrence, "The history of veterinary services in Rhodesia", 30.

## INOCULATION

In his study of the disease in South Africa in 1896, Professor Koch recognised that the bile from the gall bladder of infected animals, when injected into susceptible animals conferred upon them a certain degree of immunity. He believed that the rinderpest organism was restrained by the preventive action of the bile.<sup>46</sup> In 1897, Koch reported to the Secretary of Agriculture of the Cape Colony that "blood serum of cattle which have recovered from rinderpest had a certain immunising effect upon healthy stock when inoculated with it".<sup>47</sup> In March 1897, Dr George Turner, who was conducting a series of experiments at the Kimberley Rinderpest Station on behalf of the Cape Government, visited Bulawayo, and, on his advice, a system of compulsory inoculation against Rinderpest was established in the province.<sup>48</sup> The necessary materials were brought up from Kimberley in large quantities and cattle were inoculated by a method of simultaneous injection of virulent blood and serum in order to establish lasting immunity.<sup>49</sup> In Matabeleland, inoculating stations were established at Bulawayo, Ramaquabane, Gwelo, Manzinyama, Tuli, Khami, and Queen's Kraal.<sup>50</sup>

Towards the end of August 1898, it was found that the number of cattle entering the stations had decreased considerably. Although police patrols were sent out in all directions, and inspecting stations established on the main roads, it was found that, with the exception of some African cattle, only a few cattle, which had not been inoculated, could be detected.<sup>51</sup> It was therefore decided to discontinue the use of virulent blood and to use serum alone because the infected blood was apt at times to give rise to acute infection. In fact, as long as virulent blood was used at the stations, these had to be considered infected areas. All cattle arriving by road or rail were treated by the latter method. All in all, 18 373 head of cattle were inoculated, of which 2 242 head received serum only.<sup>52</sup> In the month of October 1898, the inoculation stations at Bulawayo, Ramaquabane, Gwelo, Khami and Manzimnyama were closed and stations

---

46 L. Bevan, "Veterinary laboratory notes", *Rhodesia Agricultural Journal* (1927), XXIV, (xi), 1138.

47 Quoted in *ibid.*, 1139.

48 LO4/1/2 "Report of the Deputy Administrator of Matabeleland for the Year Ending Sept. 30 1898".

49 *Ibid.*

50 Sinclair, "A short history of the infective diseases", 170.

51 LO4/1/4, "Report by the Government Veterinary Surgeon for the Year Ending 31 March 1899".

52 Colony of Southern Rhodesia, *Official Year Book of Southern Rhodesia*, No. 1, 1924, 159.

established at the Railhead and Queens Kraal. The station at Tuli was kept open.<sup>53</sup>

In Mashonaland, the work of inoculating cattle was started early in 1898, but after a few months, the double method of inoculation had to be discontinued owing to the impossibility, under the existing conditions, of obtaining virulent rinderpest blood from the organisms of other diseases such as gall-sickness.<sup>54</sup> Serum alone was then relied on for dealing with the sporadic outbreaks which occurred from time to time; the last outbreak occurring on Salisbury commonage in September 1898.

The supply of serum was obtained from the Cape Government. However, in July 1898 the Cape Government decided to close the Kimberley Rinderpest Experimental Station. The BSA Company decided to lease the station for a period of three months at their own expense at a rental of £1 000 per month for the manufacture of serum.<sup>55</sup> The aim of the Company Government was to produce sufficient material to complete the treatment of all cattle in the Territory and provide a large reserve in case the disease should re-appear.

