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## MYTH OR REALITY: THE 'CATTLE COMPLEX' IN SOUTH EAST AFRICA, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO RHODESIA\*

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THIS ARTICLE ARGUES that there has never been a 'cattle complex' among the Africans of the region under study. The notion of the 'Bantu cattle complex' is a myth. There has been nothing mystical about cattle: they have been first and foremost an economic asset and all the socio-religious attitudes held by Africans towards cattle are based on their economic value. Africans have always been willing and ready to sell their cattle provided the prices are good. Their prevailing reluctance to sell their cattle in the capitalist market is based on knowledge that they are being exploited: that prices are far below what their cattle are worth. Thus, capitalist exploitation is responsible for Africans' reluctance to sell their cattle and not their traditional or irrational attitudes, as has been long alleged. This view is based on the evidence that the Africans did readily sell their cattle in the precolonial period when they believed they were not being exploited and they stood to gain from the sale. Fundamentally, three categories of reasons (socio-religious, socio-economic and economic) have been advanced to explain the almost universal reluctance among the Africans to sell their cattle in the capitalist market. The search for these reasons has been made urgent recently by the fact that, despite political independence of the majority of states in Africa, Africans are still not raising cattle on a capitalist and commercial basis. Their cattle industry is still poor and based on self-subsistence. They are still reluctant to sell their cattle in the capitalist market. As Fielder found out in Zambia:

\* Dr. Mtetwa and I discussed this article a few days before his death, and he was to consider my suggestion that he incorporate some of the evidence in S. D. Neumark, *Economic Influences on the South African Frontier* (Stanford, Stanford Univ. Press, 1957), and that he explore the possibility that an (alleged) social ideology about cattle among more pastoral peoples than the Shona had contributed to the idea of a cattle complex'. Thus the article may not represent his final thoughts on the subject, but in the circumstances I have thought it right to publish it, as it stood, particularly in view of its relevance to other articles in this issue, R.S.R.

Zambian Government has for some time been trying to increase the number of cattle bought from the 'traditional' areas, particularly as the spectacular rise in wages since Independence has expanded the demand for meat in the towns. The necessity to import cattle from Botswana in ever-increasing quantities, combined with the pressure on foreign exchange, makes it a matter of urgency to increase meat supplies from Zambian sources.<sup>1</sup>

In Rhodesia the African reluctance to sell their cattle in the capitalist market has led to overstocking which in turn has led to soil erosion (the greatest problem of African agriculture in the country) and the shortage of grazing and arable land in the areas reserved for the African peasants. At first the Government implemented various plans aimed at encouraging Africans to sell their cattle in order to reduce the number of cattle held by them but when this was not realized, compulsory destocking was adopted with disastrous consequences.<sup>2</sup>

The reasons for the African reluctance to sell their cattle in the capitalist market has for a long time been alleged to be socio-religious: traditional and irrational attitudes held by the Africans towards cattle which comprised what Herskovits called the 'Bantu cattle complex'; Schapera emphasized the mystical and ritual values attached to cattle and the religious aspects of the association between man and beast. Herskovits and Schapera visualized the African concepts of cattle ownership almost exclusively in religious and social terms: cattle were raised for the propitiation of ancestral spirits and the *lobola* transactions.<sup>3</sup>

The cattle complex notion was universally accepted in Africa, and for Rhodesia, the analysis of the former Chief Native Commissioner, Bullock, who had served for a very long time in the Native Affairs Department is typical and therefore worth quoting at some length:

In the present state of world food supplies and especially of the shortage of the butcher's meat which is our chief source of proteins, the religious and social significance attached to cattle by the Bantu tribes (diminishing as it may be) is yet a matter of material importance. It is not in accord with our view that cattle are kept simply to supply us with milk and meat, and to these ends, purchase and sale should be untrammelled by any clogs on trade.