#### AFRICANS AND THE SPREAD OF RINDERPEST

According to H. J. Taylor, the then Chief Native Commissioner (CNC) for Matabeleland, "compensation was paid to owners of cattle in cases where an animal, not actually attacked by the disease, was killed".<sup>56</sup> Salisbury was proclaimed an infected district on March 24 1896, and no cattle were permitted to enter or depart without the permission of the Controller of Cattle. In this regard, the coach conveying mail was placed in quarantine outside Charter District.<sup>57</sup> However, "Goats were not attacked to any extent and many herds of native cattle were found towards the end of the year to have escaped infection altogether".<sup>58</sup> It is little wonder then that Africans objected strongly to any destruction of their stock since most of their cattle escaped infection. Regulations to control the spread of the disease, which included the shooting of infected herds, were also applied with greater vigour to Africans — an imposition which became an

53 LO4/1/4, "Report by the Government Veterinary Surgeon for the Year Ending 31 March 1899".

54 Colony of Southern Rhodesia, *Official Year Book of Southern Rhodesia*, No. 1, 1924, 159.

55 LO4/1/2, "Report by the Secretary for Agriculture for the Half Year Ending 30 Sept. 1898".

56 "Report of the Chief Native Commissioner (CNC) for the Province of Matabeleland, 1896-97", in BSA Co., *Report on the Administration of Rhodesia, 1896-1897* (Salisbury, Argus Printing and Publishing Co., 1898), 116.

57 *Rhodesia Advertiser*, March 27 1896.

58 "Report of the Chief Native Commissioner (CNC) for the Province of Matabeleland, 1896-97", 116.

aggravating cause of the first African uprising (*Chimurenga/Umvukela*) of 1896-1897.

By moving infected cattle to avoid destruction, Africans became a source of contagion and inadvertently helped to spread the infection. However, it is important to appreciate that Africans had not experienced this disease before the coming of the settlers. When they moved their cattle away from the Administration's reach, therefore, they were safeguarding their livestock against what they considered to be yet another round of cattle confiscation by the settler Administration that, after all, had already stolen their herds between 1894 and 1895 as outlined above.

Nonetheless, Africans helped spread the infection since, according to one source, "the natives themselves, were in the habit of cutting up for food, animals which had perished from rinderpest, and carrying the meat from kraal to kraal".<sup>59</sup> In the same vein, in 1897 the CNC for Matabeleland Province reported that:

They (the Matabele) still have some herds of cattle, which are gradually dying, from Rinderpest. The Matabeles eat their Rinderpest cattle and all become infected to a certain degree. One or two of the rebels have come in with information that a large number of small children have already died from eating Rinderpest meat.<sup>60</sup>

Ngomambi, a witness to the depredations of the rinderpest epidemic, confirmed the veracity of the above statements, stating:

Cattle fell ill and we had plenty of meat. We would cut up what we wanted and leave the rest. The choice was ours. You know if cattle fall ill, Europeans kill them. They do not eat the meat. We herded all the cattle and drove them to some hidden area and there they were shot.<sup>61</sup>

It was, however, not in all cases that Africans ate meat from cattle that had died from rinderpest because "very frequently deaths due to other causes were attributed to rinderpest".<sup>62</sup>

### THE DEPREDACTIONS OF RINDERPEST

The Chief Veterinary Surgeon (CVS), Charles Gray, could report with confidence at the beginning of 1901 that "rinderpest did not reappear in the country and that the check placed upon the importation of cattle

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Hist. Ms. Collect., GR2/1/2, Vera to Charlie, 14 Sept. 1896.

<sup>61</sup> NAZ, AOH/58, Interview with M. Ngomambi (n.d.).

<sup>62</sup> "Report of the Government Veterinary Surgeon, 1899", in BSA Co., *Report on the Administration of Rhodesia, 1898-1900* (Salisbury. Argus Printing and Publishing Co., 1900), 195.

would suffice to keep the country clean".<sup>63</sup> His optimism was also shared by the CNC (Matabeleland) in his Report for the same year, which stated:

The year has been most favourable and disease in a serious form has been conspicuous by its absence. The disease (rinderpest) has wholly disappeared, and it is probable that the majority of the cattle in the country has become salted against it.<sup>64</sup>

It is difficult to estimate the total number of cattle that died from the epidemic. As already stated, information regarding the introduction and spread of the disease is very meagre because the first African uprising engaged almost the entire time and attention of the whole European community, leaving them with little time to monitor this epidemic. However, it was estimated that by 1897, there were less than 14 000 head of cattle in African possession in the whole of Rhodesia.<sup>65</sup> Four years earlier there had been over 20 000 in Matabeleland alone. As Blake aptly puts it, the above is "a measure of the catastrophe partly produced by, partly coincidental with the arrival of the Whites".<sup>66</sup>

The above figures are mere estimates and are therefore highly suspect because, by the time of the rinderpest epidemic, the Company had not properly established itself in the country and had not yet developed an efficient administration. In this regard, the Government's methods of collecting and analysing statistical information were still crude. However, these estimates provide some basis for analysing the extent of the ravages of rinderpest.

The terrible visitation of rinderpest decimated the cattle of Southern Rhodesia. Wherever the disease was not promptly and intelligently combated, it left poverty, if not actual ruin and starvation in its wake. Little was known about prevention or cure of the disease, and many settler farmers lost so many of their cattle that they were forced to give up and abandon their farms. Evidence from those who experienced the ravages of the disease indicates the extent of the negative impact of the outbreak. For example, Lord George Grey, Jameson's successor, sent a vivid description of the depredations of rinderpest which stated that,

the coach road to Bulawayo is lined with the corpses of dead oxen and coach passengers, I am told, vomit continually — Oh how I wish I had the beloved Vera's pretty little nose!<sup>67</sup>

63 "Veterinary Report", in Southern Rhodesia, *Report of the Department of Agriculture for the Year Ended 1900-1901* (Salisbury, Argus Printing and Publishing Co., 1901).

64 LO4/1/8, "Report of the CNC, Matabeleland for the Year Ended March 31 1901".

65 Blake, *A History of Rhodesia*, 123.

66 *Ibid.*

67 Hist. Ms. Collect., GR1/1/1, A. G. Grey to Countess Grey, 18 April 1896.



Similarly, writing to his schoolboy son, Grey reported how all the plagues of Egypt have landed at once upon this unhappy country. Drought, locusts, failure of crops, total annihilation of the cattle by Rinderpest — no milk, no beef in a few days — but lots of lovely smells from dead cattle.<sup>68</sup>

Grey expressed the feeling that the difficulties created by the Matabele uprising were of less consequence than the depredations of rinderpest. In his words,

our chief difficulty is not the Matebele, but the Rinderpest, which is killing all the cattle on which we depend for our transport and meat. I may soon have to tell you that I have become a vegetarian, and not by choice.<sup>69</sup>

Another settler, one Jarvis, wrote to his mother about the twin problems of the Matabele uprising and the scourges of rinderpest in terms similar to those used by Grey in his letters. He wrote:

I am glad to say our "Relief" Column has arrived from Salisbury and we have now got all the ammunition we want but shall soon be short of food! for our cattle have been dying like mad. With this rinderpest and to show you what scourge it is the column from Salisbury lost 500 head of trek oxen on the way!! It is terrible to see them die. They very often fall down in the yoke, a few minutes before being apparently well and have just to be outspanned and left to die in the road as they fall. It seems hard, but it is the only thing to do.<sup>70</sup>

Yet another settler, John Blakinston, commented:

Perhaps the most serious calamity of all however is this cattle disease, even more serious than the Matabele rising. The cattle are still dying — indeed the disease shows no signs of abatement and, already, so many have died, as not only to paralyse all transport, but will further cripple it for the next two years and of course transport is our very existence, although the Company have done their utmost to substitute mules and donkeys, their efforts fall far short [of] what is necessary . . .<sup>71</sup>

Lastly, S. G. Arden later reminisced about how, at the time,

Rinderpest loomed in hideous form over Rhodesia — skeletons of numerous cattle and the stench of decomposed bodies was [sic] frequently in evidence . . . a transport driver told that many good spans of oxen had contracted the disease. The cattle died one after the other until none was left, and there the wagon was stuck indefinitely.<sup>72</sup>