<sup>1</sup> R. F. Fielder, 'The role of cattle in the Ila economy: A conflict of views on the uses of cattle by the Ila of Namwala', *African Social Research* (1973), [III] (xv), 327. See also E. C. de Carvalho, '"Traditional" and "modern" patterns of cattle raising in southwestern Angola: A critical evaluation of change from pastoralism to ranching', *Journal of Developing Areas* (1974), VIII, 199-225; R.M.G. Mtetwa, 'The "Political" and Economic History of the Duma of South-eastern Rhodesia from the Early Eighteenth Century to 1945' (Univ. of Rhodesia, unpubl. D.Phil thesis, 1976), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Mtetwa, 'The "Political" and Economic History', 400-23.

<sup>3</sup> M. J. Herskovits, 'The cattle complex in East Africa', *American Anthropologist* (1926), XXVIII, 230-72, 361-80, 494-528, 630-64; I. Schapera, 'Economic change in South African Native life', *Africa* (1928), I, 170-88.

In tribal life these are quite alien conceptions. Cattle were not for sale — a foreign and reprehensible thought. They can leave the family in life only to bring to it a bride. In death they should provide the sacrifices that the spirits demanded.

This attitude may seem absurd to our commercialized world, but it should be realized that in all primitive social organizations the tribe, clan or other group does not distinguish the religious institution from that of the state; and where social evolution has reached the pastorage, cattle have almost invariably some part in the sacred cult . . .

It becomes natural, then, to look on cattle as something more than an adjunct of the family . . . bound not to an individual as stock valued at so much per head, but to the group — past, present and future.

The dead ancestors are linked with the living men of the family in the common wish that the clan may increase and multiply and cattle are the medium for mating with this all important end in view.

There was even an inhibitory sentiment against using them in exchange for such secondary needs as hoes (although this did take place); and even in times of famine spiritual sanction was sought before they were bartered for grain.<sup>4</sup>

Such views have been readily accepted by historians.<sup>5</sup>

Holleman and Hughes replaced the above socio-religious argument by a socio-economic one which said that there was social differentiation among the Shona and Ndebele people of Rhodesia based on the ownership of cattle which constituted wealth, and cattle and women were interchangeable values.<sup>6</sup> In fact, Junod had much earlier on put forward this argument in connection with the Tsonga of the Delagoa Bay region of Moçambique;<sup>7</sup> and Allan later pointed out that, although the mystical and ritual values attached to cattle were important, the social role of cattle, as a means of 'investment in human relationships', was often the main motive behind the urge to acquire cattle. The African attitudes held towards cattle had underlying economic motives though they were obscured by the accretion of emotional and social values.<sup>8</sup>

In my doctoral thesis I went further to say that wealth and capital were indistinguishable among Africans and this was true of cattle;<sup>9</sup> and other

<sup>4</sup> C. Bullock, *The Mashona and the Matabele* (Cape Town, Juta, 1950), 99-102.

<sup>5</sup> e.g. P. Mason, *The Birth of a Dilemma* (London, Oxford Univ. Press, 1958), 165, 186-8; T. O. Ranger, *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia* (London, Heinemann, 1966), 106; see also M. Yudeiman, *Africans on the Land . . . with Special Reference to Southern Rhodesia* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard Univ. Press, 1964), 161.

<sup>6</sup> J. F. Holleman, *Shona Customary Law* (London, Oxford Univ. Press, 1952), 116; H. Kuper, A. J. B. Hughes and J. van Velsen, *The Shona and Ndebele of Southern Rhodesia* (London, International African Institute, 1954), 90.

<sup>7</sup> H. Junod, *The Life of a South African Tribe* (London, Macmillan, 2 vols, 1927), I, 46.

<sup>8</sup> W. Allan, *The African Husbandman* (Edinburgh, Oliver and Boyd, 1965), 312-13.