68 Hist. Ms. Collect., GR1/1/1, Grey to Charlie, May 1896.

69 Hist. Ms. Collect., GR1/1/1, A. G. Grey to Viscount Howick, 15 June 1896.

70 Hist. Ms. Collect., JA4/1/1, Jarvis to Mother, 3 May 1896.

71 Hist. Ms. Collect., BL1/1, Blakinston to Aunt, 19 May 1896.

72 Hist. Ms. Collect., AR1/1/1, "Reminiscences by an Old Timer" (n.d.).

Indeed, according to Selous, the disease even affected adversely the vultures, which would normally have picked the bones of the dead animals, but "these useful birds are now as scarce as cows in Matabeleland".<sup>73</sup>

### SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES

One of the effects of the disease was that there was mutual suspicion between Africans and Whites as regards who was responsible for the spread of the disease. Africans believed that Whites spread rinderpest. The situation was made worse by the decision to "shoot thousands of healthy cattle in order to prevent the infection from spreading — an action incomprehensible to the Africans and attributed to malevolence".<sup>74</sup> Whites also believed that Africans were responsible for spreading the disease. Commenting on these accusations and counter-accusations, Van Onselen argues that,

in practice, however, this highly contagious disease was very frequently spread by white farmers, who were mobile, active in trade and apt to console their rinderpest-stricken neighbours with little regard for the risks of contagion this involved.<sup>75</sup>

Rinderpest invaded the country at a time when Africans, especially the Ndebele, were still trying to recover from the loss suffered as a result of the confiscation of their herds by the settler Administration. Worse still, those cattle that survived the scourge were shot dead by the settlers in their efforts to control the spread of the disease. Socially, the loss of cattle affected Africans in that,

the relationships expressed in cattle, such as those between man and the supernatural in sacrifice, between groups in marriage payments, between the ruler and the ruled in tribute, could no longer be expressed.<sup>76</sup>

Not surprisingly, Africans became increasingly reluctant to have their cattle inoculated because, in their distrust of the White man, they imagined he was urging them to submit their cattle to an operation which would probably end fatally, so that they should be compelled to work for him at low wages. Indeed, Africans rendered destitute by the rinderpest outbreak flocked in great numbers to European centres in search of work. According to Van Onselen,

---

73 Quoted in Blake, *A History of Rhodesia*, 123.

74 R. Blake, *A History of Rhodesia* (London, Eyre Methuen, 1977), 123.

75 Van Onselen, "Reactions to rinderpest in Southern Africa", 480.

76 T. Jamu, "The Rebirth of African Cattle Herds, 1895-1910" [B.A. (Hons) dissertation, History Dept., University of Zimbabwe, 1985], 11.

The loss of large numbers of cattle caused considerable social and economic distress in African communities. With the disappearance of the source of meat and milk, Africans experienced considerable hardship and, in some cases, starvation. The impoverishment of Africans caused by rinderpest contributed to the growing proletarianisation of Africans and the process of labour migration.<sup>77</sup>

Thus the rinderpest outbreak brought suffering and poverty to the Africans as was manifest in Matabeleland where it was reported that, "... owing to Rinderpest, all the cattle are dead and the Indunas are as poor as their followers and will soon starve".<sup>78</sup>

In addition to the social and economic consequences outlined above, Rinderpest also contributed greatly to the outbreak of the First *Chimurenga/Umvukela* uprising of 1896-97. According to Boggie, owner of a trading firm in Bulawayo,

The Jameson episode and rinderpest no doubt hastened an event (the African uprising) which had for some time been "casting shadows" before, for warnings from time to time were received from prospectors and others outside districts that the Matebele were in a state of unrest and in some instances openly deliant. These warnings were however considered to be but the warnings of alarmists, were treated accordingly and were generally laughed at by the Native Commissioners . . .<sup>79</sup>

He also contended that,

The advent of rinderpest and our defeat in the Transvaal seemed to the Matebele chiefs an indication that the time of Lobengula's prophetic saying had arrived, the Mlimo or high priest was consulted, with the result that he informed them that in the mystic light of futurity, he could dimly but distinctly see his assegai dripping with blood . . .<sup>80</sup>

## IMPACT ON TRANSPORT AND TRADE

One of the immediate results of the plague was that transport riding (the conveyance of goods by bullock-wagon) became extremely difficult. Some transport riders lost most of the oxen and had to abandon their wagons as well.<sup>81</sup> One transport rider, Stanley Hyatt, describes plaintively the ruin and desolation brought about by rinderpest and the large number of abandoned wagons thus:

77 Van Onselen, "Reactions to rinderpest", 488.

78 Hist. Ms. Collect., GR2/1/2, Mother to Sybil, 6 Oct. 1896.

79 Hist. Ms. Collect., BO2/3/1, "Bulawayo in 1896".

80 *Ibid.*

81 Hist. Ms. Collect., BL6/1/1, Reminiscences, "Difficulties and the Cost of Transport in the Early Days of Rhodesia".

Thirty wagons at one outspan, loaded wagons, loaded with stores of all kinds — I have come across this scene more than once. Hundreds of wagons, tens of thousands of pounds worth of stores, machinery, goods of all kinds, abandoned on the road. There was too much to loot. The cattle died within a few hours, died in the water . . . poisoning the whole countryside, and then the transport rider, utterly broken, utterly helpless, abandoned all, and, with a boy (African) or two to carry his kit, tramped back to the nearest outspan, to curse his luck, to drink so as to forget that luck, and, perhaps, to die.<sup>82</sup>

Only those with what were known as "salted" cattle survived in the business. A transport rider at the time, Rorke, provided a useful description of what "salted" cattle were. He wrote:

Before the rebellion [uprising] the rinderpest had wiped out almost all the cattle in the country; later however, a transport rider experimented on his spans of oxen by inoculating them with liver bile from an infected animal. This inoculation was injected into the animal's tail, on the lower half. This inoculation was severe, causing the lower portion of the tail to fall off, but prevented the animal from contracting the disease. The men who had cattle immediately carried out this inoculation, and saved many animals. These oxen were known as "salted cattle", salted cattle were recognised by their short tails and, owing to their scarcity, prices shot up to exorbitant levels.<sup>83</sup>

Apart from the loss of transport oxen, it was also reported that "slaughter stock, the few breeding herds that had been started as well as native cattle were [also] wiped out".<sup>84</sup> Foodstuffs for the beleaguered Whites of Bulawayo had to be brought up from Mafeking, in wagons drawn by the few mules and donkeys procurable, through 500 miles of pest-ridden country.<sup>85</sup>

To make matters worse, because of the decimation of cattle by the disease, the market for livestock and other trade goods shrunk drastically. As Hyatt observed, when the disease got its grip on the country, "everyone realised that the cattle were doomed, and [cattle] prices fell like lead".<sup>86</sup> Transport riding as a business was adversely affected, as

We could no longer sell cattle, and so could no longer buy them from natives, which meant, too, that the natives could no longer buy trading goods from us. Moreover, all our spans were working up on the high

82 Stanley P. Hyatt, *The Old Transport Road* (Bulawayo, Books of Rhodesia Publishing Co., 1969), 293.

83 NAZ, ORAL/RO2, Interview held with M. V. Rorke by D. Hartridge at Essexvale, 1970.

84 Hist. Ms. Collect., BL6/1/1, Reminiscences, "Difficulties and the Cost of Transport in the Early Days of Rhodesia".

85 "The great cattle plague of 1896-1898", in *Zambesi Mission Record* (1898-1901), I, 271.

86 *Ibid.*, 296.

veldt, and we were not, of course, allowed to bring them down into the low country . . . We had worked so desperately hard, taken such heavy risks, carried our lives in our hands month after month, and now, when we were just on the point of getting our reward, we were to lose everything. Our task, the task of the Transport Riders, was finished.<sup>87</sup>

The crippling of the transport rider business could not have come at a more inopportune time because, by the time of the first *Chimurenga/Umvukela*, the railroad from Cape Town had been extended as far north as Bechuanaland. The only mode of transport from there to Bulawayo, a distance of 400 miles, was by ox-drawn carts that travelled only 14-20 miles a day.<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, the loss of draught cattle and the fact that transport riders had to pay exorbitant prices for "salted cattle" means that transport rates rose sharply. This, in turn, made the importation of either agricultural machinery or seed extremely difficult.<sup>89</sup> That "salted cattle" had become expensive as a result of the rinderpest outbreak is evident in the fact that, soon afterwards, while the Government was offering £9 per head, individual dealers were demanding as much as £25 per head.<sup>90</sup> Commenting on this sharp rise in cattle prices, the Native Commissioner for Gwanda District observed that "The stock in 1895, which was £2 to £3 per head, is now worth from £12."<sup>91</sup>