<sup>9</sup> 'The "Political" and Economic History', 283-4.

historians have recently begun advancing a purely economic argument. Stigger, for example, has stated that 'Africans in Mashonaland were prepared to trade cattle; the conditioning factor seems to have been price.'<sup>10</sup> I have also argued that Africans are reluctant to sell cattle in capitalist markets because of exploitation: they know that the price paid for their cattle is far below what their cattle are actually worth.<sup>11</sup> This has been confirmed by Wright, a Native Commissioner who for a long time served in Nuanetsi, one of the greatest cattle districts in Rhodesia. Wright's views are worth quoting at some length:

As I have mentioned, the Rhodesian African, like all his counterparts elsewhere on the continent looks on his cattle as an asset to be kept and increased and not as a revenue-earning commodity and we still read about thousands of head of cattle in the tribal lands being allowed to die of starvation in drought years because their owners refuse to sell them. When this happens, it is always attributed to the inborn stubbornness of the African and his resolute and stupid refusal to accept advice from agriculturists and administrators who counsel, wisely enough, early selling on our special sales before the sparse grass gets too dry and unpalatable to sustain animal life.

But what is overlooked is the most important reason of all behind this seemingly stupid refusal to take advantage of the excellent marketing facilities we now provide — SUSPICION, the bugbear of Africa. Suspicion of buyers, suspicion of price lists and, unfortunately, even suspicion of those incorruptible officials whose duty it is to organize sales . . .

All [African stockowners] are acutely aware . . . that those who control selling prices and those who buy, and naturally wish to keep the prices down, are closeted together in their rest house just over the rise . . . [They] are all conspiring together to make certain that the African-owned cattle at the coming sale will go to the European buyers at the lowest possible prices . . .

[Over] their sundowners in the rest house the night before, they will have decided to form a 'buyer's ring'. This is an iniquitous but perfectly legal practice — indulged in everywhere — whereby if seven buyers are competing for seventy steers, they agree they will buy in turn and thus each gets ten head at fifty cents over the floor price, instead of having to pay through the nose for a few head if one of their number keeps boosting the bids.

Although it may be argued that this is normal, healthy sale practice and that, in any event the African seller gets a fair guaranteed price, I am completely and irrevocably opposed to this 'ring' system, which is not only a blot on our sales but also, in my view an agreement in restraint of trade which should be prohibited by law

<sup>10</sup> P. Stigger, 'Volunteers and the profit motive in the Anglo-Ndebele War, 1893' *Rhodesian History* (1971), II, 17.

<sup>11</sup> 'The "Political" and Economic History', 413-21.

It is this 'buyer's ring' practice which mars an otherwise almost perfect sales system.<sup>12</sup>

Wright's observations are significant; being responsible for organizing the cattle sales in Nuanetsi, he took the trouble to discover the actual reasons for Africans' suspicions.<sup>13</sup> Such evidence from an agent of exploitation and underdevelopment is damning. Furthermore, Wright also observed that the African cattle owner accepts the price offered if 'it is higher than he and his family, after long discussions, expected'. But if it is lower, he refuses and either concludes a private sale with one of the buyers after the sale or with other Africans, or takes it back home and waits for the time when prices are higher.<sup>14</sup>

Exploitation at the Rhodesian centres of employment, mines, farms and towns forced the Africans to sell a lot of cattle to obtain cash with which to fulfil their financial obligations such as taxes and rents.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, cattle prices were higher than wages on mines or farms; and so Africans, being economic men, sold cattle to obtain cash instead of going out to work. This was demonstrated in Victoria District where the Native Commissioner reported: 'I have repeatedly advised the headmen to induce their able-bodied men to earn their tax by working rather than by selling many cattle. They admit that the advice is sound, but on arrival of a cattle buyer, the temptation is too great.'<sup>17</sup> Another official described an instance at a village where a cattle buyer arrived just as the men were about to leave for work; cattle were sold and no-one went to work.<sup>18</sup>

So common was this sort of situation that the Government discouraged Africans from selling their cattle in the period before 1921 so that they would go to work at the centres of employment, but encouraged them to sell cattle after 1930. Because of the unreproductive or uninvestible wages, and because cattle pulled the plough, carts and sleighs, provided manure to fertilize the sandy, infertile areas assigned to them and continued to be important as a safeguard against famine,<sup>19</sup> it is not surprising that cattle continued to be the most important economic asset in the colonial period and that *lobola* was commercialized. The functions of cattle increased during

<sup>12</sup> A. Wright, *Valley of the Ironwoods* (Cape Town, Bulpin, 1972), 232-40; I owe this reference to Professor R. S. Roberts.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

<sup>15</sup> G. Arrighi, 'Labour supplies in historical perspective: A study of the proletarianization of the African peasantry in Rhodesia', *Journal of Development Studies* (1970), VI, 197-234; I. R. Phimister, 'Peasant production and underdevelopment in Southern Rhodesia, 1890-1914', *African Affairs* (1974), LXXIII, 217-28.