For those with the necessary capital, however, transport must have become a very lucrative business. After rinderpest had passed through Mashonaland in 1896, a Mr Papenfus bought up all the salted oxen he could get, which amounted to ten spans. This gave his 10 wagons the monopoly of all transport in the country. He entered a contract with the Chartered Company to carry exclusively for them at £5.10.0 per 100 lbs. between railhead and Salisbury.<sup>92</sup> J. Bland, who was involved in the transport business in those days, says that, because of the transport difficulties when rinderpest broke out, "Salisbury had almost run out of stores of every kind."<sup>93</sup> This was exacerbated by the fact that most of the merchants were only beginners with no capital behind them and they could not import more than they could pay for transport, because transport was "cash on delivery".<sup>94</sup> Thus if the merchant could not pay

87 *Ibid.*, 298-300.

88 Schwabe, *Veterinary Medicine and Human Health*, 18.

89 LO4/1/2, "Report by the Secretary for Agriculture for the Half Year Ending 30 Sept. 1898".

90 Quoted in T. Jamu, "The Rebirth of African Cattle Herds", 12.

91 *Ibid.*, 13.

92 Hist. Ms. Collect., BL6/1/1, Reminiscences, "Difficulties and the Cost of Transport in the Early Days of Rhodesia".

93 *Ibid.*

94 *Ibid.*

for transport, he had to sell his goods to others for what he could get. In the Melssetter District, food was very short and Government supplies of rice, beef, tea and other necessities were sent up by donkey wagon and were rationed out each week in the township.<sup>95</sup>

Settlers were very reluctant to import fresh cattle from neighbouring South Africa because they feared that they would lose all the new cattle. The theory then was that fresh oxen coming into the country would contract rinderpest from the bones of the hundreds of oxen that had died all along the road.<sup>96</sup> What this meant was that, for a while, meat requirements in the country were met through imports, sometimes from as far away as Madagascar, at very high prices.

### CONCLUSION

As has been shown above, rinderpest indirectly killed untold numbers of people, caused millions of others to suffer grave consequences and substantially altered the history of large areas of Africa and its indigenous peoples. It can be concluded from this account that, firstly, "animal pathogens need not infect people directly in order to precipitate untold human suffering and death".<sup>97</sup> Secondly, "their effects upon human health are multiple ones, often reflecting far more complex problems than result from losses of meat and milk alone".<sup>98</sup> Rinderpest caused a serious dislocation of the transport industry and led to a loss in draught power among both the African and White communities. The mutual suspicion between the settlers and the indigenous community as to who was responsible for the incidence of the disease obviously hardened attitudes to the extent that the African population was to become very suspicious of whatever schemes the settler community were to come up with in future.

Rinderpest also caused despair and poverty among the African population due to the deaths of their herds and may have accelerated the process of proletarianisation. It can also be argued that the devastating effects of the disease made the task of settler colonisation easier. The disease also alerted the Colonial Administration of the need to establish suitable administrative and infrastructural facilities to ensure that future

95 S. Sinclair, *The Story of Melssetter* (Salisbury, M.O Collins, 1971), 31.

96 Hist. Ms. Collect., BL6/1/1, Reminiscences, "Difficulties and the Cost of Transport in the Early Days of Rhodesia".

97 Schwabe, *Veterinary Medicine and Human Health*, 19.

98 *Ibid.*

animal disease outbreaks could be more efficiently and effectively dealt with.<sup>99</sup>

---

<sup>99</sup> Further research will deal with the origins and development of three diseases viz, Lungsickness, African Coast Fever and Foot and Mouth Disease up to 1933. Lungsickness was introduced into the country in 1861, African Coast Fever in 1902 and Foot and Mouth Disease in 1931.