<sup>16</sup> Mtetwa, 'The "Political" and Economic History', 8.

<sup>17</sup> J. MacKenzie, 'African Labour in South Central Africa, 1890-1914 and Nineteenth-Century Colonial Labour Theory' (Univ. of British Columbia, unpubl. Ph.D. thesis, 1969), 191.

<sup>18</sup> National Archives of Rhodesia, N/9/4/22 (Chief Native Commissioner: Reports Monthly: 1909), Jackson, Superintendent of Natives, Victoria, Report for April 1909.

<sup>19</sup> 'The "Political" and Economic History', ch.6-8.

the colonial period and because Africans are economic men, it was irrational to them to part with their cattle. The Ila concept of regarding cattle in the colonial period as a bank is also applicable to the Africans in Rhodesia:

By this they do not mean so much a current account from which they can draw money regularly for everyday needs; rather they mean a deposit account where their property is saved and where it will increase in value the longer it stays there. Cattle are regarded very much as shares and investments are in capitalist societies. This is the heart of the so-called and misleading 'cattle complex'. There is no mystery about it at all: the investment is a very sound and highly rational one . . . <sup>20</sup>

Therefore, it is not surprising that the African cattle-owners practise what has been called 'target selling', that is, a man usually sells in order to achieve a specific target for something he needs. The implication of the concept of 'target selling' is that the higher the price of cattle the fewer cattle a man will need to sell to meet his target.<sup>21</sup> This is perfectly rational if it is looked at in the context of the whole capitalist exploitative system. As will be seen below, the African did not practise 'target selling' in the pre-colonial period for it was the result of capitalist exploitation during the colonial period. The African reluctance to sell many cattle in the capitalist market during the colonial period can be conceived as a sort of economic resistance, just as labour migration to South Africa was a sort of protest against exploitation on Rhodesian mines and farms.<sup>22</sup>

However, during the precolonial period, wars often broke out over the problem of cattle prices. For example, the first clash between Boers and the Xhosa in South Africa occurred in 1702 when a Boer cattle-bartering expedition attempted to force the Xhosa to sell their cattle at low prices.<sup>23</sup> Robertson has also shown that one of the most important reasons for the clashes between Boers and Africans in South Africa during the one hundred and fifty years of economic contact was cattle prices.<sup>24</sup>

This was also true during the earlier period when the Portuguese travellers bought cattle from Africans. In 1593 there was great tension between Ubabu, one of the Nguni chiefs in what is now Natal, and Nuno Velho as a result of the latter's attempt to exploit him. Ubabu killed cattle to feed Velho's Portuguese party and they declared themselves satisfied with the

<sup>20</sup> See Fielder, 'The role of cattle', 351.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 353.

<sup>22</sup> Mtetwa, 'The "Political" and Economic History', 8; C. van Onselen, *Chibaro* (London, Pluto, 1976), ch.8, esp. 236.

<sup>23</sup> *The Diary of Adam Tas*, ed. L. Fouché (Cape Town, Van Riebeeck Society, 1970), 243, 369; W. M. Macmillan, *Bantu, Boer and Briton* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1963), 25, 43, 75.

<sup>24</sup> H. M. Robertson, '150 years of economic contact between Black and White', *The South African Journal of Economics* (1934), II, 381-425; (1935), III, 3-25.

meat. They gave Ubabu's children glass beads threaded on silk and three chessmen tied to silk ribands. Ubabu and his brothers were much gratified. Velho then asked for four cows in return for these articles, but Ubabu demanded a cauldron in exchange for them. Velho gave Ubabu sweetmeats and wine and then referred again to the matter of the cows, but Ubabu demanded for them a brass candlestick. Velho was very angry and threatened to punish Ubabu. Velho alleged that Ubabu had promised to give him four cows in return for the articles he had given Ubabu's children; apparently, Ubabu thought that those articles paid for the meat that he had given Velho's party.<sup>25</sup> A similar episode in 1509 near Moçambique Island resulted in a battle between Africans and Portuguese in which the viceroy and thirty Portuguese travellers died and the rest of the party were wounded: 'As it is always the character of the Portuguese to endeavour to rob the poor natives of the country of their property, there were some sailors who tried to take a cow without giving what the negroes asked for it, upon which they came to blows.'<sup>26</sup> Another Portuguese viceroy was killed at Agoada de Saldanha near Cape Town for not paying for the cattle they took from the Hottentots.<sup>27</sup> As a result of the unscrupulous exploitative methods of the Portuguese, the Tsonga of chief Nyaka had become 'great merchants, interested and distrustful, and will not give up the article they are trading until they will have received the piece of cloth for which it is bartered'.<sup>28</sup>

The Portuguese found the Africans ready to sell them cattle provided they considered the prices to be good. According to Theal, Ubabu's trouble with Velho was due to the fact that Ubabu would not part with any of his two hundred head of cattle except at prices which the Portuguese regarded as extortionate.<sup>29</sup> The Portuguese battles against the Hottentots and the Africans off Moçambique Island and between the Boers and the Africans were due to the European buyers' attempts to force the Africans to accept what they considered low prices. The Tsonga people of chief Mutuadondommatale in the Delagoa Bay region were even more covetous and self-interested than the Nguni further south:

and for the same amount of copper, for which the others gave three cows they would only give one, it not being so valuable among them, and they also value calico, which the others would not accept. It is therefore proper to trade with copper and iron for the purchase of provisions until reaching this place, and to keep calico for this place and the country beyond, for this is what

<sup>25</sup> *Records of South-Eastern Africa*, ed. G. M. Theal (Cape Town, Govt of Cape Colony, 9 vols, 1898-1903), II, 301-2.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, V, 402.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII, 354.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, II, xxvii.



they demanded in exchange for cows . . . In an area where there was drought a cow cost more . . .<sup>30</sup>

This quotation shows that the Africans were keenly aware that prices were determined by the law of supply and demand. In 1633 the cattle trade between the Portuguese and the Africans of an area of Natal was so brisk that the travellers had to control it:

Other Kaffirs came down in haste with quantities of cattle, millet and native bread and there were some disorders among us, the barterers securing the most and best for themselves, scattering themselves in the thicket and waiting for the Kaffirs, from whom they bartered millet and native bread to the great prejudice of all, giving as much copper as was given in the camp for three or four cows.

The Kaffirs, getting this price outside, brought nothing but cows; and therefore a proclamation was issued forbidding anyone to go and barter outside the camp under the pain of death.

This led to the execution of one Portuguese half-caste and the severe whipping of two Africans<sup>31</sup> — a move to keep down cattle prices. Before they left the Nguni country the plains of which were covered with many cattle, they bought 'all the cows [(140 head) that they] chose and though at a higher price than before'. They then decided that, as there would be no more cattle obtainable until the chiefdom of Nyaka was reached, they should purchase and take with them a large number of cattle, and that as copper had no value farther on in the Delagoa Bay region, they should use all the copper to buy cattle before they left the Nguni country; but they did not buy as many cattle as they wanted because the price was high.<sup>32</sup>

There is, however, plenty of evidence to show that the people of South East Africa readily sold cattle when the price was good. For example, Monica Wilson calculated that the survivors of the *Nossa Senhora de Belem* bought 219 cattle, many in calf, through a Portuguese who had been left in the area between the Mthatha and the Mbashe rivers by previous shipwreck survivors because he was too ill to continue travelling.<sup>33</sup> Chief Nyamunda of the Danda supplied meat to the Portuguese at Sofala in the early sixteenth century, and sent 'many oxen and cows to the fortress and keeps it better supplied with all provisions than any other Moorish king'.<sup>34</sup> In 1569 it was stated that the people of the kingdom of Butua, south-west of what is now

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 326-7.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., VIII, 320.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 340-9.

<sup>33</sup> 'The Nguni people', in M. Wilson and L. Thompson (eds), *The Oxford History of South Africa* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2 vols, 1969), I, 83; for the evidence of cattle trade between the shipwreck survivors and the people occupying the region between the Great Fish River and Delagoa Bay, see 78-84; for more detail, see *Records*, II, 46, 293, 330; VII, 86-129, 220, 320, 334, 336-7, 340, 348-9.

<sup>34</sup> *Documents on the Portuguese in Mozambique and Central Africa, 1497-1840*, ed. A. da Silva Rego and T. W. Baxter (Salisbury, National Archives of Rhodesia, 8 vols, 1962-75), VI, 5.

Rhodesia, that is, Matabeleland, supplied the Portuguese in the north-east of the country with large oxen which they used to pull waggons.<sup>35</sup>

Bhebe and Cobbing have shown that during the last half of the nineteenth century cattle replaced ivory as the most important commodity in the Ndebele external trade with South Africa. The numbers of cattle taken down to South Africa were quite considerable. Selous took one hundred cattle in 1882. In 1887, Grobler traded 2 000 cattle for one hundred horses and in the following year, Francis and Chapman took 370 cattle to trade for arms and ammunition in the Transvaal markets. Cohen, Grant, Tainton, Petersen, Macnenemy, Martin and Wilson traded large quantities of cattle in 1889. Herds seen at Tati going south were large. A system of European entrepreneurship developed in which traders living permanently out in the backveld, such as Usher or Petersen, collected cattle and drove them to Bulawayo or some other meeting place, from where long-distance traders such as Dreyer and Cohen would take them south.

The occupation of Mashonaland in 1890 led to an immediate increase in the volume of the cattle trade. There was an acute demand for slaughter and transport oxen at Salisbury and Victoria and the apparently higher prices at first offered there drew the traders' attention to the Bulawayo-Salisbury route. Cattle continued to be taken into Mashonaland from Matabeleland until the outbreak of the Ndebele war in 1893.<sup>36</sup> As Carnegie reported in 1894: 'Perhaps up to the outbreak of the war the most important business done with the natives was in buying cattle.'<sup>37</sup> I have also shown that, because of the great demand in cattle in South Africa in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the Venda in the Northern Transvaal crossed into southern Mashonaland to purchase cattle; but the volume of this trade is not known since there are no figures available.<sup>38</sup>

The evidence for the cattle trade between Africans is very scanty, but there is no doubt that such trade did exist. MacKenzie and Mtetwa have shown that the Njanja expert ironworkers exchanged a lot of their iron products, particularly hoes, for cattle in southern Mashonaland and as a result they accumulated wealth. During the period of famine and grain shortages, cattle were exchanged with neighbours or people in distant areas for grain. Cattle were also killed and the meat was taken and sold at the villages with grain; or cattle were driven to and killed at these villages and the meat was

<sup>35</sup> *Records*, III, 227, 237.

<sup>36</sup> N. M. B. Bhebe, 'Ndebele trade in the nineteenth century', *Journal of African Studies* (1974), I, 94, 96, 99; J. R. D. Cobbing, 'The Ndebele under the Khumalos, 1820-1896' (Lancaster Univ., unpubl. Ph.D. thesis, 1976), 188-212.

<sup>37</sup> D. Carnegie, *Among the Matabele* (London, Religious Tract Society, 1894), 64.

<sup>38</sup> 'The "Political" and Economic History', 274-5.

traded there.<sup>39</sup> Cobbing found this to be also true of the Ndebele: either private or communal cattle were bartered, although the latter were traded or killed in exceptional circumstances.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, as Stigger said:

The degree of involvement in cattle trading by the Ndebele [and, indeed, the other people of South East Africa] without any apparent distinction on grounds of social status or political position must cast doubt on the extent of the influence of the 'Bantu cattle complex' among them.<sup>41</sup>

In fact, the evidence proves that the notion of the Bantu cattle complex is a myth. Cattle were above all an economic asset. During the Early Iron Age, that is, the first millenium A.D. in Southern Africa, cattle were fewer than goats and sheep judging from the bones at the archaeological sites. Cattle increased as the Early Iron Age culture progressed, but judging from the numbers of cattle bones at the Later Iron Age villages after 1 000 A.D. there were many cattle during the Later Iron Age.<sup>42</sup> It can be assumed that during the Early Iron Age, there was very little, if any, cattle trade in the area.

Beach has argued that the most obvious route of escape from the threat of *shangwa* (famine) was herding. Livestock lived longer than grain could be stored and reproduced themselves.<sup>43</sup> The mature cow could calve once a year and the average offspring in a cow's life was between ten and fifteen calves.<sup>44</sup> Also important in the pre-colonial period were the many functions of cattle: they provided meat, milk, hides for mats, thongs and skin clothes. Their economic value is emphasized by the Duma in Rhodesia and the Teve in Moçambique in their praise-poem in which they stress the economic usefulness of almost every part of the cow.<sup>45</sup>

It is this economic value of cattle which caused them to be held as currency among the Bantu. Cattle fulfilled all the criteria of 'general purpose currency'. It could be exchanged with anything: wives, cloth, beads, goats, sheep, guns ivory, grain. I have argued that cattle were both wealth and capital and these were indistinguishable. Because of this, those individuals who

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 223-4, 266-9; J. M. Mackenzie, 'A pre-colonial African trade: The Njanja and the iron trade', *NADA* (1975), XI, ii, 200-21.

<sup>40</sup> 'The Ndebele under the Khumalos', 186.

<sup>41</sup> 'Volunteers and the profit motive', 16.

<sup>42</sup> T. Huffman, 'Cattle from Mabveni', *The South African Archaeological Bulletin* (1975), XXX, 23-4; 'Test excavations at Nakuru', *Arnoldia* (1973), V, xxxix, 9.

<sup>43</sup> D. N. Beach, 'The Shona economy: Branches of production', in R. Palmer and N. Parsons (eds), *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa* (London, Heinemann, 1977), 45.

<sup>44</sup> E. A. Nobbs, 'The native cattle of Southern Rhodesia', *South African Journal of Science* (1927), XXIV, 336.

<sup>45</sup> Collection of Shona Praise-Poems by G. Fortune and A. Hodza, Dep. of African Languages, Univ. of Rhodesia, Salisbury. The Duma and the Teve were originally the same people: Mtetwa, 'The "Political" and Economic History', 1.

accumulated wealth or capital in terms of cattle obtained social prestige.<sup>46</sup> Beach has then argued that since the Zimbabwe state in what is now Rhodesia rose in a non-gold producing area, it must have risen from cattle-herding. The rise of Zimbabwe involved a group of people who, basing their economic strength initially on their herds, managed to dominate enough of the gold trade to found a state.<sup>47</sup>

One very important function of cattle which has been so far overlooked is that they were used to pay labour. It is probable that the rulers of the Zimbabwe state paid the constructors of the stone buildings with cattle. They were also used to pay the *varanda/vagariri* (bondmen) who used them to pay for their wives. *Vagariri* were men who were too poor to pay for their wives, and therefore sold their labour for long periods to rich men who either paid them in cattle, ivory or daughters at the end of their services.<sup>48</sup> The Mwenemutapa also paid the gold miners in cattle.<sup>49</sup> The Shona and Ndebele rulers used cattle to pay their warriors. These cattle were part of the booty plundered in wars or raids.<sup>50</sup> Large Ndebele and Shona cattle owners also leased out some of their cattle to less fortunate people and paid them invariably in heifers from which the herders built their own herds.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, the basis of the alleged African traditional and irrational attitudes towards cattle was economic although these attitudes have been allowed by analysts to obscure the economic value of cattle.

There is no doubt that the European traders exploited Africans in the precolonial period and they made enormous profit. In 1570 it was said that in Sofala 'venison of various kinds was abundant . . . Everything here enumerated could be had at trifling cost in barter for beads and squares of calico, which were used instead of coin, so that the cost of living in a simple manner was very small.'<sup>52</sup> Earlier it was observed that the Moors at Sofala did not weigh cloth which they exchanged for gold so that they were making 'a profit of one hundred to one'.<sup>53</sup> The cattle prices mentioned by the survivors of the shipwrecks clearly indicate the extent to which the African cattle owners were exploited. In 1593, the Portuguese bought two large oxen, four sheep and a gourd of milk for three pieces of copper, a handle of a kettle, a branch of coral and a silver Turkish coin. Another large ox and five sheep were exchanged for a flask of Ormus glass.<sup>54</sup> Cobbing has

<sup>46</sup> Mtetwa, 'The "Political" and Economic History', 282-4.

<sup>47</sup> D. N. Beach, *An Outline of Shona History* (Gwelo, Mambo, in press).

<sup>48</sup> Mtetwa, 'The "Political" and economic History', 285-6.

<sup>49</sup> *Records*, II, 233-4; VI, 271.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, VI, 271.

<sup>51</sup> Kuper, Hughes and Velsen, *The Shona and Ndebele*, 50.

<sup>52</sup> *Records*, VIII, 392.

<sup>53</sup> *Documents of the Portuguese in Mozambique and Central Africa*, V, 257.

<sup>54</sup> *Records*, II, 330.

shown that the European traders in Matebeleland were making considerable profits from the cattle trade even when middlemen were involved. For instance in June 1890, Colenbrander bought sixty-six oxen from Peterson at 70s. each which in addition to £9 paid in goods to herdboys came to £240. These oxen were later sold in South Africa for £495 (about £7.10s. each), representing a profit to Colenbrander of £255.<sup>55</sup>

The articles paid by the Portuguese to the Africans were certainly useless to the former but apparently useful to the latter, particularly copper for bracelets, iron for hoes, arrows, spears and axes for war, hoes for cultivation and cloth and beads which could be exchanged for wives and cattle. So, they could be invested within the African community. The Africans and the Europeans were thus operating in different economic and social systems, and generally the Africans did not realize that they were being exploited. They believed they were gaining from the trade with Europeans. When colonial rule made it glaringly obvious that they were being exploited and underdeveloped by the Europeans, they refused to trade their cattle in the capitalist market. As Alpers found out in Africa in general:

So long as the African perception of their role in the world economy coincided with that of non-Africans, that is, so long as their relationship was based upon the nexus of trade — trade from which each side believed itself to be profiting — there was little chance for Africans to see their way out of the subordinate economic role which Arab, Asian and finally Western commercial expansion had imposed on them. The change to direct colonial rule by Europe and America of not just Africa, but of all the Third World radically altered this situation politically, while at the same time it grew organically out of it.<sup>56</sup>

The Africans did not see the inequalities in the international trade because they and their international partners were operating different economic systems.

## CONCLUSION

This article has argued that there was no cattle complex among the South East Africans during the precolonial period. The notion of a cattle complex is a myth. The Africans were willing to sell their cattle provided they believed they were gaining from the trade. During the early part of the colonial period, particularly in Rhodesia, Africans sold many cattle in order to avoid exploitation at the centres of employment. The unproductive wages and low agricultural prices and land shortage made cattle the most important

<sup>55</sup> 'The Ndebele under the Khumalos', 208-9.

<sup>56</sup> E. A. Alpers, 'Re-thinking African economic history', *Ufahamu* (1973), III, iii, 120.

economic asset and, therefore, the Africans refused to sell many of their cattle. They sold them when they had no alternatives. So, it is clear that it is capitalist exploitation and not the traditional irrational attitudes held towards cattle which made the Africans reluctant to sell many cattle in the capitalist market. The tragedy of it all is that the belief that there was and still is a Bantu cattle complex has contributed a large part to the underdevelopment of Africa's cattle industry. Until Governments and economists realize that the notion is a myth, the African cattle industry in various African states will remain underdeveloped or continue to underdevelop. This paper has shown that, if prices become attractive so that Africans come to believe they will gain from such prices, they will certainly raise cattle on a capitalist and commercial basis.